CHEIM & READ
THE BROOKLYN RAIL
FEBRUARY 2015

Tal R, *Altstadt Girl* installation. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

*in*conversation Tal R WITH PHONG BUI

The morning after the opening reception of his recent exhibit Tal R: *Altstadt Girl* at Cheim & Read (January 15 – February 14, 2015) the artist Tal R welcomed *Rail* Publisher Phong Bui to the lobby of Bowery Hotel (where he was staying, and just hours before returning to his home and studio in Copenhagen, Denmark) to talk about his life and work.

PHONG BUI (RAIL): I first learned about your work through a catalog of your show *Arabesque* at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin that I bought at my favorite bookstore in Williamsburg, Spoonbill & Sugartown, in 2000. The essay by Hans-Werner Schmidt was also very insightful.

TAL R: Oh yeah! It was my first one-person show.

RAIL: I remember talking to Chris (Martin), "Who the hell is this Tal R?" [*Laughs.*] Both Chris and I have been following your work ever since.

R: I mentioned the last time I saw you that I took my students to see Chris's show at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, where I was a professor of painting for nine years at the Kunstakademie. Unlike many shows, which have these frosty surfaces that invite you to look but not enter, Chris's show allowed you to walk in and out, looking at the works as they're literally hanging inside and outside of the building. You can really relate to them and follow what he's doing with each work. You can have a discussion with his works, and learn from them. They're both strong and vulnerable at the same time.

RAIL: My students and artist friends of the younger generation feel the same way.

R: I feel that art is the only field or discipline where vulnerability is thought of as a good quality. It'd be hard to be vulnerable in the world of politics and business. That's one of the things that makes art special. A work of art can reveal certain aspects of human nature that other fields can't. Art is so important for a society, because it is the ghost in the machine.

RAIL: And the autonomous act of making art can be perceived as a political action, even when it's not overtly political art.

R: I agree. It's weird because there is, for instance, a debate going on at the moment in Europe, which is so narrow and backward: If you say you're not on the left that means you're on the right. You really have to explain to people: "No, if I'm not left, it doesn't mean I'm right." Or the opposite with the same explanation. Actually you should be entitled to be at different places and belong to no one place at the same time and that's what art very often is about.

RAIL: True, in art you can be a leftist person and make right-wing paintings. And vice versa. Take Degas, for example, who was an anti-Semite, yet his paintings, especially the late ones as well as the monotypes of the brothel scenes, were of a brilliant, experimental nature, and—

R: They also speak about some aspects of human emotions. They carry sympathy and compassion for his subject.

RAIL: Or Morandi, who early on in his career was associated with fascism: a movement linked to speed, technology, violence, progress, and other features that were more visible in his Futurist art than his quiet metaphysical paintings. Let's begin with your current show: Would you consider the two tendencies, one seems to be about lightness, and the other density, as representations of two different kinds of emotions? For example, in the painting "The Drawing Class" (2014), you use rabbit skin glue mixed with pigment on canvas that allows this luminous transparency to come through from underneath, while in other paintings, like "Bird Mask" (2014), you paint thickly with a palette so dark that one can hardly make out what the image is. Equally important: Have you ever painted in both styles in one day?

R: In the studio, there are different islands of works. One is about my interest in clouds. With one I'm dealing with painting a girl sitting in front of a window. But no, I never paint two paintings at a time. I generally look at one and think of it as a conversation for one week. But I prefer to paint it all at once, in one breath, and try to finish a painting without any editing. And then weeks after I look at it, and if it is good I put it away. If not, I just make a new painting. Otherwise each painting, regardless of size, takes anything in between a day to two weeks. Most of the time I just sit in front of the painting trying find ways to work against all the plans I have in my head. I want to get something better than what I planned, and this takes a while because I have to break down my expectations and what I imagine. To me it's not about having great ideas. I think no artist has really brilliant ideas. He or she might have tools to work with brilliant ideas so the ideas get above what they can imagine. For me art comes from a really personal, intuitive place. It's a private space when you're at work, but at the same time you have to keep it at a distance so it's not just about your personal needs, desire, or whatever.

RAIL: Yes, it should be impersonally personal, not the other way around. In any case, you would approach each painting, each time differently.

R: Yes, especially with the transparent work, which has been a challenge since I started it four years ago. I wanted to try to make paintings that are more in the air, and less on the surface. For this, the technique with rabbit skin glue and pigment is perfect. It's difficult to do it because frescos are like watercolor, once you put a mark down, you can't really erase it, or paint over since accumulations of more layers would lead to cracking. What I'd do first is take an

unprimed canvas and work to get toward an image with pastels, very light, and then I would brush a layer of glue on top. That means the pastels would dissolve, melt away. All I would see is a soft shadow of the drawing. And that's perfect for me. It's like I get my chance, then my chance is washed away and that's when I can really start the painting. Again that is something to do to break down my previous assumption of the images. Images are like ghosts in your head. You should definitely stick very close to your intention, but you should keep it very wide open how to get there. Most of the time I get there, because I always keep my gun aimed at the target, even when I don't know how to really hit it. I like this tension that occurs in my work at this moment. To give another example, I never want to get into a situation where I would wonder what color to do a painting in. It's the opposite: the painting should tell me at least 50 percent of the time what color I should use, whether I like it or not. The other 50 percent of the time I have to work out what is necessary to make the painting come alive.

RAIL: So it's a very precarious situation! But then at the same time you allow for the opposite to occur: for the heavily, densely-painted painting to coexist simultaneously.

R: Yes, I call it a revenge [*laughs*]. I just think that when you enforce certain types of restrictions on yourself, something else builds up in you. I'd say after four months of being in this constant fear of making light, ghostly paintings when I go back to the oil, I'd react against that state of mind. I'd take what I call a lazy brush—a lazy brush is something that moves very slowly, and is loaded with colors that usually don't mix. If they did they would turn into a gray or brown chocolate mess. Again with the lazy brush I can take my revenge by either being very aggressive or very passive. I tend to work on the light paintings for a few months and then make the heavy paintings for an equal amount of time.

RAIL: Let's start with your beginning then we can pick up the thread again. You were born in Tel Aviv, Israel in '67. What sort of family did you come from?

R: I was born a few weeks before the Six-Day War (the Third Arab-Israeli War, fought between June 5 and 10 in 1967 by Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria). I remember there was a saying whenever there's a war a lot of boys are born. As a child I had no idea about art, but I was always drawing. I was obsessed with making drawings of soldiers, weapons, battle scenes with tanks, helicopters, and so on. Then when I was 15 an important incident happened: I was sitting on a beach in Tel Aviv with an older friend who was in the army. At some point I told him, "I want to go to the army." And he slapped me right in the face and he said, "You have a choice of not doing it. You are not going to the army." Boom! It was an exorcism. This older boy cured me. Because when you are a child ,much like a romantic dream, or sexual fantasy, you want to become a soldier marching, playing drums on a field.

RAIL: Or becoming a firefighter. [*Both laugh.*]

R: Yeah, it has nothing to do with reality.

RAIL: What happened next?

R: My mother was Danish. She was Jewish but Danish so I had a Danish passport. It was soon after that my family decided to move to Copenhagen.

RAIL: Why did you go to Billedskolen, a progressive art school for children, instead of a normal school?

R: It was because I was not good at anything else in school. [*Laughs.*] All I wanted to do was draw all the time. I told my parents, "I want to go to art school," even though I had no idea what art school was about. It only took one year to realize I didn't want to be an artist anymore. Instead I went traveling for a year, just to get away from home. It took me a good five years in and out of this school to decide, "Okay, I will really give it a try." I was a late bloomer. And weird enough I still feel like a late bloomer. I feel like there is still so much left to learn and so much to learn about what excites me the most in life. But at that time, I thought of doing anything but art. It's actually a mystery that I became an artist, because I did everything to walk away from it: I went to China. I stayed in Shanghai, lived with farmers for a year.

RAIL: What year was it?

R: '89. I was there during the Tiananmen Square protest and crackdown. There were no foreigners at this time. Most Americans left for Hong Kong. So there I existed somewhere between working in film advertisements and looking like Robinson Crusoe with long hair.

RAIL: After a year in China, you came back to Copenhagen?

R: Yes. As soon as I returned my father said to me, "I will give you an offer you can't refuse! You come in and work at my company."

RAIL: What sort of company?

R: Diamonds, but industrial diamonds. And I hated it so much that after five long and hard months I told him: "I want to be artist." But this time I was older, like 24, and I understood, things were getting tighter around me. Now I had a wife and a child. I had no job. I had nothing. So I had to make a commitment and started pushing it for real—and I got into the Royal Art Academy. It was then that I suddenly remembered when I was a child how much I loved drawing all sorts of my images. It was about three years later I realized this need to reconnect to a sense of naturalness. And this doesn't mean you have to look from what's inside for images. It can be from the outside world. In this room (the lobby of the hotel) for example, I have a choice of brightening the light of the lamp or darkening it in order to tell my story of and about you. Actually when you want to tell a story that is so private you can't use images that are private, you need to dress up the outside world with other artificial things to get to the personal. A dog may have a name or a girl lying on a couch may have an attitude or whatever, but that's not really the first thing you see. The first thing you see can be a total feeling of an image or something that is shocking or strangely awkward. It's certainly not natural.

RAIL: I agree. I remember when Julian Schnabel was asked why he painted the big horizontal stripe over the eyes of the big portraits of blonde girls! He said, "I painted the eyes so people can look elsewhere, at the nose and the mouth, and so on." Or somebody asked Morandi, "Why do you paint bottles?" He said, "I don't paint the bottles, I paint the space between them."

R: That's exactly what I mean. It's not the apples in Cézanne's still lifes that make his paintings interesting to us. I'm sure Cézanne would have said the same thing as Morandi.

RAIL: I agree! Can you talk more about the use of collage elements? They appear more overtly in your early drawings—for example, "Birth of Laughing Chinaman" (2002), or "The Boots" (2002)—than your later works, yet I feel they're an integral part of your image-making!

R: Growing up in the '70s, our art history was cartoons. It mostly was about cutting an already existing image from a comic book or an advertisement that could be found anywhere. For a long time I had a hard time translating a drawing into a painting, so collage was a way to arrange images around the space until you felt the picture looked right. In our time, collage seemed like the secret recipe that was no longer a secret. When I was teaching at Kunstakademie,

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.
Inspired by a photography by Taylor Dafoe.

I often told my students to go to the graphic arts department and learn how apply their ideas with graphic materials. Collage, being one, provides one way of understanding how to cut into the preexisting materials. Even cutting a piece of fabric and putting it on a canvas means you don't have to fill in an area with paint. Mentally it can teach you that it's not just art history that can teach you about painting. Instead, you can learn about painting as a physical thing about either filling out a space or cutting into a space. As for this new body of works I'm trying to ask myself the question: does it make sense at all that I'm making the painting I make today? Is it something I should just leave behind like a ship that sailed away in art history? What is possible today? I've been doing it now for two years. By carrying a suitcase filled with paper and drawing materials with me wherever I go, I'm always ready to make contacts whenever I see an interesting face, an interesting person, and so on. I always walk towards him or her and ask whether they would pose for a drawing.

RAIL: So those drawings in the back of the room of the show were all made directly from life!

R: Yes, every one of them was drawn in front of somebody, and they're not edited afterwards. What I'd do is look at them and ask if it is possible to use this drawing as a model for painting. I discover very often that a bad drawing can be good for a painting. And if a drawing is good I'd just keep it as is.

RAIL: Would you say that having the paper colored in some two or three layers creates a warm patina, which is less intimidating than just the whiteness of the paper?

R: Yes. It gives a certain comfort like having a cat on your lap when you talk to people.

RAIL: Cool analogy. Anyway, would you consider yourself a narrative painter like Philip Guston without the repeated images such as his light bulbs, shoes, the Klansmen, etc.?

R: You know only by doing it for a long period of time can you become better at circulating the images in some form of continuity. What returns and moves forward is something you trust and follow when it tells you. I have always had one main road that I want to walk down. Soon I see a small road that leads to somewhere else. I see the possibility of what I thought

was a ship, but it turned out to be just a square. I want to melt things down. I want to cut off the language. I want it to be mute. I just can't help but go down that road of forms, and take the information back. I also see on the other side the possibility of letting the painting sail into ornaments. Objects and images like rocks, trees, clouds, roads, and endless others would repeat and dance into those ornaments. My work is about taking the information back to narratives. I think behind all the brushes, all the paint, ideas have little to do with art. I always search for form. But at the same time I am also aware that I don't want my work to sail into ornaments like those of Persian carpets for they are minutely and highly crafted and contain so many details. I don't want the painting to go into this kind of level of craft. What I want is to stay very close to a kind of impulse that evokes a narrative without the necessary details. This impulse for me feeds action. I develop this relationship for a while and then I have to go out again to restart it all over again. When I sit in a hotel room and I want to draw a stranger, I don't mind when the eyes and the ears are not correct. What I care about is whether the drawing is alive, or if it can breathe. Years ago I went to the Edvard Munch museum to see his paintings, as well as seeing other works by his contemporaries in Scandinavia like Anders Leonard Zorn, Richard Bergh, Eero Järnefelt, just to name a few at the National Museum in Olso. There was such a contrast between everything they had painted, from the figure, the house in the forest, the moon to a dog and everything else, and the Munch paintings where all the details fail. But what is moving and alive in Munch's paintings, which the others miss, is the air that breathes in and out of the images at all times. I always feel Munch kept his gun pointed all the time at the target where impulse and action are both right at the edge.

RAIL: You mean where anxiety and vulnerability are about to be infused, and are ready to release the energy.

R: Exactly. This desire to be at that edge is what inspired me to draw from life again, because for years and years I didn't. I was too busy making paintings. I feel it's the first time I was able to combine drawings and paintings into one close relationship.

Tal R, "m" 2014. Crayon, pigment, and rabbit skin glue on painted paper. 15⅜ × 11⅜". Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.

Tal R, "THE BERLIN" 2014. Pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas, 30¼ × 48". Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.

RAIL: Guston wrote similarly about the synthesis of the two in the late 1960s: "It is the bareness of drawing I like. The act of drawing is what locates, what suggests, discovers. At times it seems enough to draw, without having the distractions of color and mass. Yet it is an old ambition to make drawing and painting one."

R: That's why his Klansmen are so compelling, because they're also at the edge. They make us feel both anxious and somehow calm at the same time. Sometimes they're quite funny riding on a car in the open, other times one is whipping the other one in a small room, which makes you feel very claustrophobic.

RAIL: Or sometimes the Klansman is Guston himself painting in the studio. Also, the image of the whipping Klansman reminds us of the figure whipping Christ in the left half of Piero's (della Francesca) small panel painting, 23 by 32 inches, "Flagellation of Christ" at the Galerie Nazionale della Marche, Urbino. Piero was the painter Guston admired for his formal construction and sense of monumentality that generates from stillness. Alright, like Guston you're a narrative painter who early on discovered that having a big appetite for devouring endless images means it's impossible to make paintings from them. It's only later that you slowly sort out images in their simple forms in order to paint them. It's like a cow eating hastily then regurgitating.

R: A cow with different stomachs is a good metaphor. Yes, I do feel like what you've just described. I've created my own kind of art school for myself. In the last few years I've learned to be more patient than I have in the past. So yes, it always takes a long time to digest things.

RAIL: What about the impulse that drove you to decide to adapt a systematic approach by making seven paintings in seven months with seven limited colors—yellow, pink, red, green, black, white, and brown—and with one identical dimension, 78 ¾ by 78 ¾ inches?

R: Those are *The Sum* painting series. It was in the same year, 2005, I began to notice a black-and-white reproduction of Munch's painting, "Self-portrait Between the Clock and the Bed" (1940 – 42), which was of himself standing literally between the clock and the bed, which symbolically referred to his sense of time and death. I wasn't aware at the time that Jasper Johns had noticed a similar thing, the pattern on the bed linen, as I did. For me, it was the part of the painting that pointed towards something else that would make painting more interesting, more than what already appears in the picture. It was the part that pointed to something that was possible much later. So I started playing with different versions of the stripes initially with six colors, then added pink as a possibility of having more body in the paintings. The reason was whatever I do, I don't want to have a discussion of this color or that color anymore. There are the seven buckets with seven colors all ready to go when I am ready to paint.

RAIL: Are they all premixed?

R: No, the thing is I always want to start from scratch. I tried to reach what I imagined is the shared red: not too blue, not too orange, like the word red. When we talk about color I would say I'm painting with red. Actually that series of paintings, which was shown together in 2004 fed into a new group of paintings that I then showed at Victoria Miro in 2006. They were about the possibility of having something in the center of the painting and something like an ornament around the border corresponding to what's in the center. It's a dialogue between the center and the frame, between the ornamental and the figuration. The restriction of seven paintings, seven months, seven buckets of colors was just a tool, which consisted of two things: an idea and an example of the idea. Once you learn about a tool you have to leave it behind in order to move on and create a new one. It's similar to what you said a while ago about Morandi—it's not about the bottles, it's the space between the bottles. It's a clear idea. It's a clear tool. You take that tool but you can't take the bottles. You have to leave the bottles behind. So for me it's very much like this. Getting in there, understanding the method, the tool, and once the paintings are made, I'd leave the images behind and search for the new tool in order to make new images. I just think that every artist has to create his or her own resistance, something that works against him or her. In a weird way we have to put stones in our shoes. We have to keep adding stuff that makes the whole thing complicated, so you don't eat, breathe with yourself, which can be deadly and boring. I feel artists like de Chirico, Guston, Picabia are among those who cannot let go of the stone in their shoes. This is the reason why the combination of religion and art is doubtful because religion wants to take stones out of your shoe. Art wants to keep the stone in the shoe.

RAIL: So in the current show, having two pronouncedly different bodies of work showing simultaneously is one way to imply having stones in your shoes!

R: I suppose so. [*Laughs.*] There's nothing wrong when you get comfortable. You can also get good at the things you do if you do them long enough. There's no mystery there. For me I need to be uncomfortable once I reach a certain level of comfort. I have no idea why I need to go through this cycle. Art is the opposite of being constantly conscious. It's the opposite of going to analyze the why this and why that with your psychologist. I feel that I'm working from somewhere real and I have no time to ask why. I want to follow and keep responding to my impulse that lies on the edge that we spoke of earlier. I want to feel that I am connected to the world at all costs. And then when I come back to the stones in the shoe, I'm not afraid of them. I don't mind being uncomfortable, not being free of the stones, or whatever.

RAIL: The notion of freedom is a very complicated one. To most people freedom is a condition of wanting or needing to be free, which is vastly different than the desire to become free. Of course, desire is forever unattainable. This is what keeps a work of art alive, because no great art is just about providing answers. Instead it's about asking different questions about human nature.

R: One of the beautiful things about art is that it inspires us to leave behind our assumptions and expectations. Artists don't leave the idea of the things on the table. Instead they leave behind the images that they have created.

RAIL: If the drawings were made from life we would think the paintings were based on the drawing!

R: Yes, the drawing offers a point of reference from the beginning of the painting, but no, I have never made a painting that is directly based on a drawing. For example, when I paint, I try to leave the person I am painting behind because I want to create a presence of that person in the painting, which, whether I like it or not, is not derived from any aesthetic discussions. The painting to me should have an authority like a presence of a person.

RAIL: What about the size?

R: Very important. You remember we talked about *The Look* paintings being in one size: 78¾ inches square. In this group of work it is completely different. I have 30 to 35 different sizes of stretchers made in the studio, and different kinds of linen that absorb the glue or the paint differently. But generally they're made to be close to the body, and they all, except one painting in the show, "The Drawing Class," can fit under your arms.

RAIL: So this way of thinking about size is new for you.

R: Very new, yes.

RAIL: I like what Marie Nipper wrote in her essay "Tal R: The Virgin," in reference to your constant need to shift things around as though it's a balance sheet that needs to be recalculated: "On one hand [it] is dogmatic, symbolic, and neurotic, on the other hand, it is playful, enchanting, and magic."

R: It was very thoughtful and concise.

RAIL: One last question: How did your illustrations of Hugo Ball's "Flametti, or the Dandyism of the Poor" come about?

R: It began with two people from Harpune Verlag, a small press based in Vienna that publishes artists' books in limited editions, named Sarah Bogner and Josef Zekoff. They both are artists, who have no money, with a burning desire for this project. They just kept writing me, so eventually I read the text and realized how great it was. How from the beginning, Max Flametti was sitting there fishing, counting his money, before the other violent, tragic, and funny episodes that happened. The great thing about the book is it's just like life itself: it has no conclusion and no end. I have a similar affinity for what I do as an artist.

Tal R, "BIRDMASK" 2014. Oil on canvas, 52×38½". Courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.