

whitefish review

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*Whitefish Review is a non-profit 501(c)(3) company that publishes
the distinctive literature, art, and photography of mountain culture,
alongside the soaring ideas of contemporary thinkers.*



Noble — Serigraph, 20 x 30 inches, 2010
By Rob Stern — See commentary on page 84



First Snow
Oil on canvas, 12 x 96 inches, 1994
By Russell Chatham
See Conversation on page 114



Noble

Art submission, see page 71

Rob Stern

When people see my work the first question they always ask is, “What is it?” When they are told it is a serigraph there is almost always a look of bewilderment that crosses over their face. I think the most important thing is that they noticed it in the first place. Which has nothing to do with what it is.

Serigraphy is a long, laborious, finicky, temperamental, physically demanding process of creating hand-separated paintings. Each screen used in the printing of an original serigraph has been hand drawn by the artist. In viewing the product of this process under the magnifying glass, the colors will appear as a continuous tone. Commercial screen printing uses mechanically spaced dots that are layered with cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, and printed simultaneously — the same way a page from a magazine is created.

No matter the process, the most important elements of my art are composition, color, and balance — but also much more of mood and emotion. What we create and the way we represent that creation is far more important than how we get it done.

There is but one universal language. Whether you are a farmer from China or a stockbroker from New York, only sentiment and emotion can easily be conveyed between the two. Sadness, joy, loneliness and melancholy are just some of the emotions we all feel daily. It is these things that must be at the forefront of any artist’s intention.

I don’t want people to “think” about my work. I want them to “feel” my work. The “how” of things cannot contribute to the feel of things. Only the “what” and the “way” have the ability to touch — but in order to touch, the artist must first be touched, or there is nothing to convey but skill and craftsmanship.

When I decide to create an image, the focus is on composition, which includes subject, color, and style — but especially mood. I prefer the deeper emotions and stay away from “happy” compositions. There is too little emphasis on this step. Many focus on process and

feel they accomplish everything when they have mastered a particular brush stroke.

One time my young daughter Sarah painted me a painting and told me that she wished she could draw better. I asked her what her intention behind the painting was. She said “love.” I told her in that she was quite successful. Love was all I could feel.

With my latest work, “Noble,” peace, nobility, and a sentiment of age and wisdom were my thoughts. Simply put, I was touched. The need to convey those notions became paramount. Native American studies are such a big part of western artwork and there are certainly many thoughts about the way the Native Americans are sometimes negatively portrayed in art and other media. I’ve never wanted to focus on misrepresentations of a less admirable type. “Noble” is a piece of knowing. A piece about history — our history. I didn’t see sadness; I saw experience, human experience, and the sagacity that comes with it.



Rob Stern at Samarah Fine Art



Conversations: Russell Chatham and Rob Stern

*Two Montana working artists talk about
the range of emotions in art and life.*

Recorded by Brian Schott

This is the second installation in a new series we are running. The idea behind Conversations is to expand the traditional interview format into something more free flowing and improvisational — a conversation between artists.

On November 3, 2010 I met up with Russell Chatham and Rob Stern in Whitefish. Russell was visiting town for a gallery show at Rob's gallery, Samarah Fine Art, which featured new original acrylic and oil paintings by Chatham, as well as rare etchings and three new lithographs that are being completed now. One of those lithographs graces our cover — "Valley of the Madison in Winter," which is still a work in progress. We are grateful to Russ for his help.

Russell Chatham was born in San Francisco on October 27, 1939. He lived there until his family moved to Marin County in 1949, where he remained until moving to Livingston, Montana in 1972 where he still lives. As a painter and author, Chatham is entirely self-taught. He is the grandson of the great landscape painter Gottardo Piazzoni.

He began exhibiting formally in 1958, and since then has had more than four hundred one-man shows at museums, private galleries and universities throughout the United States. Chatham began printmaking in 1980, and now, thirty years later, having produced more than a hundred and thirty editions, many regard him as the world's foremost lithographer.

Chatham has been profiled in *Esquire*, *Men's Journal*, *People*, *Architectural Digest*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *the Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Associated Press*, *National Public Radio's Morning Edition* and *Fresh Air*, PBS and CBS *Sunday Morning*.

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

Chatham's writing includes hundreds of articles, short stories, essays and reviews about art, fly fishing, bird hunting and conservation, as well as numerous pieces on food and wine. His work has appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic*, *Men's Journal*, *Outside*, *Gray's Sporting Journal*, and many other smaller specialty magazines. His books include *The Angler's Coast*, *Silent Seasons* and *Dark Waters*. He founded Clark City Press in 1989, and the Livingston-based company has achieved a sound national reputation.

Among Chatham's private painting collectors are authors Peter Matthiessen, the late David Halberstam, Richard Ford, Rick Bass, Tom Robbins and Carl Hiaasen; editors Jann Wenner and Terry McDonnell; former commissioner of baseball Fay Vincent; art critic Robert Hughes; media correspondents Tom Brokaw, the late Ed Bradley and the late Charles Kuralt; entrepreneurs Yvon Chouinard, Thomas Siebel, Paul Allen and William Randolph Hearst III; chefs Mario Batali and Anthony Bourdain; entertainment personalities Michael Keaton, Jessica Lange, Sam Shepard, Jeff Bridges, the late Sydney Pollack, Jamie Lee Curtis, Sean Connery, Angelica Huston, the late Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Harry Dean Stanton, Robert Wagner, Jill St. John, Ali MacGraw, Jack Nicholson, Robert Redford and Harrison Ford.

Rob Stern is an innovative artist and native Montanan who is creating art that stands out for its originality. He is also the co-owner of a successful art gallery, Samarah Fine Art in Whitefish with partner LeAnn Libby. The gallery is named after his two children Sam, 13 and Sarah, 11.

Samarah represents over thirty artists from Montana and the west and specializes in the finest of original works by local, regional and nationally recognized artists, with traditional as well as contemporary works representing themes from the west. Artists include well knowns such as Brent Cotton, Russell Chatham, Tom Saubert, Bye Bitney, Rusti Warner, Chad Poppleton, Carol Hagen and Harry Koyama.

We began the conversation at Samarah Gallery and we soon ventured out for dinner at McGarry's Roadhouse, owned by Steve and Sandy Nogal. I had no questions prepared, opting for an improv. I did not know what to expect, only that I was open to a conversation with one of the greatest artists in the American West who was in town for a gallery show with his younger friend, Rob. What I came away with are raw insights into the life of the working artist — and some incredibly

poignant thoughts about a depression that nearly turned fatal.

Rob and I were seated at the table while Russ was being given a tour of the kitchen. I turned on the tape recorder when Russ sat down. I have kept the transcript as true to form as possible to invite the reader into the scene, while editing for some clarity. I've also kept interruptions and lost trains of thought intact, because the way information is revealed in conversation is telling. I tried to stay in the background as much as possible, letting the conversation flow between the two working artists, while interjecting short questions to shine a brighter light on certain subject matter. The full length of the recording was 1:23:33.

Waitress: I am doing well. Can I bring you anything besides water today? These fellows, they could not wait. They ordered a beer.

Russell Chatham: No. I am damn glad they did not wait. I would feel terrible. You know, could I please get a...Bombay sapphire martini straight-up?

Waitress: Okay, coming.

Rob Stern: There you go. That's the ticket.

RC: Might as well kick it off. Jesus, that was incredible in the kitchen.

Brian Schott: What did you see?

RC: Well, this is probably outside of big, really big deal restaurants in San Francisco or New York. This is the most sophisticated kitchen I have ever seen. Bar fucking none. He's got shit there — the double wok alone — there's not another restaurant in the west that has a set up like that.

[Big pause as we peruse the menus and specials.]

BS: So what is the food scene like in Livingston?

RC: If you like rummaging around in a garbage can, you'll feel

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

right at home. There actually is one new place, this young guy opened up, out in the valley about seven or eight miles outside town. He is doing a beautiful job. Eight or nine tables. The kitchen is open like this. But other than that, there is nothing I like. You know, I did not realize the degree to which I was getting depressed after I sold my restaurant. I really missed it. But I had to get rid of it or I'd have died — it would have killed me.

RS: I cannot imagine owning a restaurant.

BS: So tell me about that. I don't know about your restaurant. How long did you run it for?

RC: Ten years. I loved it.

RS: Livingston Bar and Grill. I ate there a few times. Best Kansas City Strip I ever had.

RC: I really put my heart into it for ten years and I managed it and I ran it. I did the menu, I did the wine list. I was there every fucking day.

BS: Wow.

RC: We were open seven days a week for ten years.

BS: And how many days off did you take, you figure?

RC: I never took any days off. [Laughing]

BS: In ten years?

RC: Oh, I mean I could go away for a week, which was fine, but...

BS: What did you like about it?

RC: I do not — I cannot explain it. The restaurant, you know — I love food and food preparation and I love the dining experience and all. Everything about it I like.

RS: I do too. I love to cook. I wish I had a nicer kitchen at my house so I could cook all the time, especially something that was interactive.

RC: It was a crazy thing for me to do because of the difficulties and I just wanted to see if I could do it really — but it gets in your blood somehow. If I could figure out how to do it, I would open another one tomorrow. But I can't because it's too much money. I was making money at that time and I'm not making any money now, so it's out of the question. Because it cost a million dollars to open it.

BS: Wow.

RC: And you know, probably cost me at least \$200,000 after that to keep it open before it started to break even. But I loved it more than anything that I have ever done. But it is out of the question.

BS: What was it like to have to make the choice to close it?

RC: I could not staff the kitchen. You can't get any help. I was not the chef. If I was a chef, and if that was my only job and I am like chef/owner, that would have been different. It would be still open.

BS: Right.

RC: But I was never a line cook or a chef. I was the aesthetic director. I designed the menus. I designed the recipes, the dishes and all that and then I showed the line cooks how to do it. But when you get to a point where people do not show up, where they are just flaking out on you, you're fucked. There is nothing you can do, I mean, I can put on that chef's wear and fill in. But that's not cutting it and I cannot be a line cook every fucking night. It just got too tough. If we'd made more money, which you can't do in a small town —

[Waitress appears.]

Waitress: Gentlemen, are you just visiting for a few minutes? Or should we get you going with an appetizer, or salad?

RS: I'm good for now.

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

BS: I think we might just have a drink and...

Waitress: Just visit and sure...

RS: In a little while, we will have some more people joining us.

[Waitress leaves.]

BS: So was it a long process where you just ran into hurdle after hurdle and then finally you just said fuck it, I can't do it anymore?



RC: It just got harder and harder. The last guy that I had for a kitchen manager kind of fucked me over to tell you the truth. And one day, he just booked out of there and then I found somebody else to take over the kitchen and they just could not handle it. I need to write some books. And I cannot paint, make prints, and run a restaurant and write these books. So if I have to choose, I choose to write the books. Like I say, it broke my heart. But it would have been worse — especially with what has happened economically, with this terrible crash that we have had the last two years. People are not going out and spending money on expensive dinners, discretionary spending on meals. So I would have lost it to the bank.

RS: It probably was the exact perfect time to sell it. When did you sell it? 2008?

RC: The beginning of 2008. And it was, fortunately, a very egotistical guy with a lot of money from California, who thought it would be, how do you say, “Fun to have a restaurant.” Well, he found out how much fun it is. Hell, he’s bankrupt and it will never open again. There is nothing they can do...just holding the bag.

BS: It’s a brutal business.

RC: It is a brutal business when it’s working. And the only way any independent restaurant can work — I mean we are not talking about things like the Red Lobster and The Outback Steakhouse that are formulized so their food costs and everything is dialed down to the penny in these kinds of operations. And the food cost is low, the quality is shit. It’s just junk food for the masses.

BS: Right.

RC: But in a restaurant like this restaurant, the only reason that this restaurant is going to work is because of him. [Points to owner Steve Nogal who is working behind the line.]

BS: Exactly.

RC: Because he is here and he makes sure that his vision is followed every fucking day, every minute of the day. And that is what makes it work because then people have confidence. They know somebody is paying attention back there. And it is a person who cares. If you are not well-liked in a small town and people do not respect you, they are not going to come to your restaurant. It’s that simple. And if you are respected and you do a good job they will come to you.

BS: Yeah.

RC: They will come.

RS: It is like sitting on a park bench and if you got peanuts in your pocket and if you don’t wave your hands around and do something really stupid, eventually the squirrels they just gather around you and they want to know what you got in your pocket and they will take it all day long. [Laughter]

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

BS: Did you ever, did you work in restaurants at all as a youngster?

RS: I tended bar all through college, working in restaurants, yeah. It is always the best paying job around for a guy going to school or even a guy after school. When I first moved to Whitefish, I did what everybody does when they first moved here and that was tend bar. Great Northern Bar and Grill right downtown. For several years. I was bringing home some good money.

BS: They tip those bartenders well.



Russell Chatham and Ryan Friel at the Great Northern Bar.

RS: Yup, and you can always go everywhere else and get all of your meals and your drinks for a lot less, if not nothing most of the times. And that was back when every bartender in town knew every bartender in town. There was not as much turnover. People hunkered in. It was a very coveted job so you worked hard and tried to keep it because it was good money. I worked 30 hours a week and took home at least a couple thousand bucks a month which, you know...

RC: A lot of money.

RS: Twenty two years ago it was a lot of money.

RS: I had a three bedroom house over by City Beach and rent was just 265 bucks a month. Cheap, really cheap. It was cheap to move here. It is not cheap to live here now.

RC: Well, it is not cheap to live in Livingston now either. It's kind of preposterous, really. Because when you think about it, there is nothing there. I mean there's fucking nothing there.

BS: I went down there for the first time this spring [to interview Doug Peacock and Rick Bass for the first Conversations installation in the last issue] and I was amazed.

RC: It is a fucking little Podunk town. I mean there is nothing there. I mean, why did they try to make a big deal out of it?

RS: Because Jimmy Buffett sang a song about it.

RC: Well, yeah — well big fucking deal. I mean, there is nothing there. That is what I do not get.

RS: The outdoors are there. I mean, you are right at the mouth of Beartooths.

RC: Yeah, that part of it is all nice.

BS: Well, you like to fish.

RC: Yeah, I like to fish and hunt — that is all cool. But they made a big deal out of the fact that 30 years ago or 35 years ago, a couple of movie stars happened to wander through town. And so suddenly, it is a movie star town. Well, try to find a fucking movie star in downtown Livingston today, I dare you. You are going to sit downtown on a bench for 365 days and give me a full report on how many movie stars you see go by that bench. And it's going to be none.

RS: I remember sitting there in the Gallatin Gateway Inn and having Jane Fonda and Ted Turner sitting right next to us at the next table having dinner.

RC: Try it now.

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

RS: It is different. There used to be a time here in Whitefish right after we moved here, especially when I was tending bars when a lot more Hollywood people seemed to be around. I served drinks to all of the Brat Pack. Emilio and Tom Cruise and Keifer Sutherland and Julia Roberts and Tim Green and I served drinks to Lonnie Anderson and Burt Reynolds and Pee-wee Herman. I got my picture taken at the old time photo booth with Carol Burnett and that was amazing. She came in at 11 o'clock in the morning and had a beer and lunch and some really hack band was practicing. She is like the only person in the bar and I'm like, "Hey guys, can you just kill it for a moment?" But she is going, "No, this is great!" You know, "Rock on!" And we had this Old Time Photo booth in the bar and I asked her if she would take a photo.

BS: Do you have the shot still?

RS: I do.

BS: We've got to find that and run it.

RS: She was amazing. She was one of the most gracious people I had ever met in my life. Totally down to earth, nothing pretentious about her at all.

RC: Oh, I believe that.

RS: She ordered a Bud Light and Alpine Burger and she liked the punk band that was practicing. She would stand up and applaud after each number they rehearsed. Jim Nabors had his mansion up on the hill and would throw big parties for all the people who were part of the Carol Burnett Show. But a lot of it was a fad. It was like Whitefish was a little fad for a while.

RC: I think that is what it was in Livingston too. As if, because there were a couple of people who came there —

[Steve Nogal slides a dish of Phad Thai onto the table and leaves.]



RC: I think that's what it was. You know, it was like in the middle late 70s or early 80s and people came and there were a couple of films made there. Warren Oates came here and bought some land and Sam Peckinpah and Peter Fonda, Tom Brokaw and Michael Keaton, and some others, you know. So it gets this reputation for being this movie star place.

BS: Isn't Tom Brokaw out there nowadays, now that he is not working as much?

RC: He has a nice place and he goes out there frequently, but he is actually working pretty hard.

BS: Yeah, I saw him on the news last night doing election coverage.

RC: Yeah and he's working his ass off. I saw him about a month ago and he told me. He says, "Shit. I am busier than I was before."

BS: So I see you guys both, you are both working artists, which for me is an impressive thing. There are a lot of artists and writers that would love to devote their full time to their art and you guys are doing it, which is amazing. What is the state of the working artist these days?

RC: Well, the last couple of years been pretty tough, frankly. I didn't make a cent in 2009, not one cent and I was pretty much ready to pull the trigger.

BS: Yeah?

RC: Yeah. [Nervous laughter around the table.] Because I didn't take my own advice, which was if you are not willing to be poor, you are in the wrong line of work, buddy. But it was more complicated than that because —

RS: There was a lot of stuff going on with you for —

RC: I got spoiled by being able to make a living and have it working and I did some very stupid things. I did what I thought what smart people do when they make some money. I bought land, which turns

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out to be worth nothing now. I bought a lot of land and you have to pay for it.

BS: They didn't tell you that? [Laughing.]

RC: They forgot to tell me that. Gotta make the payment. [More laughter] But I was making enough money to make the payment, but then I wasn't. So the stress of that, which was a big ass dream, went from being a dream to a nightmare.

BS: Right.

RC: And the nightmare visited itself — if you want to put it that way — on myself and my relationship with my long time girlfriend. 16 years and she just couldn't take it. Because the debt was so big that I couldn't be happy. I was just desperately miserable. So I said, "Look, I



am ruining your life. I know that. So it's time to take a break." And so I don't even know what is going to happen. We're making a little money now. We got the gallery back up and running but —

RS: — I think having your daughter commit to it is a godsend.

RC: It saved my life.

RS: You are going to meet my 12-year-old daughter tomorrow night. She works all the shows, she prepares hors d'oeuvres, she serves food to the customers, and she is one of the highlights of any evening we have down there and I can't wait for her to turn 18 so I can just hand everything over to her. She is incredibly charming, immensely gregarious and she is sharp, she's gifted and talented. 4.0 student.

RC: I told my daughter Lea, who is in her mid 30s and got married a few weeks ago —she announced on my birthday last week that she was pregnant.

RS: Oh, yeah by the way, happy birthday.

RC: And you know I went berzerk. I was in a restaurant with 40 people and I stood up and said, "Everybody in this restaurant face center, pay attention folks!" [Laughter] But just the taxes and the payroll taxes will drag your ass into the sewer. It's just unbelievable what it takes to run a business.

RS: We haven't had a real employee since we opened, every time we hire somebody it's been contracted labor.

RC: We have an employee and it's working okay, but the payroll taxes. Man.

RS: You know it's funny. We had like a \$15,000 day last week and the majority of it was my stuff, which is a big bonus because we don't have to pay another artist. We get to use all that money.

RC: And that's the way it works for us.

RS: But the money's gone. Every penny of it's gone to bills. And that doesn't mean I am bummed, I am just happy that I don't owe as much money as I did today as I did yesterday. I represent on a gross level about 35% of our sales. On a net level over half of our net, so however I go, the gallery goes. And if I were to have at least gotten my 60% cut since we opened the gallery I'd have paid off my home, I'd have paid off the gallery, I'd have paid off everything. And I haven't been able to pay off anything, so it just goes back into maintaining a wall space for everyone else primarily, but...

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

BS: So, this suffering of sorts, I mean, is it worth it?

RC: What else you are going to do? You know that's the thing. When I came to Montana—

RS: Exactly, what else are you going to do? What am I going to do? Am I going to like, you know, learn how to...

RC: Go back and tend some bar, buddy. [Laughing]

RS: No, that ain't —

RC: And you see the problem is...

RS: And you'd be surprised by how few people really understand that. I know people who were I.T. technicians the first ten years of their adulthood, then they were restaurateurs, and then they were this and then they were that and at least for me, there is nothing else I can do and be happy.

RC: Exactly. I mean I'm unemployable.

RS: I am unemployable. I do not work well with others. It has to be my way and that's all there is to it and I have to learn how to temper those expectations when I am dealing with people who are working hard to help me be successful in my business.

RC: People always say I went to Montana because the fishing and hunting were good and yeah, that's right. But that's not the main reason. The main reason was that it was cheap. I came from California in the early 70s at a point in time when the shit was starting to hit the fan in California big time. Where I lived in Marin County in the early 60s and the late 50s you could rent a really nice three bedroom house for \$30 a month. Now as the 60s came on, that same house was renting for \$60 or \$70 a month and by 1968 it was \$150 a month and by 1969 it was \$250 and by 1970, \$350 and not only was the price escalating, but the demand — go to the real estate office and ask them if they have any houses for rent and they'd open a drawer and show you a fucking list of 200 people waiting for this house for \$750 a month.

So I'm thinking — this is fucked. Because I'm having to work at two jobs, two shit jobs and pasting up grocery ads in the back of the newspaper for \$2 an hour and expecting to paint — when? On my day off? Or on Saturday? Or whatever? This is not going to work. This is not going to fucking work. So by coming to Montana where I could rent a farm house for \$500 a year, which is what it was, I could actually make that. I was writing. I could sell a couple of stories and make enough money to pay that rent.

BS: Right.

RC: And the day that I made the decision come to Montana, I said — I told this to my wife, my daughter's mother — I'd never, ever in this life, ever again am I going to do anything other than paint and write. I don't give a shit how fucking poor. So we have a fishing rod, we have a gun, we have a garden and we have free water—

RS: Defining moments.

RC: I said I don't care whatever happens, I'm not going to endure a \$2 an hour paste-up job at the back of the *Livingston Enterprise* doing grocery ads, never going to fucking happen again. Well it worked. It was pretty thin pickings, but it worked because otherwise I would never have learned how to paint — or write. You know, you can't do it one day a week, two days a week. You have to do it all the time and then you have to learn how to make it work so that it pays for your life, otherwise you don't get to do your work. So there is a practical thing to it that establishes contact with the audience — so that's healthy and that's a good thing — and you get paid for the thing that you have to do that you love to do, because otherwise, you won't get to do it.

RS: You know people who believe in what they do and they love what they are doing, they will always endure. If you are not deliberate about that, it just won't happen.

BS: There are some very low moments in the life of an artist. When you are in those moments is there —?

RC: Just grin and bear it —

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

RS: You mentioned a word suffering. [Russ laughs.] I don't know if I can speak for Russ, but I know exactly how many trips to hell I've taken and —

RC: So do I.

RS: And to be honest, a lot of them are self imposed.

RC: They are all self-imposed—

RS: You're right. They are. I do believe in ultimate free agency, in power and in destiny where ever we find ourselves. Somewhere along the line, while we might not have been aware of it, defining moments don't require that you were paying attention at the time. Sometimes defining moments in your life don't reveal themselves until years later and you see it and you say, "Wow, that was a crossroad, that was a moment right there that altered my path and my destiny forever." But —

RC: I've known this for a long time, but it has been brought to my immediate attention recently in the last year. And that is I've always been contemptuous of people who misbehaved and said, "Well I can do that because I'm an artist." I fucking hate that. To me that is just disgusting. So I never used that as an excuse for anything that was going wrong. However, what I do know is that as an artist, the thing that differentiates you probably from the quote/unquote "normal person" is that your highs are considerably higher and your lows are considerably lower. Most people have a range of emotion that is within some kind of tolerable limit, you know what I mean?

BS: Yeah, I do.

RS: I would have to definitely agree with that. There is a sensitivity that I find I have to actually pretend isn't there sometimes if I am dealing with just the average, normal person, because if I really say or expound upon my level of whatever it is, it's abnormal.

RC: It is. It's totally abnormal, it really is.

BS: Well, absolutely.

RC: Well, I described how I was a year ago and it lasted eleven months.

BS: Would you say you were at the lowest point you've been at?

RC: Ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, in my entire life. I described it like being in a well — a 50-foot deep well, dog paddling in ice water and there is nobody within a thousand miles to hear —

RS: Complete isolation —

RC: — the call for help, and I'm just going to dog paddle there until I either freeze to death or drown.

RS: And don't you think too that when you are trying to do something that nobody has ever done before, there is a significant, measurable amount of isolation and suffering that you have to experience in order to make that happen?

RC: Yeah, exactly, absolutely. Even after my daughter had said we're going to open the gallery in like February or March, I said no. No. You don't understand. I'm going to shoot myself. So get used to the idea that I'm not going to be around. You know, because I've had it, I'm done. I am cooked, finished, fucked, screwed, blued and tattooed and I am done. And so she said no. You're going to open the gallery. And I said no I'm not.

RS: This is Lea?

RC: Yeah, and finally about March, you know you are coming out of winter and the days are starting to get a little longer and you've been there in the dark, freezing your ass off, and the minute I said to her, "Alright, I'll do it. Okay. I'll do it."—

RS: —Everything changed.

RC: "We'll do it." The whole fucking world — everything in the universe turned over—

RS: — the power of intention.

RECORDED BY BRIAN SCHOTT

RC: — like, I can't even explain it. It was like, if you want everything to be shitty, the universe will deliver shit to you.

RS: Oblige.

RC: The minute that I decided that I wasn't going to die and that I was instead going to kick some ass and take some fucking names, everything started to change. The energy in the universe...

BS: So, what was the click, what was it?

RC: I don't really know what the click was.

RS: Sometimes a revelation comes in just a second and no one needs to tell you that this is absolutely perfect, that this is absolutely right.

RC: Just something turned. It was something like as if we took this plate and turned it over [he turns his plate over]. And it was different.

BS: And did you physically feel it?

RC: I mean I had the gun loaded and in January one night I was drinking and I stuck it in my mouth and tried to pull the trigger and it didn't go off because I forgot to clean it and the cylinder was frozen.

BS: Russ.

RC: [Russ laughs.] And I go, "You son of a bitch! You fucker!" God damn I couldn't fucking get it to go [big laughter] and I... I mean I was so bad. I was so black then. This table is white compared to where I was. You know I lost my girlfriend and I have no fucking money and I am a useless piece of shit who never did one valuable fucking thing.

RS: You know Russ, I can remember talking to you on the phone during that time and I knew you were bumming about a lot of things, but I didn't sense that...

RC: It was bad. And I think of the fact that—

RS: How many times have you done this?

RC: I've never done that.

RS: No, how many times in your life have you—

RC: I've gone down into weird places, but I never picked up the .38 and tried to get it to go off.

RS: There you have it.

RC: And then it didn't and I think maybe that was the turning point where I even failed at killing myself. [Laughter.] What a loser!

RS: Well, you know once again the cosmic tumblers were in action.

RC: And then I started to get excited. Honest to god I can't explain it. I thought, well maybe god damn it, maybe I can —

RS: I know exactly what you are talking about. Sometimes it can be the most insignificant little thing, but it catches something and you go, "This is right. This is right."

RC: Yeah, I can do this. What if I just started to get strong again and paint the best things? Now my brain is just rolling and I'm going, Fuck! You know maybe I can, maybe I can really do this. My life has been saved so many times during my entire lifetime. I've always felt somebody is looking after me. I'm not going to get weird on you and start talking about God.

RS: No, no, no. I know exactly what you are talking about.

RC: I should have been dead twenty times driving 80 miles an hour around corners to go fishing and screeching around and all this kind of stuff and every single thing that went wrong, I somehow landed on my feet. So I think what I thought was that somebody, some force in the universe has protected me all this time. There must be a fucking reason for it.

RS: I say the same thing. There has got to be some universal recognition of my utmost internal intention there.

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RC: And I thought, okay if in fact the universe has protected me, which I believe it has, then I owe the universe. I need to create or produce something which is so big and so good to repay the universe for saving me.

RS: That which has been protecting you became greater because it helped you become greater therefore the responsibilities to pay it forward and focus on helping other people around you become greater.

RC: Exactly. And so what happened is I went from the blackest place I had ever been. I am now more alive and seeing things in color — the best paintings I've ever fucking done have been in the last three months. The best prints I've ever done. You know I started a book that I've been dreading writing for 15 years this morning at 5:30 in the morning.

RS: And what's that about?

BS: This morning you started it?

RC: Yeah. It's a memoir of my friend, Bill Shaadt, the fisherman. I have a notebook now that has ten pages handwritten. I don't know why I was afraid to write the book. Maybe it seemed too fraught with a lot of emotional pain, but that went away and all I have to do is tell the story, the actual story of how it all unfolded and how it happened and I was so excited today, I kept calling people saying, [Russ claps his hands.] "Shit, you can't believe what I just wrote! You should read this page!" [Much laughter.]

BS: That's awesome.

RC: That's what we're talking about — the high and the low. I'm in the high now. I hope the low never ever comes back and I don't think it will — never come back like it did last winter. Now I realize what a chicken shit, awful thing it would be to kill yourself, to do that to your children and your friends. But I couldn't see past — my vision was just like this [he moves his hands like blinders on the sides of his eyes.] And I thought I was the most disgusting, useless person on the planet.

BS: Brian, Russ snapped at me one day last winter on the phone,

and it devastated me. It put my tail between my legs so I was like oh, fuck, because I wanted him to paint for me. I wanted him to paint for me and you know in a later conversation he told me, “My most productive energy has been chewing my fingernails today.” And I know that feeling. There are things that he has experienced that I haven’t and everybody’s thing is real. Remember when I first opened the gallery and we were close to folding within 18 months? There were some miscalculations and a few expectations that we didn’t account for —

[The waitress appears again.]

RC: Dear, can I have one more of those.

BS: I’ll take one more.

RS: I’m good.

Waitress: And we’re still not eating yet?

RC: Not yet. We’ll, we’ll get there. [Waitress spins away.]

RS: When I first opened the gallery and I called him, I called his home phone and I had absolutely no expectation that he would ever call me back. He called me back in like ten minutes and we were off and running.

BS: And that was the first interaction you had with him?

RS: Personally. And that whole beginning —

BS: And what year is that?

RS: 2004

RC: God, six years ago? Seven years ago?

RS: Seven years in December, buddy, so —

RC: Time passes when you’re having fun.

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RS: Or completely stressed out to the max.

RC: Oh, he was just like going, “This is not going to work.”

RS: I was fucking bouncing off the walls.

BS: It’s an insane proposition to open an art gallery. [Laughter.]
Editor’s note: Same as starting a literary journal.

RC: It is an insane proposition. You should have opened a restaurant! [Much laughter.]

BS: Exactly, it’s way worse.

RS: I know Russ understands this because, okay, I’m sitting here, I’m in a situation, I’m doing this, how many role models? How many examples? How many people? And before I even say that, let me preface it with a funny little story about being over in Great Falls last March. We were running our booth. I walked into this booth right next to us, I got my name tag on and this woman goes, “Are you Rob Stern?” And I go, “Yeah.” And she used to work at Legacy, this gallery that represented Russ before and now I work for this gallery and then her gallery owner comes up behind her and goes, “Okay, let me get this straight. So you are an artist that used to be in this gallery she worked in and you own an art gallery? And I said, “Yeah.” And she looked at me and she goes, “My God. You just don’t have enough suffering going on in your life.” And it was the most appropriate thing you could possibly say. So, when I am in this situation, I mean what the fuck am I going to do? How many working artists who own their own gallery am I going to call to figure out what the fuck I’m trying to do? Russ was the only guy I knew.

BS: That’s awesome.

RS: So, a lot of the initial experiences I had with Russ were really trying to suck information out of him about how do you deal with it emotionally? How do you deal with it intellectually? How do you deal with it artistically? All that sort of stuff. I was blazing a trail and had nobody else I could really deal with. And the whole fact of the matter is that the gallery came about accidentally. It wasn’t like I had this vi-

sion or this plan. There was a path laid out and I could either choose to walk down it or choose to say no and I chose to walk down it. It wasn't planned. I didn't have aspirations of owning this gallery. Fact of the matter is, the only gallery in town closed down and I felt there should be a good one in town, so I opened one.

RC: So, I opened the restaurant.

RS: Exactly.

RC: We have to have one nice thing here, come on. People talk about talent or ability or maybe what you call faculty — you can draw, you can't draw, or whatever. And there have been plenty of examples in history of people who were consummate craftsman who could literally draw any fucking thing they wanted who were not artists. So the distinction has more to do with your perseverance and willingness to not give up.

RS: Absolutely. People think it just oozes out of us.

RC: Oh! Oozes out of us? Jesus Christ.

RS: Let me give you an example of something and this is a true story. My son was watching me separate film one day and he goes, "Do you think you will ever be able to draw as good as Russell Chatham?"

RC: [Russ bursts out in laughter.] I can answer that!

RS: And I said Sam, I think I can actually draw better than Russ.

RC: [Laughter] And you're right —

RS: But here is what I said to him. I said drawing is underrated and overrated in the art business. What really communicates with people is — and I am struggling for quantifiable words to describe it — that there is something even deeper than that. It's about transferring your passion to somebody else. It's about transferring your vision to somebody else, It's about transferring your sentiment to somebody else. And there are a million different ways that you can do that that have nothing to do with how well you can draw.

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RC: That's right.

RS: It's about choosing the right color. It's about agonizing over something. Somehow agony tends to morph into something... sublime when it's being transferred from one person to another. The composition, what do you choose is —

RC: It's not about — you know I don't have that much talent in drawing. I am modest in my talent.

RS: I don't really either. But it's all I did when I was younger.

RC: But the only thing is, I won't quit. So when I am working on a painting and I get to a point — I don't give up and I don't quit. I go. I got to just keep going until it becomes whatever it's supposed to be and if it gets there —

RS: Right, matching vision.

RC: If it gets there, then you have created a situation where somebody can be moved by it. I have said this many times before that the ultimate — my goal in doing this work, I want somebody to walk up to this painting, stand there and start fucking crying. That's my, that to me —

RS: Just for the record, I have stood in front of a Russell Chatham painting and I have cried. And I want to be really specific about this. I have stood in front of a painting and I have closed my eyes and I pictured the the art world's version of Gepetto, sitting on an isolated stool with a beam of light shining down on top of him and trying to get into what it really took to paint so much desolation and isolation and loneliness and suffering into a fucking painting, that even though it touched those inner layers — and trust me when I tell you that the grief that you will feel in your life will never, ever reach the pinnacle of the happiness and joy that you feel in your life.

BS: I hope.

RS: The layers, but it's not all about sadness, it's not negative. The more you peel the onion, the more you get to the heart of the color

wheel, the more you discard superfluosnes in what you are trying to compose, that if you can make someone feel the more sultry emotions, you accomplish so much more than just by making someone happy. When I cried in front of one of his paintings, it wasn't tears of sadness, it was tears of — there was something that made me feel — it made me feel divine in my most rudimentary level of being human. There was a divinity in there that I see when I look at his paintings. They're not trying to make you feel good. They are trying to make you stop and notice.

RC: People will make the comment that my paintings are so calm. Well they are not calm really.

RS: They are immensely turbulent.

RC: And so to make somebody speechless is as good as crying. Because if the person can't put it in words, which they shouldn't be able to. Looking at this thing and they are speechless and they don't know what — maybe they are crying or maybe they are just, I don't know, I can't process this in words.

RS: Anybody who tries to intellectualize his paintings will fall short of understanding them. You either want to feel your way through a painting or think your way through a painting — and Russ's paintings don't make me think.

RC: They shouldn't make you think.

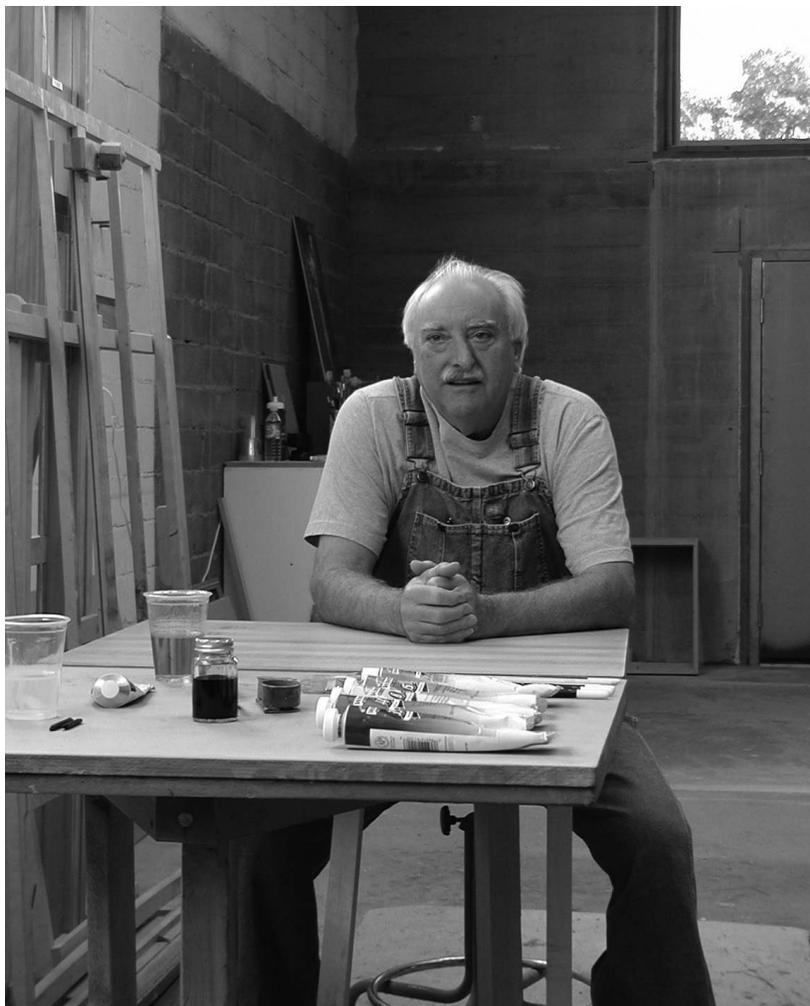
RS: That's the last thing that comes to me when I look at his paintings. When I create work, I don't want people to get up and go, wow this guy is good. I want people to stand back and do a double take because it reminded them of something, it made them feel something. It was that kind of thing. Maybe that's over thinking it. I don't know, but —

RC: No, that's right.

RS: Mood is everything. Sometimes it's the only thing.

RC: If you could translate one medium to another medium i.e. vis-

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ceral response to colors and shapes and forms to words, it's like poetry. It's like trying to translate poetry to prose. You can't do it because it can only exist in its natural form. So a painting at its very best transmits its message in a nonverbal way, that you can't really discuss it. You can't explain it in words. And scholars are constantly trying to explain paintings in words and you can't really. I mean you can try. It doesn't hurt anything. You can go ahead — hey, give it your best shot.

BS: Right.

RC: But that's not going to be it.

RS: Sometimes the more you try to explain a painting, just the stupider you look. It's like, "Oh, it's such a vision of strength!" It's like a violin solo or something. You just close your eyes and melt into it and you can't explain it.

RC: Exactly. It's like somebody asked me the other day. They said that musicians or composers have over the centuries talked about certain melodic constructs being seen in their mind as if it was in color. And I listen to classical music relentlessly, compulsively, and they asked me if I saw the music in color and I said, "No, I don't." Right or wrong, I don't care. That's not how I listen to music. I respond because I don't understand music. I tried to study music theory and piano and I couldn't really understand. It's too complicated. It's mathematics. It's just too complicated. I respond to it out of an emotional basis. So certain pieces of music evoke certain emotional responses and that's as far as I can get.

RS: When you're composing something, at least for me, I never say I want this to look a certain way.

RC: No, I never do either.

RS: I always say I want this to feel a certain way. I want it to make me feel a certain way.

RC: I think if you do that — if I'm listening to some piece of music — I tend to like a great number of great composers — I feel like the music is washing over me and I'm just crazed at how beautiful it is.

RS: Yes, you can't sit there and go, "Oh, I really like how that trumpet over there goes high and the guitar goes over here like this." You are completely immune to the process.

RC: It's like this. I think to myself, if I can make somebody feel this painting the way I am now feeling about this piece of music, I'll be happy.

RS: Right, right.

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RC: Certainly like Mozart — what was it Benny Goodman played? Clarinet concerto. It's like the purity of the notes. I am thinking to myself, I can even listen to this ten times in one day and never get tired of it and I'll cry every fucking time that song plays.

RS: There are certain things that just you can't explain.

RC: It's an emotional response that defies translation in words. [Russ's cell phone rings.] Somebody is calling me.

RS: It might be LeAnn, we need to probably call them and say get your butts over here.

RC: I think it might be LeAnn. Let me talk to her.

RS: Tell her get her butt over here and let's have some dinner.

RC: LeAnn. Yes. We're here. Oh, yes. Come on down. We are making up so much shit that it is unbelievable! And this dopey reporter is writing it down.

Editor's note: This last snippet of conversation I wrote in my reporter's notebook after I had just switched off the audio recording when the phone rang. For the record, it was said sweetly. Co-editor's Mike Powers, Ryan Friel and Zak Anderson joined us for a late dinner, as well as Rob's partner LeAnn and their assistant, Sandy. We moved on to the Great Northern Bar and kept the celebration going late, with banter best left unrecorded.