

Raphael Rubinstein is Professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston, USA. He is a New York based art critic and poet and in 2002, the French government presented him with the award of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters. In 2010, his blog *The Silo* won a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. In 2014, *The Silo* was given a Best Blog Award of Excellence by the International Association of Art Critics. In April 2017, [The Miraculous: Houston](#), a public-art installation by artist and wife Heather Bause Rubinstein, based on his book [The Miraculous](#), debuted as part of the CounterCurrent Festival.



THE TURN TO PROVISIONALITY  
IN CONTEMPORARY ART

## The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art: Negative Work

In his influential essay “Provisional Painting,” Raphael Rubinstein applied the term “provisional” to contemporary painters whose work looked intentionally casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling; who appeared to have deliberately turned away from “strong” painting for something that seemed to constantly risk failure or inconsequence.

In this collection of essays, Rubinstein expands the scope of his original article by surveying the historical and philosophical underpinnings of provisionality in recent visual art, as well as examining the works of individual artists in detail. He also engages crucial texts by Samuel Beckett and philosopher Gianni Vattimo.

Re-examining several decades of painting practices, Rubinstein argues that provisionality, in all its many forms, has been both a foundational element in the history of modern art and the encapsulation of an attitude that is profoundly contemporary.

[Buy the book >>](#)



BOOKS | MAY 2023

# Raphael Rubinstein's *The Turn To Provisionality in Contemporary Art: Negative Work*

Nothing (Really) To See Here

By Tom McGlynn

AESTHETICS AND CONTEMPORARY ART



THE TURN TO PROVISIONALITY  
IN **CONTEMPORARY ART**

Negative Work

**Raphael Rubinstein**

<https://brooklynrail.org/2023/05/books/Raphael-Rubinsteins-The-Turn-To-Provisionality-in-Contemporary-Art-Negative-Work/>



“For the past year or so I’ve become increasingly aware of a kind of **provisionality within the practice of painting**. I first noticed it pervading the canvases of Raoul De Keyser, Albert Oehlen, Christopher Wool, Mary Heilmann and Michael Krebber, artists who have long made works that look **casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling**. In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from “strong” painting for something that seems to **constantly risk inconsequence or collapse**”.

“The **genealogy** of what I refer to as provisional painting includes Richard Tuttle’s decades-long pursuit of humble beauty, Noël Dolla’s still-radical stained-handkerchief paintings of the late 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg’s “cardboards” of the 1970s, David Salle’s intentionally feeble early canvases and the first-thought/best-thought whirlwind that was Martin Kippenberger”



“I take such work to be, in part, **a struggle with a medium** that can seem **too invested in permanence and virtuosity, in carefully planned-out compositions and layered meanings, in artistic authority and creative strength, in all the qualities that make the fine arts ‘fine.’**”

Pour la dernière génération, la peinture *provisional* : “an attempt to spurn the blandishments of the **art market** – what seemed, until only yesterday, **an insatiable appetite for smart, stylish, immaculately executed canvases, paintings** that left no doubt as to the **artist’s technical competence, refined sensibility and solid work ethic.**”

“Their work may at times come off as **uncertain, incomplete, casual, self-cancelling or unfinished**, but each of them is **fully committed to the project of painting**. If they seek to break existing, perhaps unspoken, contracts with painting, it is only in order to draw up **other protocols that will renew the medium.**”



“Provisional painting is **not about making last paintings, nor is it about the deconstruction of painting.** It’s the **finished product disguised as a preliminary stage**, or a body double standing in for a star/masterpiece whose value would put a stop to artistic risk. To put it another way: **provisional painting is major painting masquerading as minor painting.**”

[Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, 1975]

“Faced with **painting’s imposing history** and the diminishment of the medium by newer art forms, recent painters may have found themselves in similarly “minor” situations; the provisionality of their work is **an index of the impossibility of painting and the equally persistent impossibility of not painting.**”



Richard Aldrich, Cheryl Donegan, Angiola Gatti, Jacqueline Humphries, Sergej Jensen, Raoul De Keyse, Michael Krebbe, Albert Oehlen, Julian Schnabel, Peter Soriano, Richard Tuttle  
*Provisional Painting*  
15 April – 21 May 2011

## Gallery Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London

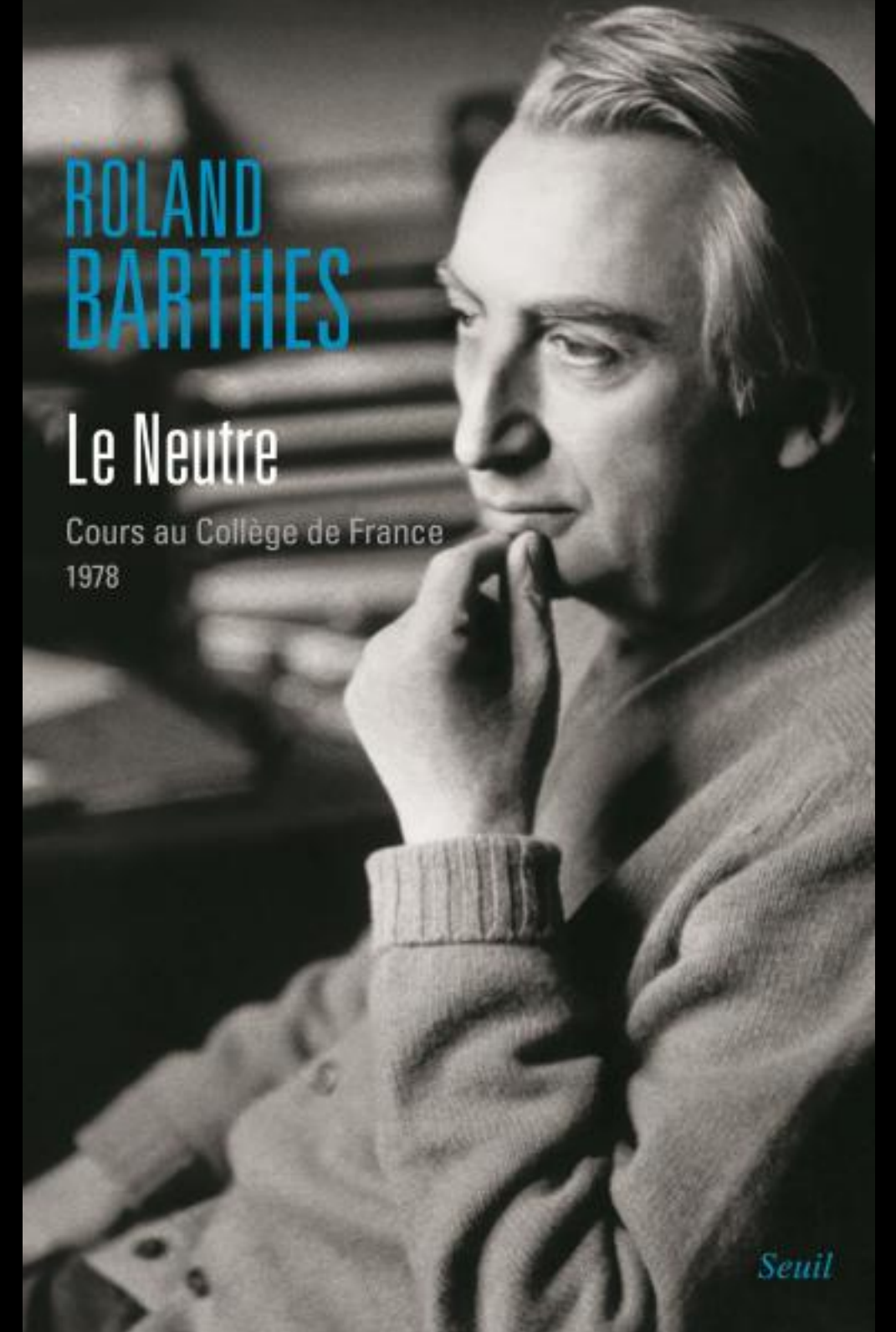
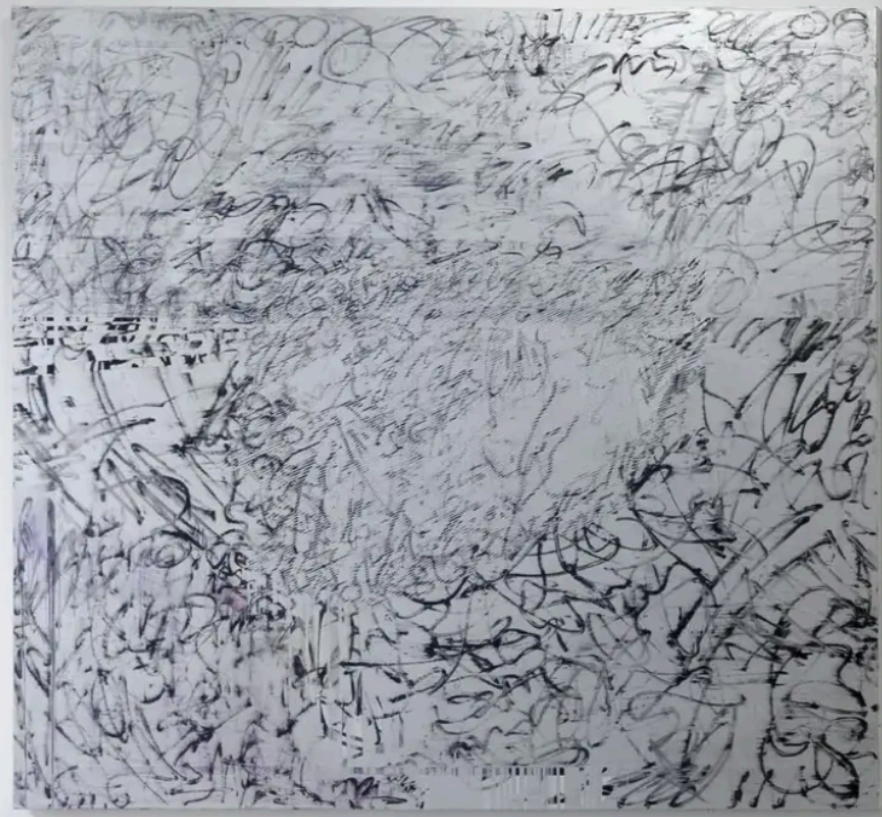


Provisional paintings are those that **might appear unfinished or incomplete**; that court **intentional awkwardness, physical fragility and instability**; that **reject the display of conventional skills**; that discover **beauty in the most unassuming materials**; that sometimes grapple with **painting's 'impossibility'**. Their lineage includes Joan Miró's anti-paintings of circa 1930, Giacometti's endless obliterations and restartings of his painted portraits, the early work of Sigmar Polke, and the spray-painted abstractions of Martin Barré. The theoretical underpinnings range from Samuel Beckett to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.”;





Richard Aldrich, Cheryl Donegan, Angiola Gatti, Jacqueline Humphries, Sergej Jensen, Raoul De Keyse, Michael Krebbe, Albert Oehlen, Julian Schnabel, Peter Soriano, Richard Tuttle  
*Provisional Painting*  
15 April – 21 May 2011

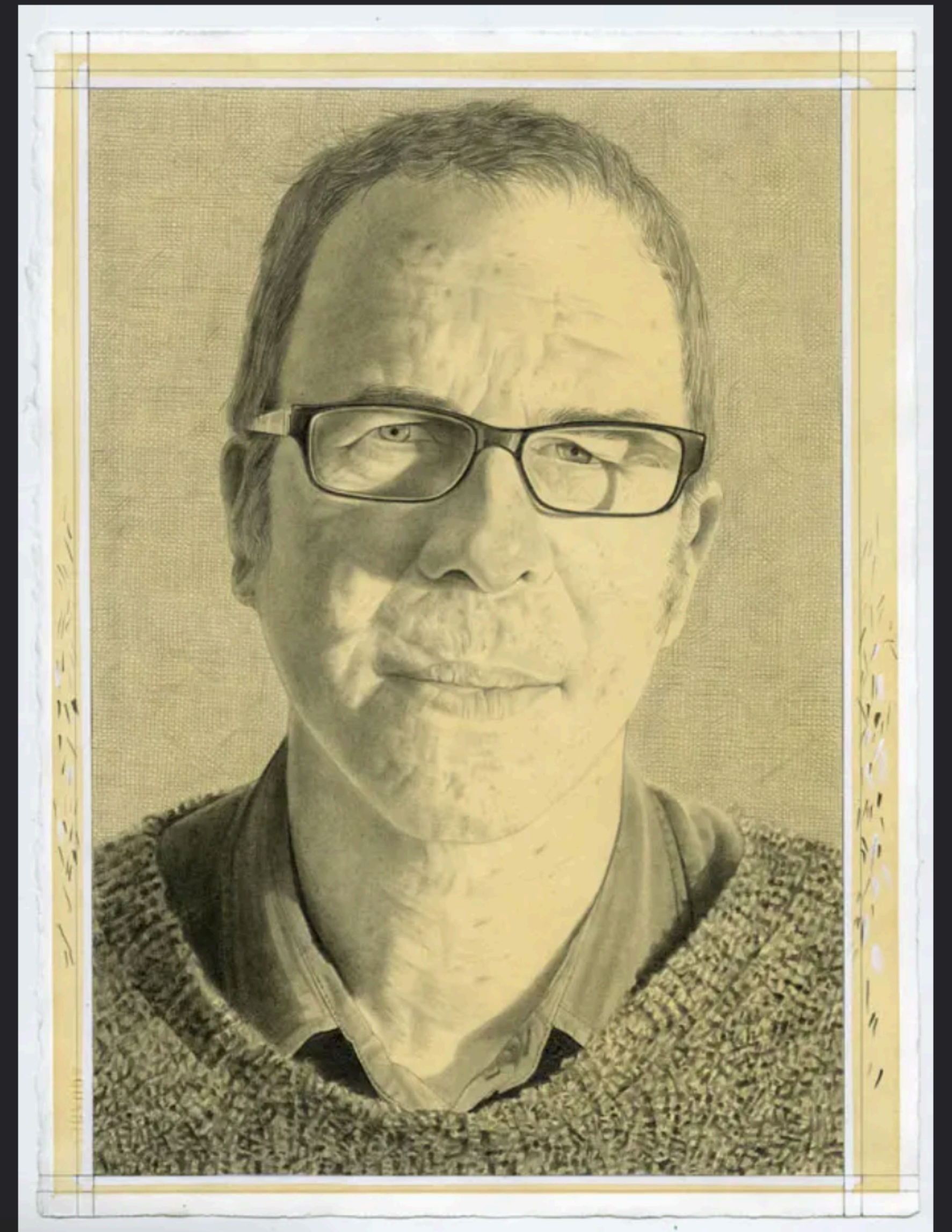


“Provisional painting is **not about making ‘last paintings’, nor is it about the deconstruction of the medium.** What the various works in the show share is neither style nor content, neither techniques nor materials, but rather **a profound willingness to suspend closure, to leave painting open.** Like Roland Barthes’ ‘Neutral’, they outplay the paradigm of their medium, and continually baffle it.”



ART | JULY/AUGUST 2013 | IN CONVERSATION

# RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN with Joan Waltemath



<https://brooklynrail.org/2013/07/art/raphael-rubinstein-with-joan-waltemath/>



“why had **Mary Heilmann** become one of the most important painters of her generation? Her compositions and paint handling seem so casual. There is no big statement, no virtuosity, no striking innovation, and yet there is something in the work that resonates for many people. I began asking similar questions about **Raoul De Keyser**. His paintings are small, low-key, seemingly amateurish, but many artists look to them as a model of what can be done in painting. Then I turned to **Chris Wool**’s erasure paintings and **Michael Krebber**’s desultory works like “Contempt for one’s own work as planning for career” (2001) and his notion of “unfinished too soon.””

