

CHAMBER *pieces*

For **Peri Schwartz** the studio is a stage where she can arrange furniture and other ordinary objects to form subtle explorations of shape, light and color.

INTERVIEW BY AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS

The drawings and paintings of Peri Schwartz reveal a mind intensely engaged with questions of composition and representation. In her studio scenes and still lifes, the artist plays shapes off one another to create a sort of quiet visual tension. She works exclusively from life, meticulously matching her setup to her vision for an image, even if it means repainting parts of her studio. *Drawing* recently spoke with the artist about her process, her inspirations and the importance of taking the time to create unhurried, carefully considered work.

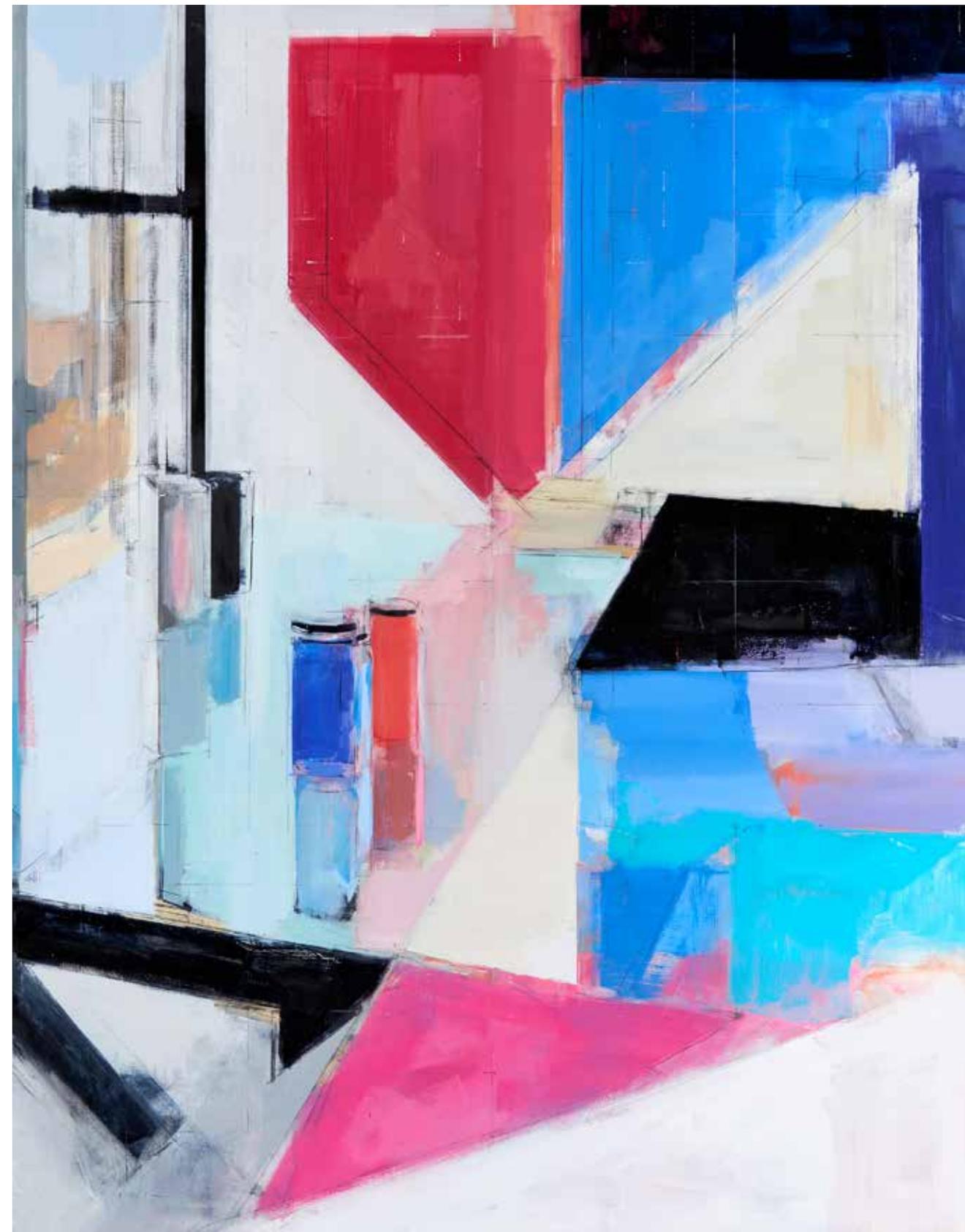
DRAWING: *Hello Peri. Let's begin by talking about the relationship between drawing and painting in your art. Are most of your drawings related to a specific painting?*

PERI SCHWARTZ: In the studio series, which I began 15 years ago, a drawing would start as a study for a painting. It was the most direct way for me to get the composition down and figure out what size canvas I needed. Inevitably, I became more involved with the drawing, loving the darks and lights, erasing and moving objects as the work developed. The drawing took on a life of its own, and it was no longer just a study for the painting. I've continued this practice and can spend weeks working on a drawing.



Studio No. 23

2017, charcoal and Conté, 53 x 40.
Courtesy Gallery NAGA, Boston, Massachusetts.



Studio XLIV

2017, oil on canvas, 48 x 38.
Courtesy Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.

DR: *Where is your studio? What about it inspires you to make it such a central part of your work?*

PS: My studio is in an office building in downtown New Rochelle, New York, where many of the tenants are lawyers and accountants. It's a corner office on the 10th floor with beautiful light and expansive views. When I first moved in I was working on still lifes and self-portraits. After completing a series of abstract self-portraits I wanted to return to something more realistic. That was when I started drawing books and seeing my studio as a subject. What I like about the studio is that there are certain things I physically can't change, like the placement of the window. Then there are all the things I can change: the wall color, the size of the tabletop, the books.

I don't think what I'm doing now fits into the category of studio paintings done by artists like Giacometti or Matisse. My setups are more like very large still lifes or stage sets that I work from—I'm making the studio look a certain way; I'm painting the boards; I'm adjusting the size of the table. The objects on the surfaces aren't just the objects that happen to be in my studio but things I've selected because they work for the composition.

DR: *Your drawings may show your studio or a row of mason jars, but to me they seem in a sense to be more about things like perception, space and light. What formal elements are you most interested in exploring?*

PS: Color, light and composition are the most important elements in my work. I want to create a real space that works as a two-dimensional composition. In the studio paintings the foreground books are large abstract shapes that wouldn't make spatial sense if they weren't connected to other objects in the studio. In the *Bottles & Jars* series I want the bottles to have both weight and luminosity.



DR: *Tell me about the books. How did they become such prominent players in your images?*

PS: After posing for many self-portraits, I felt I had exhausted myself as a subject. In searching for a new idea, I noticed art books haphazardly piled on my work stools. I began to draw them and realized this subject excited me. I loved the abstract shapes they made, and although I didn't identify the artists' names on the books, the fact that the books were about artists I had studied was meaningful to me.

Seated Self-Portrait

2001, charcoal, 41 x 30.
Courtesy Gallery NAGA,
Boston, Massachusetts.

DR: *You mix the colored liquids in the glasses to produce your desired color, correct? If you want a warmer red in a certain bottle in your painting, you'll mix a warmer-red liquid to put in the real bottle?*

PS: Yes. Initially I was using different bottles of oil that were around the studio. When I began adding more bottles, I moved on to red-wine vinegar and Windex, often diluting the color until I found what I wanted. And for about a year now I've shifted my palette to cooler colors made from liquid soaps, and I often mix two liquids to get what I want.

DR: *Traces of a grid are visible in many of your images, for instance the drawing Studio No. 13 [page 31] and the painting Studio XII [at right]. What role do these grids play in the creation of your work?*

PS: The grid has become so integral to my work that I can't imagine working without it. When I was in art school at Boston University [BU] we were taught to hold up a straight edge vertically and horizontally to line things up. It was also a way to measure the verticals in relation to the horizontals. I became obsessed with this way of drawing, and the grid lines are really an extension of my measuring.

I don't just draw a grid on either the wall or my drawing. I look, measure, draw, look again, measure again, move something and then draw, so none of the lines are done uniformly. They develop as the drawing develops.

DR: *So you actually paint grid lines onto the books and tables in your studio?*

PS: Yes, although the grid lines on the setup aren't paint—I'll use black tape or charcoal. And the grid only works from the one position where I'm sitting. The lines on the books have to connect to the table and the wall. The vertical lines are actually diagonals going back into

space. It often takes me several tries to get the angles right.

DR: *Walk me through the course of a typical drawing. How does the initial idea take shape, and what are your first marks on the surface?*

PS: It takes several days to arrange the setup. Once I have things somewhat in place, I draw a pencil line in the middle of the paper. I'll proceed to find the midpoint in the setup and draw a charcoal line on the wall. The line on the wall will be moved an inch or so to the left or right many

Studio XII

2006, oil on canvas, 54 x 42.
Private collection.





Studio VI

2011, charcoal, 55 x 35. Private collection.

Studio XXX

2011, oil on canvas, 48 x 38. Courtesy Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.



times as the drawing develops, but the pencil line in my drawing stays in the middle.

Once I'm feeling confident that I have found the midpoint, I will draw soft tones in with willow charcoal. It's important that I begin with soft marks that can be easily removed with a kneaded eraser. I know from experience that once I've made a darker line, it's much harder to erase. I'll continue making compositional decisions, moving the books or bottles around until I'm happy. I draw something, erase it, move it and draw it again. This leaves quite a lot of tone on the drawing. Once I'm feeling confident, I go into the drawing with compressed charcoal and Conté crayon. The truth is I end up wanting to erase the darker lines, too. Sometimes, when even a plastic eraser doesn't work, I'll use white pastel.

For the last few years I've been drawing on Mylar, and I've become very attached to that as a surface. It seems to erase better than paper, and some of the blacks can get very velvety.

DR: *You often paint over areas in your paintings, and you once said, "A lot of my painting is about what's underneath." Is a similar effect at work in your drawings?*

PS: I do think that shows up in the drawings, too. In a painting, I may start with a red shape, then two days later change it to orange. Some of that red will creep through into the orange, and it will look beautiful. This also happens when I'm drawing and the history of how I moved things around comes through.

Many of the paintings I love most are ones where I feel this kind of struggle and see how the artist kept changing things. Take Richard Diebenkorn. Over and again in his work you'll see places where a color shows through from underneath and he had the presence of mind to leave it.

DR: *Is Diebenkorn a favorite of yours?*

PS: Definitely. He was an amazing draftsman and did exquisite drawings from life. My favorite period is his Berkeley years, when he had returned to figurative work but was pushing the abstraction. In the paintings, these large fields of color and sense of space are most exciting to me.

DR: *With all the bottles and jars, your work brings Giorgio Morandi's still lifes to mind. Do you think your work is in dialogue with his in some way?*

PS: I love the relationships of the objects in Morandi's still lifes. Like Diebenkorn, he pushed the abstraction in his figurative work. The personality of every object Morandi painted and how they relate to each other feels like a metaphor for family relationships. That thought occurs to me as I arrange and rearrange the simple bottles and jars I use.



Self-Portrait

2003, charcoal, 23 x 16. Collection Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas.



DR: *I know you're a fan of classical music. Does that inform your art at all?*

PS: Yes. I go to chamber music concerts regularly and see many commonalities between what those musicians do and my work. A theme is picked up in one instrument and then handed over to another; a silence is like a negative shape, as important as a sound or a color.

DR: *When you teach drawing, is there any advice you constantly find yourself giving to student after student?*

PS: I think students expect results too quickly. I try to slow them down and make them think about where their subject is going to sit on the page. Going back to my days at BU, I encourage my students to hold up a ruler and line up the verticals and horizontals. By going slower, there are more opportunities to discover relationships they hadn't seen initially.

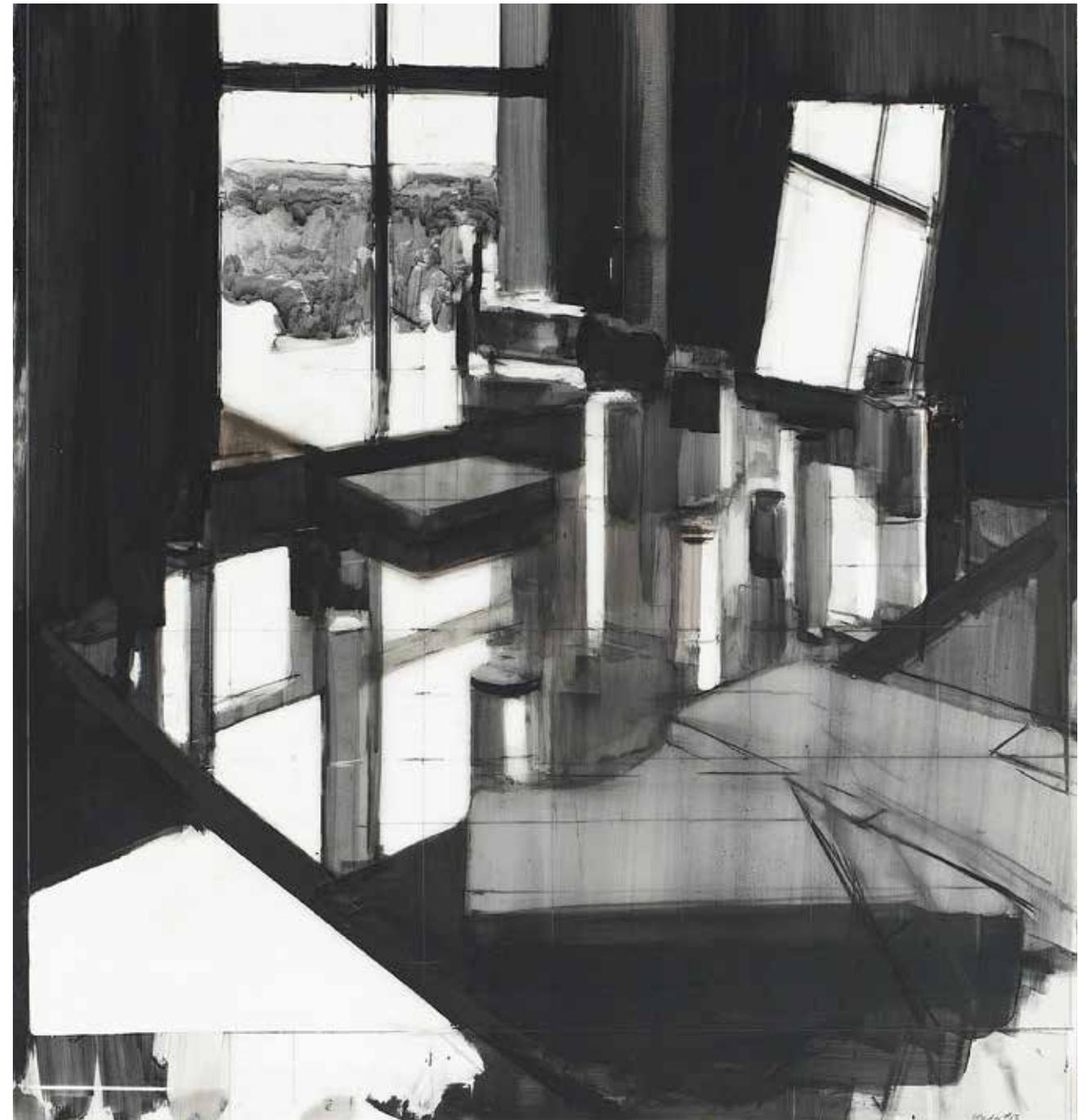
I also recommend doing studies from paintings by artists like Vermeer,



Degas, Cézanne and Matisse. Looking at a painting is not the same as getting out your sketchbook in a museum and drawing from it. It slows down the process and makes you much more aware of the brushstrokes, the composition and the color. Copying was an important part of my development, and I would recommend that any artist do it throughout their life.

TOP
Bottles & Jars No. 6
2012, watercolor, 15 x 22. Private collection.

ABOVE
Bottles & Jars IV
2012, charcoal on Mylar, 20 x 30. Courtesy Gallery NAGA, Boston, Massachusetts.



Studio No. 13
2012, Conté crayon and ink wash on Mylar, 38½ x 28½. Private collection.

DR: *What recommendations would you make to aspiring artists from a career perspective?*

PS: You have to be very hardened to rejection, because you're going to get rejected a lot. And I think you do have to be willing to sell yourself. There is somebody out there who is going to like your work, and you have to find that person and connect with them. They're not going to find you.

That process can also inform you. You might come across somebody—a dealer, a curator, a friend—who will point out something you haven't noticed in your own work. It could be good or bad. But it's important to just get out there and get feedback. ❖

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Peri Schwartz's work is found in numerous private and public collections, including those of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the Portland Art Museum, in Oregon. The artist lives and works in New Rochelle, New York. For more information, visit perischwartz.com.