

Terence Donnellan as interviewed by Gwendolyn Sangeeny

The interview took place in Mr. Donnellan's Hell's Kitchen apartment on February 29, 2009. Gwendolyn Sangeeny, the internationally renowned artist, will have her first comprehensive retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Painters in New York in 2010.

Terence Donnellan (TD): Coffee?

Gwendolyn Sangeeny (GS): Thanks. You're making yours an Irish?

TD: It seemed appropriate. Did you want one?

GS: I do.

After pouring some Irish whiskey into her cup, they proceeded to the living room.

GS: Why don't you tell me how you began? What made you want to be a painter?

TD: The money.

Gwendolyn laughs.

GM: Really?

TD: Yes.

GM: You saw painting selling for millions of dollars and you said to yourself, "Hey, I can do that?"

TD: Absolutely. Is there any other reason to paint?

GM: Probably not.

TD: Okay, to be truthful. Being a writer, I never thought about trying to create any kind of visual art. That feeling changed in 2001 when I began working at Christie's Auction House. Although I have gone to museums and galleries my entire life, I never had the opportunity to study paintings as I did there: up close, day after day, week after week, year after year. Besides being involved in all of their art auctions, and seeing all the art in the public galleries, I was one of the few people with access to the private viewing rooms and the boardroom. This is where they'd show art to top collectors for private sales, art that would never go to auction. Often, I would be in a room by myself with tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars worth of art on the wall. For someone who loves art, this was like a little slice of Heaven.

GS: How did this make you want to paint?

TD: I felt very conflicting emotions at the auctions. I enjoyed seeing the enthusiasm and excitement for the art, but I was uncomfortable seeing people raise their hands to bid on million dollar lots as casually as someone might raise their hand to flag a taxi. I felt that great art shouldn't be the exclusive domain of a small group of super-wealthy collectors. Sure, you could go to a museum to see art, but it's not the same as owning it yourself. Just because someone doesn't have money to buy great art shouldn't mean they are cut off from the aesthetic experience art offers. For me, the greatest aesthetic experience is through literature, so I started painting black letters on white canvases—it was all about the words. I thought I would be able to show people that they could find greatness for free or very cheaply, all they had to do was read our greatest writers. I quickly realized that the words, as important as they were, weren't enough. There needed to be a visual appeal.

GS: Why did you pick the particular authors you did?

TD: That was easy. They are writers I have read and reread constantly.

GS: How did you come about selecting the particular passages or quotes?

TD: Initially, the passages I selected needed to do three things: one they had to represent what the novel was about; two, they had to reflect on the writer's entire body of work; and three, they had to say something about the writer as an individual. Perhaps two and three are somewhat the same. As William Gaddis has Wyatt Gwyon say in *The Recognitions*: "What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? The human shambles that follows it around. What's left of the man when the work's done but a shambles of apology?"

GS: That sounds kind of drastic. Do you believe it?

TD: Not really, but I think it sounds good in a novel.

GS: Since you mentioned Gaddis, why haven't you used his writing in one of your paintings?

TD: I have. But I was unhappy with it, so I'm not including it on my website. Besides, the images I'm showing are only a selection of what I've done.

GS: Most of the writers have written hundreds of thousands of words, sometimes millions. Did you have to sift through all of them to find what you wanted?

TD: I had to do some searching, certainly, but probably not as much as you might think. Some people have a good visual memory. They see something, they remember it, and draw it or paint it quickly and accurately. I can't; my visual memory isn't very good. But I do have a good memory for words. Certain phrases, sentences, quotes, or snatches of dialogue, read once or twice, stay in my head for years. That's how it was with these. They were already in my head. The difficulty they presented was trying to remember exactly where they were in a particular novel or piece of writing. And, in going back, I usually found a number of different quotes from the same writer that I could have used. So I had to make some decisions in that regard.

GS: Some of the passages are well known, or fairly well known. Is that something you looked for?

TD: Not really. If they are known, there is a reason. I didn't think I should neglect them because they were known. And even the well known passages had to be winnowed down or perhaps expanded. Also, I wasn't interested in only a literary audience. Part of what I wanted to do is bring the words to people who don't read that much. You might be surprised at how many people who consider themselves educated are very unfamiliar with great works of literature.

GS: What was the next step? Once you had the words you wanted, how did you figure out the layout?

TD: I use a computer. Sometimes this is somewhat easy, other times I'll probably go through 50 or 100 different versions before I'm satisfied. Usually, this takes a number of months. I have a few that took me a few years to figure out, and I have some writers whom I've been playing around for years and still haven't found a satisfactory way to paint them.

GS: The way the letters are obscured in your [Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*](#), painting makes me think of Jasper Johns' gray lettered and numbered paintings. Was this an influence? And, are the colors symbolic? The white covering the black? Was this an obvious allusion to the novel's theme of a black man being invisible in white society?

TD: I suppose Jasper Johns paintings were an influence, but not a conscious one. Maybe you've noticed that some of my paintings have long rectangles that highlight certain words.

GS: Yes, I was going to ask you about that.

TD: Originally, I wanted to do this with the Ellison painting. I was all set to go when I felt it wouldn't work for this painting. I thought about it for a while and realized it wasn't just Ellison's invisible black man who wasn't being seen. Ellison wasn't just talking about the black race, he was talking about himself being unseen. I then extrapolated it a bit more, I wondered if Ellison's words, his writing, had become invisible. Were people still reading him? Did his words still matter? Unfortunately, on the website, you can't see the side of the painting where it says: "IS THIS STILL TRUE?" That's part of what I was trying to get at. Having Obama as

president is a great and very welcomed change, but I was working on this before I was even aware of him. Beyond the racial and cultural themes raised by the novel, which are obviously important, I was interested in the novel as a representation of literature. “People refuse to see me” was directed not just at Ellison’s would-be readers, but people in general. Were people refusing to see literature?

GS: Why did you repeat the lines from [Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*](#) twice?

TD: It’s like that old ditty “New York, New York, it’s so nice they named it twice.” Chandler’s words are so great I wanted to say them, to write them, twice. I wanted the viewer to savor the language. Writing “I was clean, shaven and sober” is no big deal, but writing “I was clean, shaven and sober, *and I didn’t care who knew it*” tells us more about the narrator, his friends, associates, and the world he lives in, than pages of description ever could. It isn’t easy to define a character and make him stand out distinctly, but with those last seven words Chandler has boldly introduced Phillip Marlowe to the world and created one of its great fictional figures. Chandler didn’t invent hardboiled fiction, but almost every detective fiction writer after him has gone to his well for inspiration. Film noir, our view of the dark side of Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s, sprang from his pen. By embodying Chandler’s words on screen, Humphrey Bogart found the image that defined him. Chandler’s literary desires were somewhat different than other writers I used because he was primarily a stylist, but he took a genre format and turned it into literary art. How many other writers were able to do that?

GS: Even though The New York Times called William Trevor “The greatest short story writer in the English language” he isn’t that well known. Why do you think that is?

TD: It would be easy to say he isn’t that well known because people are reading less, which is true. But there are, however, about the same amount of people reading literature as there has always been. It’s a small number, perhaps, but it hasn’t diminished that much. It’s the wider public who are reading less. Or, if they are reading, they’re reading self-help book and books about how to get rich quickly, or some celebrity biography. So, someone like Trevor, who isn’t flashy or intentionally provocative, doesn’t draw as much press as others who are.

GS: Why did you use the colors of the Irish flag for his painting?

TD: Often when I start off, I don't necessarily know what I'm doing as far as color and layout. But with [*Beyond the Pale*](#), after selecting the words to use, it struck me immediately that I needed to use the Irish flag. In a sense, I am disfiguring it. It is representative of what the English did to the Irish. The story is about four bridge-playing English vacationers—two men and two women—who travel to a beautiful seaside Irish inn every year, one they believe is untouched by the violence between the English and the Irish. A chance encounter by one of the women forces her to face the truth about how deeply the Irish have been affected by the British raping and pillaging of the land of green. She tries to communicate her discovery to her companions, but they don't want to hear the truth; they want the illusion. They want to continue to see Ireland as just a plaything, a holiday toy, for the British.

GS: Tell me about [*Kafka's Hunger Artist*](#). Of all his books, why this short story? And what is a "hunger artist?"

TD: A hunger artist is someone whose art is not eating.

GS: Like an anorexic?

TD: No. It's different than that, as it's a literary invention. The story looks back to a time when hunger-artists, professional fasters, were all the rage. This particular hunger artist is the best. Every night great swarms of people would come to see the Hunger Artist inside a barred and locked cage illuminated by burning torches. The crowd would watch and wonder how day after day, week after week, he could live without eating. But he was not like them: he was an artist and fasting was his art. Unfortunately, after being celebrated throughout the land the art of fasting lost its appeal. The Hunger Artist became just another sideshow attraction, barely noticed, rarely visited, and then almost completely forgotten. But the nature of fleeting fame wasn't why I chose this passage. Part of what I've tried to do is paint portraits of writers by using their own words. Kafka isn't just writing about fame and fortune, he is writing about

himself. Kafka is the Hunger Artist. Read the passage and substitute “writing” for “fasting” and I think you’ll understand. I’ll paraphrase it: ““Are you still writing?” asked the overseer, “when on earth do you mean to stop?” “Forgive me, everybody,” whispered the writer; only the overseer, who had his ear to the bars, understood him. “Of course,” said the overseer, and tapped his forehead with a finger to let the attendants know what state the man was in, “we forgive you.” “I always wanted you to admire my writing,” said the writer. “We do admire it,” said the overseer, affably. “But you shouldn’t admire it,” said the writer. “Well then we don’t admire it,” said the overseer, “but why shouldn’t we admire it?” “Because I have to write, I can’t help it,” said the writer.” Kafka felt that this was the plight of the serious artist: one had to write. He did not have a choice not to.

GS: I guess that explains why many artists, not just writers, but artists of all stripes, most who are quite intelligent, often forsake the pursuit of wealth or material gain so they can concentrate on their art.

TD: Yes, I think so. Samuel Beckett touched on the same theme, although somewhat differently, when he said about writing: “There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”

GS: The line in the [Eliot](#) painting, which was taken from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, has “In the rooms the women come and go talking of Michelangelo.” Eliot had it singular, “room” not “rooms.” Why did you make it plural? And why did you cross out the words you did?

TD: If it was singular, then we’re just talking about one room, one instant. I wanted to broaden the implication. By crossing out and adding words, I was commenting on changing times and the changing of society.

GS: Why did you paint [Kerouac](#) with the American flag?

TD: With his young men racing cross country from New York to Denver to San Francisco, and all points in between, Kerouac was obviously writing about America. But his mostly autobiographical characters weren't the type of clean-cut kids draped in red, white, and blue seen in Tommy Hilfiger or Ralph Lauren commercials. Kerouac friends were blazing across the nation's highways and back roads because they wanted to get away from the stodgy, conservative, and conformist mainstream. They rejected society's values and created their own. His world was filled with junkies and whores and winos, and car thieves, and jazz musicians, and homosexuals, and intellectuals, and Mexicans, and sailors, and poets, and rucksack wearing Buddhists, and other types of outcasts. Kerouac embraced those that America wanted to ignore and still finds difficult to acknowledge. He set their struggles to a musical prose based on his love of the spontaneity of bebop jazz. He wasn't one of those flag-waving hypocrites pontificating about moral values while holding a Bible in one hand, and behind his back, holding the genitals of an underage boy. Kerouac was what America pretended to be but wasn't, and still isn't: someone who openly accepted and embraced the outsider, the ones who didn't fit in. In doing so, he didn't judge them by some inherited or preconceived Victorian standard. His desire to shine a light on the outcasts and the underdogs; his desire to show they were as valuable and worthy as anyone else, is what made him, for me, a symbol of the American flag. He was the genuine article.

GS: In the [Henry Miller](#) painting, you highlight "This is not a book." Is that a nod to Rene Magritte's famous "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" "This is not a pipe"?

TD: Sure, but the allusion to Magritte was a secondary consideration. I was just trying to find a way to give Miller's words more impact. It's sort of a visual exclamation point. With *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller was the angry young man who wasn't that young anymore. He was sort of like the Sex Pistols, raising his middle finger to the world, and saying "Fuck you!" to all that had become false and phony in writing and in life.

GS: The [Coltrane, Parker](#) jazz painting is the only one that isn't taken from a writer. Why did you decide to break away from literature?

TD: Literary writers aren't the only ones who have something valuable to say. They are plenty of others worth listening to, some who I've already used (but whose work isn't seen on the website) and others that I will be using. The jazz painting is the first in a series that will focus in on musicians.

GS: Why the Mondrian backdrop?

TD: Sometimes at night, I like to have a stiff drink, listen to music and look at my art books. I was doing that one night, listening to Coltrane, and I came upon Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* painting, which to me has a very musical quality. It's very alive. It hit me that they belonged together. Jazz is very mathematical and Mondrian's paintings are very mathematical in that they are structured with well thought out linear lines. But the math and the structures are just frameworks to begin with. The artist or musician must decide what to do with the structure, or within the structure.

GS: Let's talk about what you mentioned earlier, the highlighted words in rectangular shapes. Why did you do that?

TD: The way our eyes and mind work we're going to read what's highlighted before reading the entire text. Doing that gives the words an added dimension and puts the entire text in a slightly different context.

GS: Let's move on to Becket. I've seen *Waiting for Godot* but that's the only work I know of his. Why did you pick [The Unnamable](#), certainly not one of his better know works?

TD: I think it's his most important work.

GS: Really? Why?

TD: Many people know *Godot* and maybe one or two of his other plays, but for Beckett aficionados, and for Beckett himself, his prose, his novels, are his most important work,

especially the trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, which is the culmination of the all three, and the culmination of everything he had written up to that point. .

GS: Why?

TD: In some ways, Beckett was like Jackson Pollock, in that he broke down the walls of what writing could do or be. But unlike Pollock, he didn't die young or remain tethered to one innovation. Beckett continued to create and refine what he was doing, always trying to pare away what was not essential. To evoke painting again, you could say he went from Pollock to Agnes Martin or Ad Reinhart and finally—with a piece like *Quad II*—to Robert Ryman's white paintings. With *The Unnamable* Beckett had gone as far as he thought he could go. Of course he ended up going even further, but at the time he felt that he had reached the end.

GS: Why did he “pare away” writing?

TD: A lot of writing is artifice. A writer tells a story but what he or she really wants to say is between the lines. The author is using the story, the characters and situations, to get at some deeper truth. Knowing this, Beckett tried to get rid of the “story” as much as possible. He was trying to get at what needed to be said or expressed. Although he tries to get rid of the story, of the characters, he cannot do so because in trying to communicate or express there is necessarily a voice speaking. In speaking, almost inevitably, some sort of character or story emerges. This character or story, this fictive creation, is also, inevitably, false because it is just a creation. This is part of the dilemma Beckett dealt with: how to get at the truth, or get at what is essential to say, without creating something that is fictitious. Essentially, it cannot be done. That's why the writer, or the voice speaking, fails, and has to fail: it is trying to do what it knows cannot be done. And yet, the voice, knowing that it will fail and has to fail, nonetheless cannot give up or remain silent. It may have no desire to go on; no will to go on, but while still alive, it has—as stated earlier—an obligation to go on, to continue to try to say something. The passage I selected, which is the ending of *The Unnamable*, alludes to what has come before in the novel. It starts off “...that's all words, they're all I have, and not many of them, the words fail, the voice fails, so be it...” All any voice has is words; words and silence. And that really is the essence of

Beckett's writing: words and silence, the silence fighting against the words, and the words fighting against the silence.

GS: Tell me about the Dostoyevsky, [*The Brothers Karamazov*](#). I know religion played a key role in Dostoyevsky's life. But honestly, I don't know if he was a believer or non-believer.

TD: That's one of the reason I chose this quote: it's very difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly what Dostoyevsky thought. Part of what makes Dostoyevsky such an important writer is his ability to create living, breathing characters that advance important philosophical questions, but at the same time to counter these characters by others who are equally as believable but whose beliefs are diametrically opposed.

GS: Okay, but what's the story here?

TD: This passage is from the section of the novel called The Grand Inquisitor. It was banned from the novel when it was first published because it was so controversial. One of the brothers, Ivan, an atheist, tells his brother, Alyosha, who is studying to be a monk, a parable about Christ returning to earth during the Spanish Inquisition. Christ is immediately recognized by all. Nonetheless, the most powerful man at the time, the Grand Inquisitor, locks Christ in a jail cell, and informs him he will be burnt at the stake the following morning. The Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that instead of freeing man by granting him free will, he has instead been responsible for man's endless suffering and misery because there is nothing man wants less than free will. When Christ was nailed to the cross he could have easily "cast himself down" and freed himself. If he did so mankind would have had the great miracle they've always wanted. But Christ didn't do that. He told his disciples and followers that they had to believe his words: that he was the son of God. If they only believed in him because he performed some sort of Houdini magical act and came down from the cross, then their faith was worthless. Christ wanted man to trust in the truth inside his heart. But most men, most mortals, according to the Grand Inquisitor, lack the courage to believe without some sort of proof. This lack of proof is agonizing. The Church, as represented by the Grand Inquisitor, is relieving man of his anguish and doubt. The Church tells people what is right and wrong, what to do and not do; in short, they are relieving man of

personal responsibility. By returning, Christ has gotten in the way of the Church—he will again fill men’s minds with doubts. The Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that he knows what he and the Church are doing is wrong, and he knows he will be sentenced to Hell for his sins, but in his defiance of Christ, of Christ’s teachings, he is bringing happiness to countless people. In essence, the Grand Inquisitor is acting like Christ, but he is not in the service of God, but in the service of Satan. The Grand Inquisitor asks for an explanation from Christ, but Christ says nothing; he simply kisses the Grand Inquisitor on the lips. In the morning, Christ is let go and he again vanishes.

GS: So, the controversy is whether Christ believed in what the Grand Inquisitor said? Or was it because Dostoyevsky was advocating that the Church was in league with Satan?

TD: You should read the novel and find out.

GS: Fair enough. Let’s move on. The [Joyce](#) quote from *Ulysses* is entirely without punctuation. Why is that?

TD: These are Molly Bloom’s thoughts from her famous stream of consciousness soliloquy. For ten years, she has shared the bed with her husband, Leopold, sleeping head to toes. And for ten years she has refused to have sex with him.

GS: Ten years without sex? Is that a typical Irish marriage?

They laugh.

TD: I hope not. *Ulysses* alludes to Homer’s great epic poem, *The Odyssey* where the heroic Odysseus (or Ulysses) spends ten years battling his way home to get to his wife, Penelope, who has been fending off suitors during the same period. Theirs is the great example of undying love. Joyce completely flips this. It is through meeting a young man, Stephen Dedalus (a version of Joyce himself) that Leopold and Molly are brought back together again. Stephen has his literary twin is Odysseus’s son, Telemachus.

GS: So, is Joyce making a non-heroic man heroic or is he trying to say that heroic action in the Greek sense is no longer possible?

TD: Good questions, but I don't think we have time to get into a long discussion about that. I'll just say that the previous seven hundred odd pages of the novel have led up to Molly's moment. Her words have a sexual rhythm to them—the word “yes” being repeated more frequently toward the end, with the final Yes being the great orgasm the novel has called for.

GS: I like the blue of the [Fitzgerald](#) painting. This is one of the novels you've painted that I have read, but what I remember is mostly from the movies I've seen of it.

TD: Yes, I think that's true of many people. They remember the depictions of the glamorous highlife or maybe they remember Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, but they forget the words on the pages. I wanted people to think about the novel's final words. With them, Fitzgerald summed up his story, summed up America in the 1920s, and maybe even summed up America today. What Fitzgerald couldn't have known was that he was also summing up his own life. For him too, “His dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it.” Although now considered one of the seminal American novels in the 20th century, it wasn't a great success when published. Since it didn't sell as many copies as his previous novels, many people thought it illustrated how washed-up Fitzgerald had become at the ripe old age of twenty-nine. He tried again and again to capture the magic in this novel, but he couldn't. Slowly, or perhaps not so slowly, his life began to unravel. His fun and games social drinking became a daily solo habit. His beloved wife, Zelda, ended up institutionalized. As his fortune and fame plummeted, he was forced to whore his talents to Hollywood without much success. And, at forty-four, the Great Fitzgerald was dead, largely a forgotten writer. It was only many years later, after a Fitzgerald biography was published, that the public began to reread him and his standing as a writer was reestablished.

GS: Why did you choose Hemingway's short story, [A Clean Well-lighted Place](#), instead of one of his better known novels?

TD: Hemingway is known as one of the most macho of writers: a man's man. I wanted to show that behind all that posturing bravado was existential dread. That's why I started off with the line: "What did he fear?" The narrator then gives us the thoughts of the waiter in the story who, in thinking about God, reworks the Lord's Prayer from "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name" to "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name..." Late at night, the waiter tries to find some comfort in the world but he cannot find it. He goes home and tries to sleep but he is unable to do so. He tells himself, "it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it." Of course it isn't just insomnia: he is questioning the meaning, or the meaninglessness, of his life, of existence.

GS: Eugene O'Neill is the only playwright you've used. Will be you be using more?

TD: Probably, but plays present difficulties because they are all dialogue and stage directions. Straight prose is much easier to find a way to make visually appealing. But I do have a number of playwrights whose words I'm ready to use. I just need to find the time.

GS: [*Long Day's Journey into Night*](#) is O'Neill's most autobiographical and greatest play, so that fulfills the criteria you mentioned earlier. Why did you highlight the section you did?

TD: I guess because of the poetry and imagery in it, and because this is where Jamie Tyrone, who is of course the young O'Neill, has laid his soul the barest. In the play, O'Neill wrote a great speech for the elder Tyrone (he wrote great speeches for his mother and brother as well), but I wanted the speech he wrote for and about himself. After years of bitterness between father and son, in the darkest heart of night, with the fog rolling in, and the whiskey loosening their tongues, the elder Tyrone has finally explained himself to his son in a way that makes Jamie understand, accept, and forgive him for the neglect he feels he has suffered. Now that he has understood his father better, it is Jamie's turn to respond. With the words I selected, O'Neill isn't just having his literary creations speaking to each other: he is explaining himself to the ghost of his father, the once-great actor, James O'Neill, as well as his other family members, and to the world.

GS: Frank O'Hara's poem, [*The Day Lady Died*](#), that's about Billie Holiday, who was known as Lady Day, isn't it? It seems like more than a few of your paintings are about death.

TD: I never thought about that, but I guess it's true now that you mentioned it. And, I don't know if you know it, but Frank O'Hara also died young.

GS: I didn't know that. I don't know much about him.

TD: He was very influenced by the visual artists of his time (1950s - 1960s), and he became quite influential as well. This poem is very typical of his style. He starts off with casual observations and recording of what he did that day and somehow he is able to turn these seemingly mundane activities into poetry, into art, by the ending of the poem. We, the reading audience, can visualize the listening audience at the 5 Spot and feel the deep emotions Billie Holiday and Mal Waldron brought to life, but we can also feel the deep emotion O'Hara felt by discovering Billie Holiday's sudden death. He's able to take us on an incredible journey in a few short lines—that's quite an achievement.

GS: Hubert Selby's [*Last Exit to Brooklyn*](#) was quite controversial when it came out more than forty years ago, wasn't it? Selby's characters are at the end of the rope, aren't they?

TD: No. For them there is no rope. Never was. A rope would imply that they're clinging to some aspect of society, or some sort of hope. But society didn't want these people; didn't want to acknowledge or even look at them—that's one reason they tried to ban Selby's writing. Looking at, writing about, photographing, or making films about people outside of so-called society is quite common these days. But almost all of them who do so are doing it from a distance, almost like Margaret Mead going to Samoa. But Selby, who was among the first, wasn't like that. He wasn't looking down on these people or even looking at them from a distance. He's telling their story as an eye witness, one who was there the whole time, not as someone who thought the voyeuristic prose would find a market. He is using the directest prose possible to tell their story from their point of view, that's why he uses language the way he does:

no fancy words or pretty metaphors; no perfect punctuation for the well-to-do-school-book crowd. His writing is honest, unadorned, and as powerful as a bare-knuckled punch to the face.

GS: Your last painting, [*Vanishing Point*](#), is by David Markson. I'm not aware of him. Who is he?

TD: His later novels don't have any characters or any plot, and only the very rare appearance of a narrator, who may or may not be the actual writer. He uses pieces of history, literary quotes and allusions, utterances by artists, philosophers, poets, writers, next door neighbors, and many others, to talk about art, literature, politics, music, philosophy, baseballs, anti-Semitism, and a host of other subjects. But what he's really talking about is the world we live in; the people who have shaped it and the people who have shaped us.

GS: Why did you use twelve panels?

TD: In his novels each quote—or whatever you want to call them—is separated from the next quote by a couple of lines—this gives them each room to breathe, room for the reader to take them in before moving on to the next one. I needed a way to do the same thing visually. I only picked out eleven out of the hundreds, maybe thousands, he had in the novel. I tried to have these add up to something, just as he did, but I did it on a much smaller scale.

GS: Do you have any other twelve-panel paintings?

TD: I do. I like the format, as it allows me to do something different than the larger canvases.

GS: Do you want to tell me about it?

TD: Not really. I think I've already wasted enough of your time.

GS: To the contrary, I enjoyed our talk. In fact, I think I'm going to head to the book store. Is there one nearby?

TD: Unfortunately not. Book stores are disappearing at an alarming rate—sort of like independent thought.

GS: Do you think there's a connection?