

# Interview with John Oberdorf

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During the summer of 2019, three interviews were held with John Oberdorf. Primarily, these interviews were conducted by Jordan DeGelia. These interviews were overseen by Professor of Art History at Willamette University Ricardo De Mambro Santos who is present during the first interview. In constructing the transcript for these interviews, great care was made not to dismantle the authenticity of conversation while also providing coherent information. As such, little of the interview is altered except for colloquial pauses and short affirmative comments of agreement which have been omitted. Anything beyond that is signaled to be part of the construction by the author of the transcript through brackets. Overall, the transcripts reflect the unaltered ideas and character of John Oberdorf. Should this authenticity come into question, the audio transcripts are readily available.

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John Oberdorf, *The Forgotten Quarry* (2009)

## Interview 1 - July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019

Jordan: Hello this is Jordan DeGelia, I am here with artist John Oberdorf and Professor De Mambro Santos, and we are doing the first of many interviews on July 2nd, 2019 in order to delve deeper into the work of John Oberdorf. So, John please... well how are you doing today?

John: I'm... as far as I know, I'm doing fine. The day is started. I have my coffee and then we're ready to go. If you want me to begin.

Jordan: Yes!

John: I can just... It's where I started. Is that what you were [referring to?]

Jordan: Yes! Well it's wonderful to be able to be in your presence. And I'd love to get into the very beginnings of artist career. You have told me a story before of your childhood. I would love to hear more about that story and how your early discoveries with the wax utensils used.

John: It's all a matter of human perception, and at the risk of sounding pompous right off the bat which I don't mean to do, I kind of like to go to what the Red Queen said to Alice: "When one begins, it is best to begin at the beginning." And that is where it starts for all of us.

Ricardo: Where is your beginning then?

John: My beginning is in Panama from the first memories. Occasionally, when I talk to kids, students in high school [or] middle school, I tell them because I believe this firmly, that the first images and memories that we have in our life are some of the most poignant and important. They help direct what we are going to become because of our reactions to our experiences. Mine or actually... I could say that I believe I remember just after being born which is a very strange thing. I could be wrong, but I don't think I am. Right after that, immediately, the first memories are from South Carolina where I was born walking around a car, and getting lost on the other side of the car beginning to cry because I didn't know where I was. You know, it's very easy for a tiny little someone who has just learned to walk to get lost which says a lot about our awareness of environment at a very early age.

Ricardo: And [it's] what you will be doing for your spectators because we are delightfully getting lost in many of your paintings. Searching, Searching, moving around.

John: Let's see how lost we can get. After that, I say that the memories that were the most important to me and some have been rekindled to me by our conversations are of Panama. My father was the air base commander of Albrook Air Force Base at the Panama Canal Zone. So, my memories really hinge on those early sites and experiences I had there. One of them that I haven't told you yet, I rediscovered the other day, [but] I always knew about it. When we are talking about my tendency to paint large rocks and fortifications where you don't really know if it's natural or not, that's just the way it happens, might have started at a trip to a place called Fort San Lorenzo at the mouth of the Chagres River in Panama. I remember being there with my dad and the sun was shining down on this grass which they kept very neatly cut by these old ruins. Fort San Lorenzo was built in 1587 and later was taken over by Henry Morgan, the pirate. He used it as a staging area to invade Panama City which was successful for a time as most things like that are. But the ruins are still there, and I remember walking along the grass and looking at these old fortifications and the arches. I looked at photographs the other day to see them, and I remember them from 64 years ago. At the time, my dad was showing me the ruins, and I was curious about them. There was a troop of Panamanian soldiers walking by, marching. I guess they were practicing marching and something like that, and I remember asking my dad if these fellows lived here. He said, "No, they are just practicing marching" or something like that. That was always a question for me because I didn't understand how people that looked like they belong to a fort actually didn't. Later on, I suspect, it affected by tendency to be interested in places that people have been even more than where they are. That is, I'm drawn to these places, imagining what... They're ghosts in other words, in a sense. So that probably accounted for some of that interest at an early age.

Ricardo: John, as a child for instance in connection with this experience in Panama, do you remember creating things, making drawings or taking images out of that experience?

John: Absolutely. It was the first time that I experienced [creating art]. At the time, my parents decided a box of crayons was the best babysitter. We lived in a house on the second floor. Everybody lived on the second floor because they didn't want snakes to get in. So all of your other stuff was your basement, the first floor. That's where my father kept all his tropical fish. He used to go into the jungle and catch his own tropical fish. He had angel fish the size of saucers and that always fascinated me. I would be playing with my crayons around two to three foot iguanas in our yard. So it was not going to be a normal upbringing and even though I had very little to compare it with because a child of that age really doesn't. These are the first things that you are seeing. I somehow knew that this was not a common experience. These huge volcanic boulders that were all over the place because the whole area is volcanic... I'll tell you my other experience because you should [record it.] You've heard it already, but it has everything to do with how I've dealt with things. I would be on the back porch and since we're talking about the crayons, for me, crayons were something to be played with. Everything was to be played with or fiddled with. I noticed how the crayons were getting soft. I couldn't really draw on

anything with them. So I was playing around with them, twisting them into interesting little shapes. I didn't realize at the time because I hadn't ever been exposed to Henry Moore but that was a very early, early Henry Moore moment. Because these shapes were almost like some of his [works].

Ricardo: Interestingly, not only they were means for you to create something but they have been reshaped while creating that something.

John: Oh yes. Just as we reshape materials and the way I look at the earth in the natural and unnatural, things that have been created by man, I realized that nature is always in the act of reclamation. Things are changing constantly. And that's the way I paint. I can't not do it. It's a [rule], I can't use, you have to know the system. You have to know the rules, but then knowing them you, use them for what you want or break them as the case may be.

Ricardo: Then John, in that regard, when do you know? After you have started a painting, when you should stop because that is a topic in art history that many painters didn't know where exactly to stop? Not your case, but some of the ancient painters, they ruined their own works because they worked and worked extensively

John: They were obsessed.

Ricardo: What's the point for you of balance that you know you must stop? Is there any?

John: Ultimately, not officially, no. Each painting is different. I remember Demetrius Jameson at Oregon State telling me that if he wanted to, he could paint on one painting for the rest of his life. And things would continue to change.

Ricardo: That's the *Unknown Masterpiece* by Balzac.

John: There you go. And things change. Is that such a bad thing? Well, it can be if you are looking for a finished product. Part of the problem that we have in art today, and I'm not speaking about conceptual art. I'm talking about painting is that people have gotten so rigid in their understanding and material. Not that it's bad to understand the detail, but at some point, that takes over from the painting. It's like saying, "I always thought that Chuck was just a little too close." I don't want to see every pore in the skin. If that becomes the objective, well fine, but then the first time that's done, it really says whatever needed to be said about that like photorealism, you know. There is some fine, I've known some fine photorealists, but so far, it's different from the way I approach things.

Ricardo: Coming back to your childhood, do you remember when you were using those crayons in order to interact with things, elements, phenomena you were observing? Were

they the objects you were trying to capture, or what kind of images were you searching for in the playfulness of that?

John: It was just spontaneous curiosity. And that is how it remains essentially, curiosity. I don't paint to produce a preconceived finished product. Because for me, I know that it is never going to end up to be the way I perceived it to be when I started. I could have any number of preliminary drawings for a painting and use them, but it's not going to end up the same way because I experience things on the canvas. If you're not experiencing things, if you're not exploring, if you're not learning something every time, are you really painting? If you look at YouTube, you'll see any number of people giving lessons: how to paint seascapes, how to paint [mountains]. And they have a system down to the nth degree. These are the colors. The colors are all, you know perfectly lined up and they know where...

Ricardo: That's the reason they have never created anything remarkable.

John: Take a look at my pallet. If you want to see a mess.

Ricardo: So spontaneity and playfulness were constant?

John: Yeah, and compulsion. I am compelled to do this and I always have been. It's like somebody asked George Carlin once, "Did you always want to be a comedian?" He said well not in the womb, but right after that.

Ricardo: But for you John, as an artist, in your childhood, you experienced and explored out of your curiosity. And you just mentioned, it is necessary for you to learn the rules. How did you learn the rules?

John: Absolutely [it is necessary for you to learn the rules.] By trial and error through learning from teachers who taught me some of the basics. One of the best things to learn was to set aside my preconceptions on how things ought to be. One of the most important things that I learned was a statement from Demetrius Jameson who I remember saying to me and it didn't register at the time because I was filled with sophomoric wisdom as they call it. He said, "Remember Johnny, drawing is just learning how to see." I didn't realize how expansive of a statement that was. How do we see ourselves? How do we see the world? How do we find things in things? You see things that are there; that's the way I paint, too. I will lay down glazes and find things in them. Since you have seen the really big piece "From the Ashes of Angels," you can realize there is only one figure where I refer to a photograph, and that was only from a memory that I had of the thing because I liked the angle of one of the torsos. All of the other figures were pulled out of the paint. But to do that, you have to know something about the human figure. I spent many days in life drawing where we'd start at 7:30 and end up at 11:30 or 10:30 painting or doing life drawings. So I figured that if one or a person can learn how to draw the human figure,

they can pretty much handle anything because there are so many subtleties in the human form.

Ricardo: So basically, the human figure was some kind of methodological pretext for you to learn how forms can be shaped and reshaped over and over again?

John: And so it would be for anybody because of the nature of what you're dealing with.

Ricardo: Going through structure and forms?

John: Sure, structures, forms. Leaving what you leave out is as important as what you put in, especially in terms of light and shadow.

Ricardo: I'm just asking that, John because of course, in the development of your narratives and your poetics, the human figure tended to become a minimal tiny little presence while everything else became so structurally important.

John: Well, yes, absolutely. This comes back from my time in illustration where I was dealing with human forms and I was very interested in them. And I loved some of the old illustrators N. C. Wyeth.

Ricardo: Before moving any [more] forward in that direction, it's crucial for your development, let's go back to the childhood. You were talking about when you learned the rules. What was the school system that you went through?

John: Well, if you want to talk about being very small... Both of my parents really encouraged the arts in their kids. It's kind of surprising because my father was 26 years in the air force. We were almost two generations removed and he was very much a Victorian in many ways, a Pennsylvania Dutch Lutheran. He encouraged [art] and my mother had gone to acting school at the Pasadena Playhouse in California. She was there around the time of Victor Mature and people like that. If she had continued...

Ricardo: Did you ever go with her to the performances or the [playhouse]?

John: No. This was very early on in her life. Long before I came on the scene. It was just before the war. She encouraged me, and she could draw. [She] did pretty well at it. I [didn't] have that really formal instruction, but it was instruction of a kind. I was doing drawings and she would be watching me finger painting. I did my first finger painting there which I kind of liked. I really like getting into the materials. In fact, only in the last few years, a few years ago, I did an entire canvas with my thumbs in acrylic.

Ricardo: Oh my God, I'm sorry to interrupt, but that reminds me of one of the most interesting stories in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch Art History. Cornelis Ketel exactly in the year

1600, he decided to refrain from painting with brushes and use first his hand fingers and then his toes, then only his feet. Remarkably now with the diagnosis and all the techniques to verify the technical approach of an artists, we know for sure, he painted with his hands and feet. Remarkably naturalistic, portraits.

John: Well, if you want to talk about the immediacy of taking an idea from the mind and having it transferred out onto a canvas or piece of paper, I mean, you can't get more immediate than that. I remember talking to some kids and they liked my drawings and they said, "well, I can't draw a hand; I can't draw a foot." I said, "yeah, but you recognize and know what they look like." And if you know what they look like, what is it that blocks us between our brains and our fingertips? We have these natural blockages that automatically tell us, "I can't do this." So I said, "Do it anyway." If you have the inclination, and if you do it enough, you'll find you not end up being absolutely precise, but you'll be a lot better at it than you thought you might be.

Ricardo: Was that a technique that someone taught you when you went to school? You were talking about your formal or informal training as a child.

John: Well, there was formal training of course when I went to Oregon State in 1971. My first year was at Eastern Oregon College.

Ricardo: Did you reach the college with the decision of majoring? In which discipline?

John: It was after my first year at Eastern Oregon College. I had majored in General Studies because I didn't really know. I just couldn't figure that out because everything was presented to me as: well, you're going to have to find a career someday. I wasn't sure. I knew I had liked to draw, and I had just gotten started in doing a little painting. This is back in 1970. So it was a matter of graduating into the idea that I don't want to have just a General Studies major. I want to do what I'm good at. I made a formal inner decision. I'm going to continue doing this because this is what I do. It's not a decision like, I am going to be an artist. It was a recognition that this is what I've always done and this is what I'm always going to do. You know, I'm not going to stop doing it no matter what I do otherwise to make a living. It is just something I am always going to do. So that probably happened in 1971. The decision that well this is it.

Ricardo: Do you have that type of [stimulating] moment in which you heard your inner voice? Can you tell us?

John: Yes, I did. It wasn't. It was very simple and I don't even remember where I was at the time. I just said, yup.

Ricardo: That's the road.

John: That's the way I am going to continue with this because this is the one that is most obvious to me. So, it was never a matter of I'm going to decide that this is my career. It was this is what I do.

Ricardo: So the University has played a very important role for you? The university has played a very important role clarifying your very being?

John: Oh, absolutely. I was fortunate at Oregon State because we had some really wonderful professors there at the time. Most of them had been coming out of the abstract expressionist schools in the Midwest.

Ricardo: Can you name a few?

John: Absolutely! Allen Monroe would be one. Demetrius Jameson would be another. There was also Sandgren who I didn't take too many classes from. They were all buy and large. Shepard Levine [was another.] These were excellent [teachers.]

Ricardo: If it were, I know it might sound reductive. But if you were to organize your mindset and just see things that you might have learned from each one of them, would it be a possible list for you to make?

John: Oh yes, well the ones that I mentioned, certainly. Berkley Chapell was another one who became my counsellor.

Ricardo: And what did you learn from every one of them that you can recount?

John: From Berk', I learned about glazes. And he wasn't the only one. Demetrius was the same thing. So, we kind of bounced back and forth.

Ricardo: Can you explain that?

John: How that started building a canvas, how to stretch a canvas, which I hate doing to this day. Its labor intensive and so I buy pre-stretched canvases when I can, but you can't always do that if it doesn't fit the size or shape of the idea that you've got at least in your head at that time. Then you have to do it. Then it was laying down the ground, the gesso. At the time, we were using the old formula basically linseed oil turpentine, a little Damar varnish and mixing that. It was wonderful for painting while you were painting. But they would never dry. They just didn't dry. You would have to wait when you put a surface on, you would have to wait a week almost before you could go back and into it because you would destroy what you had already done. Now, we have mediums like Liquin by Windsor Newton. These faster drying things. While there not quite as fun to work with in terms of mixing with your paints, they do dry very fast. You can literally put on two coats in a day, and you can mix also. In fact, I'm thinking of going back on occasion on to

using the old formula to start the painting for the immediate gesture finishing off with the other for the hardening up and the finishing off of a painting.

Ricardo: What about the other professors you had?

John: Well, those were the ones I already mentioned certainly. For drawing, Clint Brown was excellent, still is to this day. He came out of UCLA, I believe. I think they were taking pre-med classes, so you're talking about medical illustrations almost. Or it was being taught by the art department at that time. We didn't have that at Oregon State. I had to learn that from my Life Drawing classes destroying a lot of *National Geographic*.

Ricardo: Now, John, back in the sixties, there was the [emergence] of a new category, the design, aside from illustration. It was also a very poor reception at first, so there was a prejudice at first. One thing was the "high" art, fine arts, and the other is to become a technician of images to provide design images or illustrations. How did you field that back then?

John: I really concentrated on illustration. I actually did sculpture at first. After about a year, I realized that, and I always did a little bit... I'd always take a sculpture course. You'll see a couple of my things you have here that I did in resin cast. I realized my efforts were going to be best on a two-dimensional surface. So I was doing that, and I was concentrating on.

Ricardo: Which is never bi-dimensional. Right, in your case, it's very sculptural.

John: Yeah, well it's bringing out the sculpture in the two dimensions and from the mind. That's all about the mind and the perception. So yeah, I had not stopped sculpture, but I concentrated more on the drawing and the illustration. It was probably in the beginning of my junior year that I concentrated more on the painting as well. It had an illustrative sort of emphasis.

Ricardo: How would you define that illustrative emphasis, John?

John: Depicting literal content of a story on a two-dimensional surface. I was a big fan of N.C. Wyeth and am to this day and a number of others as well. I would say the people that he learned from as well were very important to me. I also learned from looking at the work of Frank Frazetta who did a lot of the Pulp Fiction illustrations and Edgar Rice-Burroughs and the Conan stories. I found at some point because I even started to paint a little bit like that at the time 'cause I was thinking about doing this and doing the illustration. Which I did for a little while, but I never quite caught on to that because I got tired of drawing or painting what other people wanted me to draw and paint. But, I was finding, I was looking more and more at the landscape behind the figures than I was at the figures at a certain point. I appreciate them and I come back to them on occasion

because I'm not absolutist in terms of approach to a painting. I'm kind of like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut's [character]. I go back and forth with time with each painting. Each one is going to be different. You've seen a few of these here and some are absolutely completely different because I was thinking different at the time. And why should you fight against that?

Ricardo: You could say that with you there is a constant beginning because it all begins, begins, but there is always a development. Never an ending.

John: It's like the old philosophical statement becoming is superior to being.

Ricardo: Would you think that that kind of approach has helped you to refrain from subordinating images to texts as a prerogative for illustrations?

John: Absolutely! There are times when I will refer to literary material. In fact, what started that big painting *From the Ashes of Angels* was a book that I had read by Andrew Collins called *From the Ashes of Angels*. His premise was trying to find out what the origins of these iconographic images, what they come from, what they really mean. For me, I tend to check the box at the bottom that says, "all of the above." Where do Angels come from? Spirit Beings? Ancestors? Spirit Guides? Or Collins has suggested they come from the memories of a fallen civilization or lost race that he referred to as the Watchers. Well, I found that really intriguing.

Ricardo: That's a very important element, John, an element that I would like for us to excavate further because you mentioned that particularly this painting was based roughly, vaguely on a text, on a book that you read.

John: I was staring at this 5 ½ by 5 ½ foot canvas that I had laid down.

Ricardo: After you read the book?

John: After? Well, no the canvas had already been there.

Ricardo: But I mean the book, you had already read?

John: During, you know? It was apart from.

Ricardo: Oh, okay...

John: And I was... I knew I was going to do something with it but I wanted this kind of umber ochre ground on it, and I wanted to pull some images out of that. And through the glaze. And I had an entirely different concept when I started.

Ricardo: What was it going to be like?

John: Well, it was going to refer more to some of the ancient Egyptian imagery from Horace and Thoth and Tahote or later Hermes Trismegistus, the Thrice Great, the god of science and wisdom.

Ricardo: The emerald tablets.

John: The emerald tablets of Thoth. Um, and that's where it started, but it wasn't quite working. After I had read that book, images started popping into my mind, and I thought well how do I do this? I knew I was going to do. I will also say part of this is a reference to your presentation of the Renaissance drawings. Yes, it definitely does because it was reminding me of images I had seen in the past of how they used to draw. The sepia on darker paper. I was also impressed with their absolutely precious use of paper because they didn't have as much of it. If they had access to the paper we have now they would be out of their minds. They would be crazed.

Ricardo: Oh my God. Or they wouldn't, so I'm glad you are... So in other words, John, you had a certain idea in your mind then you are staring in this vague chaotic shape, and in the meantime you were reading this book. Sort of an intersection?

John: Yeah, it just kind of transferred over to what am I doing? Because I was taking on top of the ochre umber, a translucent umber glaze that I was putting. Just seeing where it goes, putting it on. That's how I start. Find images. You know, something will lead to something. Something always leads to something.

Ricardo: And then when those images. Especially the human figures, they started emerging. Would you say the attributes, they could be somehow related to the book as well?

John: Yes, absolutely. I find things and my mind works on them, and it refers back.

Ricardo: So we have found Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, the textual basis for it.

John: Yes, basically. It was there and these things started popping out. It is almost as if they are painted before they are painted, in a way. You know to a degree what the attitude is going to be. It's just like drawing the human form. A human has its own backbone, it's own spine, its own direction or thrust. You find what that is and work on it, and everything else surrounds it.

Ricardo: And that remark, John, really leads us back to your moment at the university when you were discovering yourself and you were first approaching the world of illustration. Could you describe that period a little bit?

John: Basically, to describe the academic process, part of it is a drudge, frankly. You realize after the experience that more of what you learned. The learning process continues. It's the old statement: "If he is indeed wise, he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather lead you to the threshold of your mind." The best professors do this instead of teaching students what to think...

Ricardo: Henri Matisse's master Gustav Moreau once claimed that, "A master should be a bridge."

John: Yes, instead of teaching them what to think, you offer a means by which they can learn to think. As they say, the human brain isn't even formed until about age 25. I suspect for many people, it is way beyond that.

Ricardo: (to Jordan) Are you 25?

Jordan: I'm only twenty...

John: Okay, we so you're ahead of the game. Yeah, in terms of that, I tell people... I don't want to whip any religion in them, but there is a statement I remember. I think it Paul's letter to the Salvador-Dalians or something like that. I think he wrote a whole bunch of letters to people.

Ricardo: Now there was the letter to the Magrittians.

John: Yes, there you got the "Magrittians." It goes: "When I was a child, I acted as a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things" and here I add "and so I thought." I learned at some point that I had not put away childish things, and that I had no intention of doing that. But, I would change the word childish for child-like because it has everything to do with attitude, how we see the world. How we see the world of we're a painter is how we paint. To have that sense of awe and wonder at the world. There's a lot of really awful stuff out there, and that's why I don't paint that. I'm more interested in other imagery, other things that compel me. That I find more interesting, awe-inspiring. I always wondered why during the day a policeman would do his job then want to go home and watch police shows. You've got to be a real sucker for punishment.

Ricardo: So in your case, John, at least at that stage of your career when you were in university. Part for you to explore the possibility for you to given people for them to awe, giving them their own wonder experience.

John: That's why paintings are an experience, a window.

Ricardo: Right, but in your case, at that stage in your career, you sought for sources in texts in other narrative.

John: It wasn't always seeking for them because I was thinking in many ways the same way I do now. But I was also dealing with the reality of how am I going to make a living at it? That's why I was concentrating more on the illustration and I was compelled by it. Later on, I realized this was really...

Ricardo: And between choice and profession, what were the stages you had to go through to become an artist in illustration, in the market of illustration?

John: Well, yeah, part of that is I really never figured that out. That's because I did not have the mind of an entrepreneur. You have to do that to be really successful at that sort of thing. After that, it becomes more about the entrepreneurship almost than it does about the [product] that you're putting out. Which is what pushes me away from that. Any number of people present themselves and the term artist is tossed around like popcorn in a movie theater. Everyone and their pet dog is an artist. I don't even use the term anymore. I just say I paint. I'll let the people consider me to be whatever they want. But this is what I do.

Ricardo: You did have some contacts because you created many beautiful, very enigmatic illustrations for [publishers.]

John: Most of those I did in the Bay area. It was magazines basically, children's magazines. Even I did some political illustration at the time because I had it open to me. As long as it was more conceptual and not dealing with the political so much. More in the way of the mind works and whatever is conveyed that way. I was more at home with that and did that. I even did some illustrations for the Oakland Public School system for a while. Which was really a drudge 'cause it was describing certain things: how a child first learns to go to the bank, for instance, that sort of thing. The imagery that... which interested me really not at all. I understand how it's nice to teach a child how to learn to go to the bank, but oh my god. My creativity was really right out the window on that one.

Ricardo: Especially in this field because you are commissioned, right. All the images and they are somehow prescribed within the text.

John: I found it very difficult to stay rigidly to what they were looking for. Because I was always wandering off into my own thing. I couldn't be at home with that.

Ricardo: Were there cases in which you were satisfied with the result and the connection between text and image?

John: Yes, although not the result necessarily. And the primary example is the book that Ace put out that we looked at called *The Tower of Death*. Where they were putting the cover together from a painting that I had done. The tower was cut off. So, it was a little bit contradictory to the title at the very least. But the painting was kind of fun, and it was really in the Frazetta-esque style. Apparently, there's been some question as to who actually did the painting because they also cut off my signature on the end so nobody knows. They didn't record it in the book anywhere.

Ricardo: As a matter of fact, I might have mentioned that briefly I went online just to search for remark about this book. There was a huge debate about who was the author of the cover image. Many of the names have been even made for that. So, the authorship is still open, wide open.

John: Well, we should probably let them know. I'm not too worried about that. They'll say whatever it is and who knows somebody will probably claim it who didn't do it. These days, intellectual property is like a free-for-all.

Ricardo: Now don't you think that is a parameter too that is somehow reductive in how the illustrations, the fact that their authorship, their very authoriality can be simply erased. There is no emerging style that can be so recognizable as to affirm their originality.

John: Sure, I have the preliminary drawings and the painting that are owned by a friend of mine that pretty much prove that I did that particular one. Most of the others were magazine illustrations and even one painting where I had combined a photograph with my own imagery which ultimately didn't really work, and was where I really learned that if you're working from a photograph, you better be changing things because the original work is done in the photo. The truth of a photograph and the truth of a painting and they're not the same. While I refer occasionally to a photograph, I never paint directly from them. There is one instance in this particular painting where I had taken a...

Ricardo: Can you remind us the title of this painting?

John: Yeah. It's called *Sea Sides*. ...where I had found a photograph in National Geographic of course of a little Egyptian boy wading in this pool. I thought, gosh, it almost looks like a painting itself. Somebody should do something with that. So, I stenciled on the back, reversed the figure and aged him by about seven years in terms of musculature and the only thing I really wanted was the attitude and the angle there. I didn't have a lot of time and I just wanted to get it done. I changed everything, gave him a different head, and instead of six or seven years old, more like 14 or 15 and put him there. The rest from the sea to everything else is all from my mind. Of course, most of him is with the exception of that stance which was changed.

Ricardo: So, John, would you argue that in many of your works regardless of the chronology, 1975 or 2018 this very dichotomy between creativity, illustration, textuality, iconicity, they are constantly evolving and getting fused over an over?

John: Absolutely. And mixed up and spewed out, and taken back in. I kind of, I suppose I look at it like a story. My paintings do present opportunities for people to create their own stories, their own narrative. Which is all to the good. They all don't see them the same way I do. Which is fine also. And they will sometimes see things in them, I didn't see.

Ricardo: Which is inevitable.

John: Yeah, I mean... you'll look at any painting I do and no matter where it is you'll always see human figures somewhere. In kind of a basic abstract...

Ricardo: Metamorphic shapes

John: Sure.

Ricardo: Sometimes it's so hard even to identify whether they are human, geometric, geologic, or they are just getting there.

John: That's the important part of it all because it relates to how we see things. And how we see things in things, and how we get meaning out of it. I suppose I experienced some of the first elements of that in Panama. This process by my mind got thinking. I had all of the elements of art in front of me without knowing it because I was too young to figure out what they were. If you see some of my planes that stretch out into the distance, there is a line. The Nasca-like lines on them. That basically goes back to my father taking off in his C-47 from the tarmac at Albrook Air Force Base. My mom and I would be standing there while he waved at us from the cockpit as he was taking off flying into Quito or Lima or La Paz or wherever it was. We never really knew exactly why and maybe that is another story for another time. As we suggested because of some of what he was involved with after the war.

Jordan: Did you ever draw those things as a child?

John: I didn't draw... No, very early on, it was basic stuff. I have a drawing of mine. I had a real sense of order and organization. I liked order in the universe. If you'll see a drawing of mine that is probably the perfect image of that, there's a house. You have the house, and you have the roof and you have the door in the front, and you have two windows one on either side. Off to the side of the house, you have three or four flowers the exact same number on either side of the house. And each flower has a bee diving at it at precisely the same strafing formation. So, that was the type of thing I started out with, or

ships. Very soon after I would get into knights and... I was always interested in ancient history; we can go into that a little bit later, but his is where it started, but all these elements were there. From the tarmac at the airport, you have the stretching out. You have all these geometric principles. You also have the definition of time, space, dimensions, geometry, timelessness. For a child, it stretches out forever. Where does it end? It doesn't really, conceptually.

Ricardo: So, John, during those years, you spent at university, you came across multiple sources of images [and] narratives. What happened next when you graduated? What was your major that you eventually embraced?

John: I was an art major, and I remember being very... I was still dealing with my own preconceptions at the time. In fact, my student project was a horror. It was a disaster actually. It reflected my interest in illustration, my interest in painting, the conflict of doing was suggested in the way I started painting as opposed to how I was doing it. It ended up as a monstrosity. In fact, I think one of the art history professors referred to it as, "that ghastly thing." I learned something from it. I also learned the nature of dry air on paint. Because I had taken the thing to my miniscule apartment, and I was painting it and getting it ready. I went to bed one night and I heard something that sounded like rice krispies.

Ricardo: What was that?

John: It was the sound of the paint cracking. I look back on it now as absolutely hilarious. But it had a very interesting look to it in a way. It made one of the best aspects.

Ricardo: Along with art and your interest particularly in painting, did you have other interests that you cultivated?

John: Oh yes! I spent as much time in the archaeology and Anthropology departments and the English department almost as I did in the art department. I took on a lot of hours. Up to 23 a term, you know. In different things, but it was all grist for the mill for me. That's where I get ideas. It's one of the reasons I don't hang around a lot with other artists. Some yeah, but as Allen Monroe told me once. "You know artists who don't agree with each other have nothing to say to each other. And artists who agree with each other have nothing to say to each other." That's not always true, but a lot of the time, it is. And of course, if you hang around other artists or a group of artists, it tends to become a kind of, very often, an incestuous sort of experience. They start looking like each other. That was never my objective. I got my ideas from musicians, archaeologists, poets, reading the classics, the Romantic poets of England, reading the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, people like that, fascinating stoic character[s]. Probably the epitome of stoicism as we understand it. All of that was part of my learning and creating this well of ideas that I draw from. It was part of this naturally came into play there. It still does.

Ricardo: It is almost as though it created your very background of information because you are constantly living in this threshold of temporality.

John: Oh it is. Yeah, and it's a process that continues all the time. All of this started way back when. My father told me something very important one time about this process. I didn't really understand it quite as he dictated. Again. Like Demetrios telling me about what drawing was. My father was a friend of Thornton Wilder who wrote *Our Town* and the *Bridge at San Luis Rey*. In the war, World War II, Wilder was in air force intelligence and my father was army air core. They used to go down into Algiers and drink wine and talk about literature because just before the war, my father had majored in English at Columbia. He asked Wilder one time what young writers I should be looking for to read. Wilder thought for a moment and said, "Well I see a lot of young people who want to become writers, but very few who want to write." My father was telling me that story for a reason. That is: to be, you have to do. Otherwise you are always going to be about something and like painting, you are either going to know about painting or you are going to know painting. The only way to know painting is to do it, to involve yourself in it. So that was a very important thing.

Ricardo: Someone could even see a strong connection between your interest to the multi-layers stratification of geological formations as well as the stratification of temporality in history. Thus, archaeology, anthropology, they are fused together. You are sort of an interpreter of the geology of human histories.

John: Yeah, I spent a lot of time. It wasn't just ancient history, prehistory especially. It's part of the ultimate question. Forever since I can remember being exposed to possibilities. It's part of wondering who you are, what you are, where you come from, and how in the hell did I end up here doing this being that, thinking about the things I think about, wondering what this thing called the future is.

Ricardo: If you think about that, John in fact that's a constitutive element of all your works: the idea of trace. Trace has this very ambiguous temporality. While it directs something toward the back of history, but it also is present in a way that is so physically tangible and yet enigmatic.

John: Absolutely, the enigmatic part of it is the attractive part of it.

Ricardo: Traces are everywhere in your images.

John: It's all a result of the way I think. I am an impractical person. That's basically what it boils down to in terms of dealing with the reality of the mechanics of civilization. I am a definite outside in more ways than one.

Ricardo: That as you pointed out has been a very important element in your life because you have somehow to change. Even some ideas or preconceptions regarding the profession of being an artist. The world of, or the market of illustrations related to social interaction that you didn't want to take.

John: Through this process, there are always people who are going to tell you what they think you ought to be doing. I have fought a silence battle against this all my life. It kind of boils down... I remember a statement by Joni Mitchell in one of her songs. It goes, "People will tell you where they've been. They'll tell you where to go. Until you get there yourself, you'll never really know." It's a personal process.

Ricardo: What happens in this attempt of getting there, for you after the end of university, and before becoming [an artist?]

John: It's all a matter of gradual realization. From illustration, I learned that I didn't really want to do that. I would rather dig a ditch, so I went into retail work which I did for 30 years. Which turned out to be a good thing because I learned a lot about people and how to deal with people. You deal with the good, the bad, and the ugly. You learn how to deal with people and you give them a chance to be the better part of themselves, hopefully.

Ricardo: Or the hidden parts, right?

John: Meanwhile you're dealing with yourself and how am I doing in this regard. Perfection being a nonexistent thing with regard to everyone including me in so many ways. To get there, the thing that really set it off. It was very early, and this is the beach scene in Panama. My first realization that the world is a strange and enigmatic place. My father had taken us to the beach and rented a bungalow in Panama. Panama has this wonderful kind of off-white sand, very fine, very beautiful. My dad and I were sitting on the sand. My mother had walked down the beach to just take a walk by herself. After a while, my dad looked at me and said, "Quick, get on top of this rock." The rock was about the size of a table about 48" by 60" like that canvas back there. We got on it, and we heard this rustling in the background in the brush and out came hundreds at least tens of thousands of little orange-red crabs. They had been foraging back in the brush and somebody had punched a time clock or something and it was time to go back into the ocean. They just poured out of the brush and parted around the rock we were on. All little struggling arms and legs and sour-looking faces as they went around us. I remember looking at one in particular as he passed looking up at me. I was shocked, but my dad said "it's alright, they are going to go." They parted around the rock and they finally went in. But, they covered that sand orange-red. I realized in that instant, though I couldn't describe the thing that world was a very amazing place and it was different from I would have ever imagined. We have to allow ourselves to be open to that. That's why I say out earliest experiences and earliest scenes are the most poignant. Some of the most

meaningful to us, the most real. I go back to that scene once every day almost at some point.

Ricardo: How did you combine this image-rich memory of yours especially in regard to the childhood with those thirty years of working at the retail? How did you conciliate your creativity with the daily routine?

John: Well, it's the old statement: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's." In this sense, God being the creative process and Caesar being the world that you have to live in to get by. You'll find there is a connection along the way because you never know who you're going to meet, and what connections you're going to make.

Ricardo: But you never stopped painting while you were working.

John: No, I could never stop. I've had slumps, everybody does. Or I was in the build rooms. I always had to be the one to kick myself in the rear, and give myself a pat on the back ultimately. It's part of the way I think that I didn't... I was never in the system. I was never in the academic pipeline in terms of art or the commercial, the art market. I was always on the fringes of that and how to maintain that.

Ricardo: So was Kafka. So, you are in a wonderful genealogy. He worked in an attorney firm while just writing in the evenings.

John: If I hadn't been like that, I probably wouldn't be who I am today. The path that we take is the one that we are, what we become. If I had taken another path, I would maybe have reacted a little differently to the universe and everything and been different than I am. I'm pretty happy, satisfied, at home with who I am at this point. Even though I still have so many things to learn and that's one of the things. The older you get the more you realize you don't know.

Ricardo: You were able to conciliate? You had to work during the day...

John: You have to compartmentalize to a degree, to a big degree sometimes. Sure, it's true that I was working at a place, this place at Wilshire Blvd. called the Tinder Box in Santa Monica. The original Tinder Box. Boy what an oddball place that was. All the actors, well, not all of them, but a lot of them...

Ricardo: Was that the tobacco place that you told me about?

John: Yes. It had knick-knacks... old mugs and steins and things a lot like that. It was the original of that sort of thing which also they sold... It revolved around the interest of its owner Ed Kolpin who had been all around the world. He was a fan of Richard

Halliburton who written books on travel and exploration in the 30's. I have some of those books as well. As you know, I have collected a really funky, old library of exploration and archaeology books. Well, Richard Halliburton was one of those people and Edward Kolpin decided that he was going to follow in Halliburton's footsteps. He slept beneath the pyramids, he took a swim at the pool at the Taj Mahal at a time when you could be beheaded for that. This sort of thing. He tried to climb the Matterhorn, but only got part of the way up. He was a friend of King Kamehameha. He was a surfer also. That was the nature of this place. People would come in from the acting community. I actually mixed Aaron Spelling's pipe tobaccos for him. I never met him, it was his wife [who came to the store.] I mixed his tobacco, and I met a number of other people there. But that would be dropping a lot of names. I met a lot of people, some of them very nice. A couple would probably remember my name to this day.

Ricardo: Usually, you would work by day and then how was the art part of your life in the meantime?

John: Well, that was essentially at night. It kind of worked because I have pretty much always been a night painter. Part of it is that I find it difficult to concentrate during the day because there is so many distractions. I've always been a studio painter. I tried doing the outdoor, *en plein air* sort of stuff. You can only be covered with red ants so many times or surrounded by a flock of seagulls eyeing you with something not very nice on their minds. Wind blowing sand on your canvas, you're probably better off...

Ricardo: That guarantees or allows you to control the light of your painting.

John: I've always painted in a fishbowl. Look all around here. I have big paintings in a one-bedroom apartment. That's what we're dealing with, here. It's not because I actually want it that way. I would have more room if I could, but I don't. At the same time, I would never want a studio that I would have to get into a car and drive to. If you wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning with an idea, you don't want to have to get into a car and drive to a studio. By the time you get there, like a cloud it will be gone. I want to stagger in from my bed and look at the canvas and say, "Better catch this while I can."

Ricardo: In those years, John, when you were working and painting in the nights, did you have consistency and a time you would regularly devote to painting?

John: I thought so, but it wasn't always so. Like I said, I would have slumps occasionally. If I was getting ready for a show, that would promote certain things. I came up with some paintings that I like very much and a few turkeys. I put out a few of those in my time. You can't paint the way I do and not come up with an occasional one that just doesn't work or that needs to be changed. You'll remember well when we first started talking here, there were a couple of paintings I had here that were almost where they ought to be, but there was something that was throwing it off, and I had become so attached to

one image in that painting that detracted from it. It took you (Ricardo) to kick me in the rear to say, "Wouldn't it be better if..." then I would say, "you're right." I had been fighting against it. On two paintings that I remember especially, and the result was especially happy resolution to what was there. But you have to be open to that and not worry too much about what somebody who's very interested and has no personal stake in the game tells you. As a friend, [what] do you really think? I have been open to that with people.

Ricardo: In those years, John, what about the themes that you used to paint? Were there ideas that you were trying to explore or narrative that you wanted to pursue?

John: Yes. Just to show you how weird this is... You've seen one of my paintings that is still in production right now with the nautilus that started out as an idea I got from a jazz piece by Bob James in 1972. I always thought I want to do something with that. I never did. It was only this last year nearly 50 years later, I thought by golly, I'm going to do something with that even if it's a little bit different that what I do. I'm not worried about that. I always go back and forth as I said. This is a more classically surreal piece. There are some like that where the images kind of defy the laws of physics. You're moving into the melting clock category a little bit. Not that that bother me at all. I have always been a big fan of Salvador Dali. Again, you have to do it. I always remember Dali saying, "No great painting was ever painted by a lazy artist." It's part of the problem we have now that is producing what we see in art is people not willing to put in the time and effort. They find it a little too easy to move into other areas. It also becomes redundant. It's all been done before. So, okay, if it's big, large and offensive, that makes it all the sudden art. Well, no they can talk about it all they want.

Ricardo: In your case, John, what I particularly find striking is the absence of temporalities in that we can take some of your images from 1975 and 2019. There is an inner cohesiveness, coherence that is really stunning. In fact, one of your paintings, it's a series of drawings. It's called *Careful Continuities*. It seems to describe perfectly well this expression, your very approach to art. You're living in this capsule of time that's timeless in that you are constantly evolving or moving backwards in a pluri-directional path.

John: In an ironic way, it is an expansive capsule.

Ricardo: Oh yeah. It has no time therefore no constraints. You are dealing with certain themes with certain images regardless of any chronological development. You are back, you are forward, you are always in multiple directions.

John: It's about the experience. That certainly separates that from illustration, really which fixes things in time and place. Unless it's about that very concept about it not being fixed in time.

Ricardo: Would you say the 80s were the toughest years of your career? You had just finished university, then you realized the art market, the art world, the art system was a gear or a machinery that was very difficult and sometimes unwelcoming machine for you to be part of?

John: Sometimes, it was welcoming in some ways, but very definitely not in others. I realized that I was not part of that machinery. My mind was not part of it therefore [I was not part of it.]

Ricardo: But you were within the art. Jorge Luis Borges once said, "One thing is the literature and there are people who just contribute to the mere history of literature." So, in your case the literature, art, was so strong and part of your very being that you couldn't refrain from painting.

John: The question is what do gain from this in your mind? What does it produce in you? We take all this...

Ricardo: It's interesting that you pointed to your guts, right, in your minds because there is some part of immediate instinct.

John: It's all about how we respond to stimuli, how we process information. It goes through us and how we feel about it decides what comes out of us from that. This is a continual process with me. I'm not doing it simply to achieve a physical result in terms of career or anything like that because I have found myself unable to do that.

Ricardo: For the exhibitions that you took part in, there were many, really many. Especially in the late 80s early 90s in California etc. How did you manage the contacts?

John: Contacts lead to contacts. People lead to people. Ideas lead to ideas. Even when I was dealing with a scenario that would supposedly relate to the way I thought, I found that there were conflicts. Especially when I started doing illustrations or paintings for what they referred to as "visionary art" in the bay area. First of all, what art isn't visionary? What art is not conceptual? What art is not performance?

Ricardo: I couldn't agree more. It's mere label.

John: If people want to encapsulate, pigeon hole it, well fine. I was at this one gallery in the North Bay area. I was showing at an exhibition, and yes they like the work and everything. It didn't quite work out in the end - nobody was buying anything. I was kind of curious. I asked somebody there why this was, and they said, "Everybody likes your work very much, but it makes them feel alone." People don't want to be alone. People don't want to feel alone. Whereas I'm fine with it. If you're exploring yourself, you don't mind being alone. This is all about me looking at the world. Some people like that. Some

others don't. They like having their world whether it's art, archaeology, or the sciences. They like their world packaged up and wrapped with a bow. Which goes against basic human nature for me which needs unknowns. It needs exploration. It needs to find out. It needs to have these unknowns in front of them. It needs to be aware of themselves.

Ricardo: Then, John, at some point, you decided to move to Oregon and particularly Salem. How did [that happen?]

John: It was a back and forth thing, and I was tossed and turned a little bit by events. I lived in Los Angeles on three different occasions, the bay area once. I finally moved back to Oregon in '85 when my father died at age 72. We think because of the arterial deterioration he had possibly from being at the first atom bomb blast in Alamogordo, New Mexico. He was in one of the trenches, and the wind blew his hat off. So, they didn't realize what was coming at them. I think some people did. I think Oppenheimer did. He had a contact and this...

Ricardo: Was your family originally from Oregon?

John: No. No, my mother was born in Blue Island Illinois. My father was born in Sealand's Grove, Pennsylvania. I was born in Greenville, South Carolina.

Ricardo: Where does Oregon come from?

John: My father eventually ended up teaching air ROTC at UCLA in Los Angeles. He had taken a trip to Oregon where he met the governor Mark Hatfield at the time. He decided to move the family up to Oregon because he had seen Bend at the time which was a beautiful place in 1963 when it was a town of 9,000 people. He just retired from the air force brought his family up and retired to Bend, OR, where we lived for a year. For us, it was like entering Nirvana. I would ride my bicycle and catch 20" brown trout and bring them back. It was a wonderful place. It still is in many ways, but it's grown phenomenally. At that point, he was asked by the Governor Hatfield if he would come and work for him and be his director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, so we moved to Salem. I didn't want to leave Bend. In some ways, I'm really sorry that we did, but then again events being as they are, I wouldn't be who I am today. He did that, and that's how we basically ended up in Oregon. I have been back and forth many times since then. I lived in Tucson, Arizona [and] Boulder, Colorado. Always working do retail, dealing with the general public, and doing my painting in the background.

Ricardo: How does transferring from one place to another might have altered or redirected your themes or works?

John: When I went to Arizona, I was drawn to the Southwest. My father was always drawn to the Southwest. In fact, I think he first saw it when he got involved, it turned out

to be a shadowy group after WWII called the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group. He was working out of a windowless room in the bowels of the Pentagon called the tank. He'd be flying into Arizona and New Mexico and he always liked that. When he was done as base commander at Montgomery Air Force base in Alabama, 'cause he lived there also. We drove out to California. We had to drive through Texas which I remember as being flat.

Ricardo: How old were you, John?

John: At that time, I was probably about seven or eight, something like that. I tend to be bad at my own personal dating system. I guess because it's all part of the same thing to me. I'm very good at dates when it comes to ancient history, but not my personal life. If you wanted to ask where I did this at a certain place and time, heck if I know. I know generally, but I wouldn't know precisely. We drove through Arizona. One of the images I saw there was the painted desert. My dad was always flying his C-47 even when he wasn't flying his C-47. He'd be hell-bent to get to point a to point b, so we stopped briefly at the painted desert. My reaction to the painted desert was like people's reaction to Disneyland. It was so phenomenal. All these different earthy colors had a big effect on me. I have always been drawn to the desert-sort of environment even though I love the ocean. I paint oceans at time. I suppose if I were living at the desert, I'd be painting oceans and if I lived by the sea, I'd be painting deserts.

Ricardo: If you think of it, they are not that different after all. Visually, metaphorically, exactly.

John: No, they're not. It's all part of the same thing.

Ricardo: If you look at them abstractly, they are forms in creation, in constant reshaping.

John: Absolutely, conceptually at the very least.

Ricardo: That's very interesting because in the future, rocks, or rocky setting are going to play a major part in your iconography, and yet, even though they are so rocky and they are textured, they look as if they are constantly in transformation all the same. Just like the water of the ocean or the clouds in the sky.

John: That's the way I paint. You might find interesting that some of my early paintings when I was painting clouds, they were like solids. My rocks may have been a little more fluid.

Ricardo: Geometry, they are all the same in your work.

John: It's an interesting weird thing, but I don't want to analyze it overly much because to do that, you get away from the idea of idea and discovery. If I knew why I did everything, maybe I wouldn't be painting. It's all a part of finding out. I do that every time I touch brush to canvas. I don't always know. I can't embrace the idea of having a preconception for a painting and following it through exactly to that end. It's like, it's not painting for me. People do a lot of landscapes where they are simply copying the photograph or other things. Is that really painting? It is in a sense, but I think that people are very often neglecting their creativity when they are not discovering things that are happening on the canvas as they are doing it. If it's all part of a method you're going by, you're simply... It's like learning things in college, going to class, and simply sucking in everything you have been fed so you can spew it back out like a parrot. What have you learned? I have learned how to memorize.

Ricardo: John, in association with the very idea of self-taught process and constant experience that leads to another set of experiences and forms etc. That's one of the reasons I see you so attached genealogical to the poetics of the sublime. It's not so much something out there: a rock, a setting, a landscape that has its own properties, but your constant interaction with that. So, it's an inner landscape.

John: That's why I tell people while I have an affinity with the concept of surrealism because it's the depiction of the artist's psyche on canvas, I consider surrealism at least to me an idea before it is a thing. This takes place either at the beginning, or the middle, or all the way through that which makes for a very happily produced painting of which I call it an uncommon perception.

Ricardo: Which conceptually ties up to the very notion of the Romantic transfiguration of reality. Your surrealism, very personal, very experiential is actually tied to the historical notion of sublime. There is this constant reshaping of everything through your eyes, through your inner and external eyes.

John: This is a result of the evolvement of conception, the evolvement of life. That's pretty much what it is. Otherwise, we become, I won't say a slave to other things, but people do become slaves to processes, to mechanics that I think very often get in the way of what we call creativity. It prevents them from the realization of who they are.

Ricardo: In your case, John, creativity has different stages. Even though, as we mentioned, there is a sign of temporality or timelessness to it. You could be working right now in 1972 as well in 2019, and you are constantly thinking vertically about your problems, your curiosities. The stages of your career then. You were at university, then you worked part time?

John: I was actually working full-time retail. For me to be able to do that and paint... Well, I still look back on it, Ricardo, and I wonder, I look at paintings, and I wonder how I did

them, when I did them because when you're doing it, there is no such thing as time. You're not thinking in those terms at all. I really don't know how I produced all this stuff. I have no clue. I look at it and I'm kind of amazed. When did I do this? How did I do that? Which is not a statement of how great it is, it's a statement of whatever it was that drove me to do that.

Ricardo: To the point that they become a catalyst or a gate between times.

John: It's very much that. I remember painting on one piece in 1983 in Berkeley, California. I was dealing with a very classically surreal piece which I called "Evologenesi," kind of a lofty title. It was a combination of evolution and genesis because I always wondered why they had to be so opposed to each other as concepts. It is all part of the same thing to me. Who knows what the process of unfolding in the universe really is. I had this hand coming out of this egg opening itself up to this eye on the other side. It was resting on top of this rock ledge. In the background, I had a very expansive plain, like the Nazca plains with the lines going into the distance and an obelisk in the background. But, it was getting very detailed, and I remember looking at it, and I thought, "It's time to get up and look at this at a distance." You have to look at things at an arm's length every once and a while or you get lost in the detail, and you lose your objectivity. Which is why I have to set paintings aside sometimes and come back to them because you find things. This time, I got up to look at it, and unconsciously balanced myself so I wouldn't fall off the edge. Apparently, I felt I was painting around me rather than on a two-dimensional surface. That's how involved I was. We get very involved.

Ricardo: What about this intensity? How does it dialogue with repetition? There is a consistent set of forms that emerge.

John: You know when you're copying yourself. I don't want to copy myself. That's why each painting is a new experience. It will refer at times to an on-going theme in my head, but you won't find me painting a series of five paintings in a row that are alike. It just doesn't work that way. Every time I finish one or at most two, I will be thinking of something else because I kind of covered that for right now. I'm not thinking in the same way. If I did, it would be repetition. What else do I have that is exciting me at the time? Or do I need to find out, hence the blank canvas and putting paint on it. One of the most wonderful experiences that I have had in a process that I have developed over the years is what I call my pallet paintings. You've seen these. They take any number of forms, and I have been painting with paper pallets. You tear them off when you're done and throw them out. I was thinking gee, I was liking the pallets more than what I'm concentrating on in the canvas, and I'm seeing things. I thought, "well, how in the hell can I do something with this?" I want to turn it into a painting, but I can't really turn it into a painting, so I decided to get and cut basic 11"x14" masonite boards, gesso them, and sand them down to almost a marble surface, and mix my paints on them. When I like what I

see happening there turn it into something. Some of my happiest result[s] have happened through my pallet painting. It also saves a lot on paint.

Ricardo: It's interesting while many would see in this process, a surreal approach, I see it very closely related to the humanistic approach. People would listen to all sorts of external stimuli. Leonardo Da Vinci for one argued that the best of all possible of all possible topics would be a wall. A wet humid wall through which you would be seeing stains and forms shaping themselves.

John: He knew how to see. Drawing is just learning how to see.

Ricardo: Because maybe seeing is not seeing at, but seeing through.

John: Seeing through. Watching things and being able to see things coming out of things which is what I see in the canvas, in the glaze that I lay down.

Ricardo: Early on, you mention rules. The fact that your painting and your process is very structured. There is a John Oberdorf approach. What are some of the rules you learned in the academy that systematically you attempted.

John: One of the most important things I learned from myself is that style is not something you deliberately acquire. It's something that you eventually discover that you have. I've had people say, "I'm trying to find a style." Why? It's just like one professor saying, "John you have to do what's happening now." I am happening now. If I'm going to be remembered for anything or not remembered for anything, it's not going to be for trying to be something I'm not. It's going to be for continuing to be something that I am.

Ricardo: Especially when considering the verticality of your [work] now. It is not just a description of what's going on now, but in those multi-directional ties of yours.

John: If I'm going to be relevant at all, that's going to do it. It's not that I'm trying desperately to be relevant. Everybody wants to be relevant. It's part of human nature, I suppose.

Ricardo: But, that's possibly part of moving, touching, and authentic parts of your personal narrative. The fact that you are creating in the night, in your hard or wonderful time something that comes from within, and you couldn't stop doing that. It's not only to make part of a system or a market.

John: I can't. I've tried. It didn't work. It just did not work at all. Ultimately, we have to be the judge. Sometimes they say, "Shouldn't you be doing something for society in the production of your work?" I am. If I'm not doing what it is that compels me, I'm hardly doing civilization any service. Why, by being something I'm not or trying to be something

I'm not? No, that's not going to work. It's trying at least to be true to who you at least perceive yourself to be. Also, again, we're in the constant process of becoming. We are learning which is another experience I had when I was doing guard duty. A teacher came in with a whole gaggle of little geese of students. They were grade school kids. The first thing that he said, "Now forget everything you've known about art." I just went "enough." How could he possibly say that to a child or anybody? We are not here to forget what we know, we are here to learn, and add what we know. If we have to, we adapt it, but you don't get rid of what you know.

## Interview 2 - July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Jordan: We are now recording. I am Jordan DeGelia with John Oberdorf. This is the second interview. In this interview, we will be discussing more of the artist process, and what it takes it make an Oberdorf painting.

John: Well, it's hard to really nail anything down with me because I don't use what I would call a normal process of creating work. I know it, but if you look at YouTube videos of people putting out instructional videos of how to do this and how to do that, everybody seems to have a formula, and it's very exact. When they mix their colors on the pallets, it looks more like a demo for an item that you are going to buy. Like you're looking at colors at the paint store. My pallets don't look anything like theirs. Mine look like a battlefield. I've got colors all over the place. I think the thing with me is the act of painting is an act of discovery more than an act of replication. A lot of people who think they are painting are actually replicating something which is fine for them, but for me it's all about what I'm finding out in the process. It's a voyage into discovering something. Each painting is different and each painting tells you something. When I'm mixing my colors, I'm pretty much doing it intuitively. You have to know the basics. You have to know what the rules are before you can break them. I was trained over a period of time to know this, but I don't really adhere to the accepted program because I can't bring myself to do it. I've tried. It doesn't work with me. I explore, and I make mistakes which I constantly correct. By this act of correction, being as I said bothered until I'm not bothered anymore, I come up with something that works. As you saw on the painting today because you did get a chance to see me making some rather dramatic changes quickly that I'm working on. You saw the figure in the upper corner.

Jordan: Do we have a working title for this painting?

John: Yes, it's kind of called, tentatively, I may change, *The Wreck of the Argo*. It refers to Greek mythology. I don't want to overstate the actual characters. Perhaps the most recognizable character in the painting is the ship itself with the eye they used to put on

Greek vessels that were in this painting barely visible. Just enough to give you kind of a haunting look. Almost as if the ship is alarmed at what is happening to it. That, to me, was something that simply happened, so I recognized it, and it starts to work, so I started going with that. I didn't want the gods in the clouds to be recognizable. That's one of the reasons that almost Hera-like wife of Zeus appeared because she was becoming sort of a diva, and I need a shepherd's crook to come up and yank her offstage. She had to go. On the other hand, we have what could be Medea or a siren. Who knows? I don't want to overstate that either, but she was really kind of the first thing that showed up in the painting when I painted it. I really kind of liked her and wanted to keep her in there. Everything else kind of followed. The spine of the painting really is the crashing wave essentially which has some of that ominous aspect. If you see a wave like that coming at you, well, it's not necessarily that you bought the farm, but it's pretty prominent. And their ship has obviously been wrecked. You see this either in the state of complete alarm or resigning themselves to whatever fate awaits them. As we know, the Greeks really didn't like their gods all that well. They paid [offerings] to them and performed the rites, but they were afraid of them because they were very capricious at times. Unless you had one of them on your side, you were in trouble. So that was the nature of their pantheon. I guess that relates in this sense to events that befall people in general.

Jordan: Oh definitely.

John: This has been part of my later paintings here, not all of them by any means of some of them showing that sort of almost unavoidable catastrophic...

Jordan: All civilizations are familiar with volcanoes and similar things.

John: Volcanoes kind of show up. They are signs ominous signs. I have one right behind you here. I have done a few things with volcanoes. I did paintings where they were the main attraction. I simply called them "Recent Eruptions." because it was a recent eruption from me. I kind of like the feeling of the earth moving in constant motion. Although, people don't really think of it like that. In geological or archaeological terms, as I mentioned to you once before, I think, because people would think of as me with archaeology almost as much as art for a while, "Are you a uniformitarian or a catastrophist?" I say, yes, because on the earth nothing happens, or it is extremely slow then something big happens. Then nothing happens for a while, then something big happens again. Uniformitarianism and Catastrophism to my mind are part of the same thing. We're in the middle of all this trying to live our lives. Is it a fateful thing? Well, in a sense. I think I reflect in my painting and how I paint, I reflect a bit of stoicism. It's not fatalism. It's bearing with. Marcus Aurelius is one of my prime examples of a stoic. We have to deal with the earth that we live on. Our own history or prehistory, mythologies; it all comes together. It's all grist for the mill. It all in my paintings, and areas where I have human forms. That's been a late, later thing now. I did it more when I was in illustration early on. I went more into landscape and seascape of my mind. I've been

putting more people in some of them now, not all of them. As I said, each painting is different, each one tells you what it wants to have happen at a certain point. Even right off the bat sometimes. You have to keep working it and refining it. The approach is not always the same.

Jordan: How do you start? Where's the idea come for a painting?

John: From several areas. In my pallets paintings, for instance, it's where I mix my colors. A lot of my paintings, most of my smaller paintings used to be pallets that I was working on. I had been using paper pallets to mix my colors. They're infused with wax and they won't adhere to anything. I've started liking what I was seeing on the pallet more than what I was painting on the canvas, but I had to throw it out. Paint is very expensive. You might as well use as much of it as you can. Since I like what I'm seeing here, why don't I devise something to address this. So I started cutting 11" by 14" boards, gessoing them down, and sanding them until they were almost marble smooth and mixing my paints on them. When I see something happening, it may be just a tiny blotch of color that says something to me...

Jordan: It's almost painting though the subconscious.

John: Absolutely. It gets back to what Demetrius Jameson said to me. He said, "Remember Johnny, drawing is just learning how to see." A lot of this is learning how to see whether you're drawing or painting. I'm seeing things in things. That's overall my *modus operandi*. I can have any number of preliminary drawings and paintings, but it's not going to dictate what the final result is going to be. Very seldom does that happen, and I can bear working with a preset notion of what's going to happen on the canvas because if I do that, I'm not paying attention to what's happening on the canvas at all. Other people work differently. For me, this works. I do it until it works on the canvas. This is the one that you see right here, this Argo painting. It is a traditional form, composition, application of paint, that sort of thing, but I can go into something that is entirely different as you have seen on occasion. I'll even do something that's abstraction. I always let myself be advised by what's happening. Otherwise I'm not learning anything. I learn more as I go. Maybe at a certain point, I'll understand it to a point where I might not have to do that as much, but I don't think that's the case. I think it is always going to be a matter of discovery and changing things as I go because that's simply the way I operate.

Jordan: When you have an idea for a painting, do you often feel the need to paint it right away or do you often feel it is good in giving it time to develop?

John: Again, yes. It's different every time. Sometimes ideas will be festering in the back of my mind until finally something happens. I have this one painting where I'm dealing with a more literal content of the chambered nautilus. That idea started in 1972. It was

there for about fifty years before something happened. What sparked that idea was a piece of music that I heard. It was a jazz piece by Bob James called simply "Nautilus." I had this image of the chambered nautilus at great depth. The music sounded like a nautilus moving through the water. I had a different image that I wanted to convey that was more whimsical. In that particular painting, I'm having the nautilus doing something which nautili never do which is hover above the waves in a pod. First of all, they're solitary creatures that swim at great depth from 500-2,000 feet in certain regions of the western Pacific. In this one, this image flitted into my mind of a whole pod of them riding about a foot and a half above the waves. This is what I was working on then. I will be back to it soon, as soon as I finish the Argo. I'm to the point now to which the creativity is pretty much over with.

Jordan: How do you define creative liberties versus just finishing a painting?

John: Finishing a painting is following up on things I know, but haven't done, basically. Creativity is discovering things. I like that better than anything. I don't really enjoy. I don't think about when I'm painting, "Gee, I love doing this." I'm focused and obsessed by it. That is pretty much how I work. Finishing a painting is tedium, a lot of it. You're trying to get. You can just make tiny discoveries within that process at the end that are creative. That picks you up again. Oh, that works better than the other was for sure. You keep on doing that until you get to the point you realize if you do anything more, you're going to possibly destroy something that you've done. Unless that's your objective. Another thing Demetrius Jameson told me was that he thought if he wanted to, he could work on one canvas for the rest of his life and keep on changing things. He didn't work the same way I did or produce the same kind of paintings at all. The principle is pretty much the same. I learned a lot from him. I learned a tremendous amount from Allen Monroe when I watched him paint because he also said at one point, "I don't really know what I'm doing." He was doing some fantastic things with his paintings that made it almost look like an accident, but you knew that it wasn't. Abstraction, it works, but you've got to know the rules before you can do that. You have to know the rules. I think a lot of the time, people try to cut corners these days. If they are getting back to basics and learning how to do them, some of the imagery is profoundly good in terms of details and structure and everything. At a certain point, and that's fine for them. For me that would be getting beyond what I'm trying to achieve. It would be about the form, about the detail, and it almost looks like photography in a way. I was looking at a work of some artist on the internet in fact early this morning. I was trying to figure out how did he get all of that detail? It turned out, he was a digital artist. That is on the other side of the galaxy from me. You know how to punch buttons and move the mouse, basically, but are you painting. No. You're producing imagery, and there is some validity there, but to compare that to what I'm doing is comparing a fire engine to a hummingbird. Do they have anything in common? Well, they both move, but by completely different means. It's different entirely. I guess my approach is... It's not haphazard by any means. I'm finding things along the way. I can't imagine doing it any other way. That is the most satisfying

ever. In each painting, in each approach that's different. To me, it's kind of looking at the world with the childlike eyes. Getting back to that sense of a-hah. I hadn't seen that; that's something different. I don't ever want to lose that. If it's going to be formulaic, I could be doing anything else and it could mean just as much. For me, what you see is a result of me being bothered.

Jordan: How many paintings do you work on at one time?

John: There is no set number, but I always have several in the mix. The reason I do is because at a certain point when working on a painting, you begin to lose objectivity. You realize if you keep on painting on it, you're going to be pushing something and moving blindly in the dark because you have lost objectivity. So, you set it aside for a while. That's what happened with this painting, *The Argo*. I didn't know what was going to happen with that one. It had almost become two paintings in one. I set it aside, and I wasn't even sure I was going to finish it at a certain point. Eventually, after a couple months, I pulled it back out again. I had been working on things in the meantime. I can have as many as five paintings going at one time. For me, that's a good thing to do. Every time you turn to the next one, you're looking at it with fresh eyes. Very often you're saying, "How the hell could I have done that." Fortunately, I discovered a few things on this painting that didn't work, right off the bat. You had the chance to watch me as I kind of canceled them out. As I said, I have to go over it again and keep on working it a bit. In the next two days, that will all have been handled. As far as the other figures are concerned, I may have to set the painting aside for a while just because I feel the need to finish a couple of others, both start and finish. I have a couple of ideas churning in my mind that will obviously not end up the way I'm conceiving them now. They will be started at least. One of which is another idea from what kind of turned into a series called *Old Roads*. I am fascinated as I have told you before my places people have been. Almost more than where they are which doesn't mean I don't get along with people because I do. But I'm fascinated by places where they've been and places where earth is in the act of reclamation. Taking things back in a sense. It produces some very interesting imagery. *Old Roads* is one of them and another is one that I did several of that became a series. I don't start off saying I'm going to make a series of paintings. The idea is still fresh will be, and there are other examples that I come up with. The other one is the *Forgotten Quarry*. I have kind of created an image in my mind of where I want to go with that, and it will obviously change. Those are two that I really am intent on trying to do and possibly finish before this upcoming show.

Jordan: Well, I have no doubts. You are clearly a very prolific artist.

John: In the same sense, I guess I am. I look at a lot of these paintings and I don't know how I had the time to paint them or I don't remember when in a sense. That's why it seems when you're painting sometimes, that time is suspended. You're not thinking about it. Each painting is different, but I look at some of them and think, "When in the

heck did I paint that?" That is simply part of living in two worlds. This is the blessing and the curse of painters, I guess. Overall, I consider it kind of a blessing because I wouldn't know the things that I know or have been exposed to the things that I have been exposed to if I didn't live and work that way. It has made me a very impractical individual, but I've simply accepted it at this point. It is a matter of living in two different worlds. I suspect that that is what happens when I paint. I think of my paintings as windows on another sense of reality.

Jordan: Do you think all of your paintings exist within the same world?

John: They may be different aspects of the same world. That might be a way of looking at it. Each painting is different unto itself. It is a different exploration. Does it have similarities or points of reference to other paintings? Certainly, it does because it comes from me. This is the nature of creativity that it comes from us. This is something out of nothing in the physical world. In the mental world, it definitely has its references. As we say, there is nothing that is not derivative. Everything comes from something. It's how we produce it that dictates the nature of our creativity. It's what makes us individuals. If we didn't have that, we'd all be a bunch of cattle grazing in a field like the Eloy waiting to be taken away by the Morlocks in H.G. Wells' *Time Machine*. We have to have that distinct different ideas. For me, I have my own version of what we call reality. In painting, it touches on what we refer to as the surreal. As we know, that definition officially of surrealism is the psyche of the artist on canvas. In that sense, that makes every painter a surrealist in some sense. We have all those different definitions that we give to our genres like abstraction and visionary. I always like visionary. Well, what art isn't visionary? It's all part of the same thing ultimately except perhaps for what I would kind of call art that is referred as art these days where people are really... I don't even know how to describe some of this stuff being done today in the name of art. That doesn't appear to use much in the way of creativity. It allows a lot of blank space for critics to fill with words. They do abundantly. I think with me the ideas come from a source. From a point in the mind. There's a pool of ideas out there that we draw from. In a sense, it is derivative, but if it comes from us then that's where the creativity comes in.

Jordan: You mentioned H.G. Wells, so... Do you think science fiction would fit as a label for your paintings?

John: Only when I did science fiction illustration or fantasy illustration. The thing about illustration is generally, the thing you're doing is depiction of somebody else's ideas. I wouldn't call what I do science fiction. If anything, it would touch more on fantasy because it deals more with the way my mind works and my own fantasies, in a sense. The way I refer to the ancient past, a number of things, but not necessarily science fiction. There could be elements of it that could be used in science fiction, but that's more toward the literary sense of fantasy or mythological.

Jordan: Certainly, a lot of your ideas come from science fiction. How do you feel that influences [your art?]

John: I'm aware of science fiction branch off from science. It's part of our understanding of the physical world, basically. A good example of that, now conceptually, I'm not talking artistically although it does relate, when was going to college in the first couple of years, a fellow by the name of Michael Talbot had come out with a book called *The Holographic Universe*. I found this profoundly disturbing at the time because it suggested the possibility that our reality is a hologram which automatically implies it is somebody else's hologram and that we can be turned on and off like a light switch. That I found disturbing, and I had just seen an image at Oregon State of a hologram in the Physics department. This is as the beginning of holography. They were just beginning to produce these images. I walked around this podium where there was an image of a cannon like a civil war cannon that they had done. It was rotating around in 3-D. It had an effect on me. Now, I am not as frightened by the concept as I was at the time suggesting that if this is a hologram, it's here for a reason. Now, we're talking in science about quantum mechanics and the nature of the mind being able to control matter. What we produce in our minds has a physical effect on matter. That really makes sense to me. Isn't that what the artist is doing when they paint or sculpt or draw. Your mind is producing something that is not there before. It's manipulating matter to produce the image. This is definitely something I think about. What is science fiction, ultimately? Jules Verne was considered to be involved in science fiction, but a lot of the ideas that he had later turned out to be science. That definitely affects the way we think about the world. It provides the impetus, the imagery that we get. Again, mine moves more towards in imagery either the mythological or the geological. I didn't officially study geology. I work a lot with rocks and earth patterns. I would almost call it an intuitive geology.

Jordan: Tell me more about that. That's very interesting how the rock formations you form... They're not modern aspects of what we think of. They are very ancient-looking.

John: I put the sense of geology really is, and what I consider it to be almost spiritually that the earth may retain a memory of what happens upon it. A concept that I kind of like, rock being solidified life, in a sense. It was once liquid, and there were things in it. Fossils used to be things, living things that were replaced by minerals in their form. That's very much a part of the way I think. When I say I'm more interested in the places people have been than where they are, that figures in pretty heavily. I find it fascinating, I find it ominous almost in places where I'm seeing this. This happened, again, at a very early age in Panama. I remember that my father had taken the family to a place in Panama called Fort San Lorenzo. Here was this old fort that'd been built in 1587. It was later taken over by Henry Morgan, the pirate. He used it to stage his invasion of the city of Panama, Panama City later on. It went through several ownerships. When we were there it was essentially ruins, but I remember sitting on the grass there and watching a troop of Panamanian soldiers marched by. I didn't know why they were doing that; I was very

young, two, three years old maybe. I remember asking my dad where they came from, "Do they live here?" He said, "No, no they're from the Panamanian army. This is an old fort and nobody lives here anymore. It was something that I wasn't able to quite reconcile at the time. Here they were, here is a fort. Aren't they soldiers? Don't they belong? No, not necessarily. That contradiction stayed with me and informed me on the nature of places people had been opposed to where they are.

Jordan: Within that relationship, too, there is the earth reclaiming everything humans have done.

John: It does. I think it goes far beyond what we would imagine. When I discuss this thing, as I do often with people who have interest in that sort of area, they say, "Well, how long have we had human civilization?" I think really we have had it for as long as we have had brains capable of producing civilization. That probably goes back a lot farther than we could ever imagine. Yes, the process of reclamation dictates that these structures and ruins, places where people have been are going to be reabsorbed into the geology. At certain points, I can't imagine why this would not be possible. We have ruins that have disappeared under continental plates in the act of subduction. This would be very old stuff, beyond what is accepted, but I think it's there. This had a very profound effect on me. It really informs the way I think when I'm painting. I'm constantly referring to the ancient past, prehistory, or the concept of prehistory. The other day I was looking at images of several places, most particularly Malta where there are these fossilized ruts in the hard stone that are God knows how old. Through reductionism, archaeology/geology likes to say they're only a few thousand years old, but they're obviously far older than that. Some of them drop off of cliffs and disappear into the sea. Some of them have been found underwater going out to great depth. They're very, very old. What were they? Who did them? We don't know. This is part of that interesting process of things that have been found that don't really fit the paradigms. It all comes together with the way I paint. When I was in college, I spent as much time in the archaeology and anthropology departments and the English department as I did the art department. I took a lot of classes back then. I was completely inept when it came to things like math. I had an unfortunate experience with that because I was never able to catch up. It was not the way my mind worked. I regret that and I'd like to understand math more because that is really the language of the physical world as we know it, the physical universe. I handle things theoretically pretty well, but as far as equations are concerned I am out to lunch, completely at sea. I spent a lot of time in those areas. It's an unconscious reference to everything that I do when I paint. I am always going back to those images and things I found fascinating. The existence of human beings on this planet, that sort of thing, and how we produce what we produce. What is it that causes one to paint, to put an image on something? What causes us to want to write a poem or create a piece of music, this creative impulse. If we were able to pin it down, it would lessen it. The mystery of it is apparently very important to us.

Jordan: In a way, you're almost creating your own monuments.

John: Every artist creates their own monuments, in a way. If you're asked, "How do you perceive yourself in relation to others," I always go back to the statement: "If you compare yourself to others, you will always find there are those that are greater and lesser than yourself."

Jordan: You can't compare ancient ruins side by side. That's just degrading this culture for what it is.

John: You have to be, your own favorite artist. That means essentially, you have to give yourself your own pat on the back and you have to give yourself a kick in the rear. It doesn't matter what other people are going to think about that. I remember one instructor telling me, "John, you have to do what's happening now." Well, I am happening now. For better or worse. If I'm going to be remembered for anything or not remembered for anything, it's going to be for who I am or at least who I perceive myself to be. That I work at in an almost unconscious sort of way. I think that if you're too conscious of that, maybe you're not creating as much as you think you are. You are being about being something rather than doing something or being something.

Jordan: That's similar to your point, instead of talking about what you're doing, just do it.

John: I remember when I was living in the Bay area talking to another artist, he was talking about a phrase that they have regarding those who are about something rather than being something. It was, "He really know how to talk a good painting." That goes back to my father's conversation with Thornton Wilder who said, "I see a lot of young people who want to become writers, but very few who want to write." It's the act of doing and being involved in that. When you lose the self-conscious aspect of that and are more involved with what you're doing, that's when you're producing. That's when you're being really creative. Otherwise, you're simply about being self-conscious about being something. I saw that all through college. Kids who liked the act of being something or being seen as something, but they weren't quite in tune with the process of doing. If you like it so much, then what are you doing? If you're not doing anything, why are you here? It's like someone saying to me, "I don't know what to paint." Really? You don't know what to paint? Why do you want to paint at all if you don't know what to paint?

Jordan: Don't waste your time.

John: Don't waste your time. You have ideas; there's thoughts in your head. You need to use them. The idea of not having any ideas at all to paint means you really should be doing something else probably. It doesn't always mean you're always going to use the ideas in your head. I have had thousands of ideas. I take what I call "visual shorthand."

A couple of lines to remind me of what I was thinking at the time. Does that mean it's going to translate into exactly what I was thinking of painting? Not necessarily. It doesn't necessarily mean that I am even going to address it, but I take it down at the time. I always keep a tablet next to the bed stand at night. If I wake up and have an idea, I can write it down. Again, it doesn't mean anything is going to happen with it, but sometimes they do. It's something I recommend to anyone. Write it down if you've got the idea. Draw it down, even if it's only a few lines.

Jordan: Don't let it fly away. An idea's worth nothing if it's gone.

John: It goes back to the statement by Demetrius Jameson. You have to capture it when it's happening sometimes. Otherwise, it disappears, and it fades. I've had entire paintings occur to me. Early hours in the morning when the mind is most active. Sometimes they translate into a painting and sometimes they don't, but there's always something that you can take from it. Ideas are like gems. They're to be collected and not lost. That's why I have this either unfortunate or fortunate habit of collecting old archeology books. They are talking about ideas that many people don't like to talk about anymore. They don't accept them. They don't fit, as we use that clichéd term, "paradigm" anymore. Some of them were concepts of finds that were made very well documented. Ideas that were very well-thought out, so why are they simply out of favor?

Jordan: Do you think some of your paintings explore some ideas that other people might reject?

John: Sure, they don't like the idea that it doesn't seem to fit with their concept of the way the world is supposed to be. Very often, they want their world wrapped up and tied with a bow, but that's not the way the world works. It makes me recall an experience in the North Bay area when I was living there at a certain gallery that produced a lot of what we called at the time, I didn't call it that, they did, "visionary art." I showed work there for a while. I wasn't really selling anything. I didn't know if they weren't promoting it as much, or what the story was. I asked them, "What kind of experiences are we having here? What kind of reaction am I getting?" I remember the lady and she said, "Everybody likes your work a lot, but it makes them feel alone." People want to be comfortable. Sometimes it's the things they find vaguely unsettling that disturb them the most. The images that are mostly disturbing, they simply accept as disturbing images. Mine is more subtle than that. A good example might be my *Forgotten Quarry* paintings where you're confronted with huge megalithic blocks of stone or places where they had been. That's one of the latest ones, the impression of where rock has been taken out and moved that don't really look like it was done by a primitive society at all. I think some people find that disturbing. I don't know why. I find it fascinating. People look at things in different ways. I'm always after the unknown simply because I'm that way. I think it is essential for humans to have unknowns in front of them and accept the fact that they exist. You always try to find out the reasons for them, but we don't really know. People refer to

Occam's Razor often: "the answer is usually something simple and easily explainable." I say, "Occam's Razor works every time except in the times that it doesn't." The answer does not always come down to something fundamental and simple. A lot of times... I know in archaeology and geology, they use this thing called reductionism where they try to make things seem less than they are. Usually that happens in terms of dating certain things or in analysis of geological events, turning what appears to be a large titanic event into a series of vast, small ones. It doesn't always work by any means. People often find disturbing in a way because it upsets them. They want their world to be just so. They're happy with that. I remember being at a dinner at a director's house who was a friend of mine in Los Angeles, John Milius. He did the Conan movies, *The Wind and the Why*, *The Roughriders*, and some of those other movies.

Jordan: Oh wow.

John: His guest that night for the group that his wife belonged to were interested in Egyptology. His guest was Zahi Hawass who was the director of the Giza plateau. I had the interesting situation of sitting next to him at dinner. I think he knew intuitively that I was not of the bent to look at a traditional manner at Egyptology. I remember one fellow saying across the table from me, "Why do these people think they need to have alternate explanations for these things? Why can't they just be satisfied with what we think we know already?" I didn't know how to respond. Today I would be far less likely to remain silent because I simply don't care. I cared a little more then, I'm afraid. I should have said, "because sometimes that is just plain not enough." Sometimes you have to ask questions.

Jordan: Why settle for 90% of the answer?

John: If that. I remember talking to an archaeologist who spent all of his career at one site, Nineveh to be exact. We were talking about alternate ideas about archaeology, and he basically said, "Well if you want to know about archaeology, you ask an archaeologist." I said, "If I go to the doctor to get a diagnosis, if I'm not satisfied with that diagnosis, I'm going to look for another opinion." I have a right to do that. The thing was, he didn't have a broad knowledge. Admittedly, he didn't. He knew about Nineveh. He didn't see or make connections in the world. For me, it's all about referencing. That provides a general feeling. That feeds my art. What comes out is a result of this cross-referencing, finding different places in the world that seem to have similarities and understanding also when they don't. You get a panoramic sort of view in a sense of the past. Does that make me supremely knowledgeable about the ancient past? No. It's about asking the questions rather than getting the answers. If we ask the questions, it's about the way we process information. That informs not only my interest in the past but how I paint. It's asking questions.

Jordan: Do you think you're asking yourself those questions or more so the viewer?

John: I'm asking myself first and primarily. Beyond that, I leave it open as a window for the viewer. In the back of my mind, I want the viewer to look at this and make questions also. They may come up with different answers, different ways of looking at it, simply because they're different people. I don't want to beat them over the head with a stick and say this is the way I think it is. I put certain images and things. I juxtapose them. This big painting that you saw, *From the Ashes of Angels* was from a book with the same name. It has all sorts of cultural references in it. Possibly some that I'm not even aware of. It's putting them all together there. It's not telling people this is the way things were and this is what happened. It's putting them together and asking questions. What happened? Do we simply deny the existence of this because it doesn't fit the way we think, no. That's not the way I work. It's allowing yourself the opportunity to be wrong, always. I tend to check the box often at the bottom that says, "all of the above" and leave it open for that. Put as an answer also unknown, if I'm not really sure. I've talked to too many artists and archaeologists and people like that who are so sure that they have the answer. "We're pretty sure we know this and we're pretty sure we have the answer for that." When they really know nothing. They think they do. As Tommy Lee Jones said in *Men in Black*, "People think they have a good bead on things." But they don't. He [then] says, "Imagine what you'll know tomorrow." That's a really great little scene in that movie. It really defines the whole concept of what's going on in the universe. In our world at least, our perception of what we think we know as opposed to what is. The nature of what we call reality as opposed to actuality. I'm not going to get into a whole bunch of that. Did that even begin to address your question?

Jordan: I think so. I think it helps. Another question that I have is: do you think your paintings conflict each other ever? You present an idea in a painting then another painting [conflicts.] I'm sure it's a wonderful process of it could.

John: I really haven't even considered that. Maybe that is something I accepted myself is that they all kind of related in some way. But, I'm always open to there being some contradiction there. I don't see how ultimately it could contradict itself too much. In the sense that it's all part of the creative process. It all comes from me. It's putting stuff out there. Again, since I'm not trying to give anyone a pat answer for anything either visually or conceptually, there's not a lot that can conflict too much. Everything relates to everything else. Even the paintings that I've done that you've seen that were somewhat abstractions relate to the stuff that I do that isn't. It all is part of the same thing, ultimately. It has a connection. There's a continuity. Ricardo refers to it as something he had found that I had apparently written down. I don't really know where it comes from or if it even came from me at this point called "Careful Continuities." I don't remember writing it. I may have been thinking of something at the time. I write down a lot of stuff. I'm not really. It's careful continuity for me, and it's a subconscious careful continuity because I don't really think about that when I paint. I think I do it automatically. It's just because of the way I think. So, there is a connective process there.

Jordan: Beyond, just how you create paintings, is there ever a goal, like a collective goal? Sure, you want to ask questions, but I think we all hold our own ideas of what a painting should be. Do you think you ever have sways of what you want people to believe in these paintings?

John: Only in a very general sense. I'm more interested in people getting what they want to get out of a painting. Just as I'm concerned with what I am thinking when I explore into it. I don't want to say to people, "You have to look at this painting in this way or that way." Your way of interpreting it and the way you see is just as important as anything that I put there that was what I wanted to see. That's part of what I do. Like I said, I don't want to beat people over the head with a stick and say you have to think this way about my paintings. It could be one of the reasons I've avoided getting too, I call it putting too much excruciating detail into the paintings. I put detail into it, but it's a detail according to me. I do it as much as I think needs to be used to convey the idea. If I had gone a different direction and decided I wanted to produce technically and very fine detail that would become the focus of the work. Or as I have said before, I always thought Chuck was a little too close. I don't want to see every pore in the skin, you know. There are some people right now... And actually thankfully, they're getting back to this: the technical process of painting and learning how to use the materials. Instead of this thing where the less able you are the better you are which seems to be part of the art world these days. There are people that I saw some work being done from Italy, people who were studying there, young artists who were really getting into the involvement of construction painting almost... They're almost like Velazquez, Rembrandt in being able to pull these images out in extreme detail. They're immaculate. I remember one fellow especially by the name of Jordan Sokol who was producing some really wonderful images studying in Italy getting his visual education there that were very, very fine. That works is very fun. They're very fun to look at. That doesn't work for me and the way I work. I appreciate what they're doing very much. I don't know if I could do that or bring myself to do that. Who the hell knows? I just haven't gone to that point. Every process is different, and you find... This gets back to process. How, finding a style. Style and I have been asked or have been told by certain people, "I'm trying to look for a style." Well style is not something that you look for, it's something that at a certain point, you realize you have. If you're looking for it, maybe you're looking for something that may not be a part of what you really are. You're going to be about something else. So, paint. Learn the tools, learn how to, whatever you happen to have to create what you call art, learn. Learn the tool and the trade. After doing it for a while, you'll realize this is what I do. You'll be at home. If you want to learn something else and try something else, by all means, do it. But don't be concerned about having a style.

Jordan: Just do it.

John: Just do it. You'll find out far more that way than trying to delve into things that may or may not be part of what you are.

Jordan: I imagine [people] often get caught up in trying to copy someone else's style.

John: Oh yeah. They become little carbon copies of what they were studying. Now, you'll find it in a lot of different areas. In the regional landscape painting, you'll find people will study under certain people. You'll look at a painting of theirs and find that every brush stroke will look exactly the same. It will look very much like those they were taught by. It just leaves me as cold as it does as attempts at abstraction with no knowledge of reality. I'm going to do an abstract painting, so you throw a bunch of painting on a canvas. Wherever it lands is basically it. You might discover something that way. That's part of learning how to see also, but I get the feeling that a lot of these people just put stuff up there that really didn't have that much thought in it. Some do. I just feel it's good to know the tools that you're working with and to know how to use them. Painting still does exist. Now that we're seeing a return to that in a number of areas, I have people who are getting tired of some of the not just bad stuff that's coming out but the redundancy. One bad thing trying to repeat another bad thing that doesn't work. You can only do so much of that. Eventually people go "euugh" Whereas in painting, for me, especially the way I do it, each painting is a new experience. It's a new journey, a new experience which makes it sound really Augustin. It's important to me. That's the way I look at it, an exploration. An exploration into my own mind, my own thought processes. As I say each one is different and creates its own criteria for completion. If I'm not paying attention to that, I'm really not painting.

## **Interview 3 - August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

Jordan: We're here back again. I'm Jordan DeGelia with John Oberdorf, and we are continuing with our third interview on August the 7th. I would like to start off with John recalling a story that he told me from which a lot of his work share a common theme.

John: Jordan, to begin, we've talked about how early experiences and images are important. Even when you're very small. Maybe especially when you are small. They're more poignant. They're vivid in your mind. If you're in special places or situations, they stand out. My experience growing up in at a very early age in Panama had a very early effect on my later paintings. We've already talked about most of those. One of the ones that I didn't really talk about happened in the same area. My association, my understanding of it occurred probably a couple weeks ago from this conversation. I was recalling different places I had been in Panama. A lot of it was sparked by our conversations. This one turned out to be very profound for me, because it was a place my dad brought me to visit called Fort San Lorenzo which was established in 1587. It was attacked eventually by Henry Morgan, the pirate, who took it over and used it as a staging

area to attack Panama City which he held for a short period of time. Over the years it was fought over. I don't remember the last time it was in use, but I think it was in the 1800s or something like that. We went there to visit and it was essentially a ruin, talking 400 years old. I was about three years old. I was looking at the structures and the bricks and the moss clinging to the bricks, so it was breaking away. I was thinking that this was a place that people had been, but a troop of Panamanian soldiers marched by. I remember asking my dad, "Do those guys live there?" He said, "No, they're just practicing marching here on the grounds. I didn't say anything else, but it was kind of a non sequitur to me. I wasn't making the connection between that these were soldiers and this is a fort. They're living, but they're not living in the fort. Why are they here at the fort? Then I started looking at the fort. The fort meant more to me because it was still there, but it was in decay. It looked as it was, really old. I realized a couple of weeks ago. I made the association finally that this is one of the places people have been, but no longer are. I'm very attracted to places like that. It's a constant source of, I guess, wonder to me, in a way. Where the earth is in the act of reclaiming things that we put on it which it does constantly. Only we don't really notice the progress. So that really made me realize it had a big effect on a lot of the imagery I produced later. Just as watching my dad take off in the C-47 runway gave me this sense of expanse and distance and time and geometry. So, this place showed me examples of the structure and geometry that we put there is assimilated back into the land essentially. I wasn't thinking in those terms back then, but I had a basic sense of questioning and focus, a wonder about that sort of place. That stayed with me, and I realized that really was my first association with places that have fallen into disrepair and are breaking down. I still find them very fascinating as you know.

Jordan: Have you been back to Panama to see that fort?

John: No, no I haven't, but I did look it up on the internet and found just about the place where I was standing in the photograph. There are the old brick arches and everything and the lawn. I know pretty much where I was. That was pretty interesting.

Jordan: Has it changed much since you remember it?

John: Actually, it looks, to what I can discern, not much has changed. It hasn't of course, It's been, huuugh, 64 years since I was there. That in itself is a very strange feeling. I think it takes in some cases, a long period of time to break these places down. When they're totally abandoned, they become reabsorbed.

Jordan: Humans make such a big effort to keep things from being taken back. Preservation.

John: In places like that, special places. In other places, we have a tendency to totally take them apart and put up cement structures. Depending on where we happen to be. It shows

you about the changing nature of the earth and the geological processes and how they work on any material that we use. Obviously, it's been a factor in what I do.

Jordan: Your art really comments on where humans have been and how they interact with the world, but it's always an effect after. Very few, I've never seen any of your paintings that show the construction of something. It's always someone coming across something after.

John: That's really true. To make a statement like that is to state that I know exactly how things were built or the methods that were used, and I really don't. In many cases, we assume that we know, even our so-called experts, when we don't really understand. Maybe getting in our heads maybe people in the past knew things that we don't know now. Or had a different basis for understanding nature. Somethings that they say look like magic for instance, is probably just the science we don't know. I'm fully on board with that concept. There you have that little piece of my history that I can add to the other stuff. It was a lot of early on experiences that affected what I do. I'm hoping almost now that this has started happening that I'll come up with almost more things. It kind of started the process of reaching into your backlogs in your brain and remembering certain things. Which is kind of exciting in a way, getting reconnected with your early experience.

Jordan: One question I have from this is do you ever imagine what the structure looked like before you take it apart and show it in most of its components?

John: Yes, but I always remember my concept of what something might have been maybe entirely different from what it was. Who knows where these images come from? When I do stone blocks, who knows what they might have been used for. We have these structures at places like Baalbek and Lebanon up to twelve hundred tons. We know some of them are bases for structures that are above them. Some people think that the Romans built the huge blocks of stone and put them there but it's not Roman architecture. It is something far, far older apparently to me and a number of other people. It's very easy to attribute things to somebody that you know and it's convenient, but it doesn't always answer the question. I leave it up in the air. I don't know, but as long as we're asking the questions. That's what a lot of my painting are about, asking questions. I'm asking a question in terms of content and process every time I approach a painting. I don't know what's going to happen, and I like that.

Jordan: You want your paintings to cause people to question?

John: Or ask questions because that's exactly what I'm doing. I never want to beat people over the head with a stick.

Jordan: You don't learn that way.

John: No, not at all. It's kind of like the statement made by Václav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, who said "Seek out those who are looking for the truth; run away from those who have found it." I'm asking questions. I might have some suggestions on certain things, I think they apply, but I don't have the answers. That's what my paintings are about. They're windows into a perspective.

Jordan: With a lot of us, there are just answers that we will never find.

John: Undoubtedly. Humans always need to have unknowns in front of them. We like to find what we consider to be answers, but if we run out of unknowns and we run out of questions. What are we? We sink into stasis. Stasis is the first step toward decay. I don't think the human species is about that. We're about continuing on, hopefully. Finding more things and asking more questions. It seems like a natural process to me.

Jordan: Do you think your paintings could fit in an overall collective of describing the same world, or do you think they could exist in different realities?

John: I would say, both. You'll find in my painting things that relate. You will always find things, one thing that relates to another. Yet, they could be completely separate in some ways also. I like to think there is a visual cohesiveness in what I do. I think there is, but I'm not conscious of that when I paint. Maybe that's why that is because I'm not worried so much about... As we discussed earlier, I don't worry about having a style. I think that comes naturally to you. It's not something that you strive to have, it's something that you recognize or other suggest you have. I'm not very focused or aware on every brushstroke that I make from the standpoint that this is my style, so I have to paint in this way. Not at all. I go where it leads me. I'm compelled to do something. It's an instant sort of expression. I think that gives life to the painting. I see a lot of paintings where people have learned from other people and have adopted their quote unquote "style," and every brushstroke it the same. It starts to look gimmicky in a way. They also learn a certain style of mixing their paints. Every once and awhile, I'll look at a YouTube video. Somebody is going to teach you how to paint a landscape. You look at that and they're mixing their colors and every dab of paint is in the proper place on their pallet. They're mixing one color into another. It looks like a machine. I don't paint that way. My colors, my pallets look like a battlefield. It looks like someone threw a mini hand grenade on the pallet and blew everything up. I'm just going immediately for whatever color or effect that I want. I know I waste a lot of paint that way and so be it. It's there to achieve a purpose. This is one of the reasons I started my pallet paintings because I figured I liked what I was seeing on the pallets. I stopped using the paper pallets and made those boards and gessoed them and started mixing paint on those and turning those into paintings. I've got a whole pile of pallets here. Every once and awhile, I'll pull one out and see something, and it will become a painting. Again, that goes back to learning how to see. Remember the Demetrius Jameson statement: "Remember Johnny, drawing is just learning how to see."

Painting is also watching what's there. Sometimes, things are already painted and you don't even realize unless you take a look. Then you say, "a-hah!" I love the "a-hah" moments in painting. The only moments I don't enjoy so much is the finishing off when all sense of creativity has essentially been accomplished and there are items that you have to take care of to make work. That becomes a little more tedious. On some paintings, I actually make a list of certain things I want to address because I don't want to forget that I need to do that. But that's not part of the creativity. Not as much as in the sense as the original exploration. Did that answer your question?

Jordan: It did more so. It's very interesting hearing your comment on style. For people to focus so much on trying to replicate their own style, they are almost copying what they think they should be doing.

John: Absolutely. That's not painting so much as it is an act of replication. I just can't do that. I tried it once. Boy, did that not work. It's not the way my mind works. It's probably why my work lends itself to, I call it a different type of Surrealism. It does have that air to it, although not in the traditional sense, most of the time. Ricardo might have another name for it. He probably does, but I'll let history [decide that.]

Jordan: That's just for the art historians. They're the ones who get to decide all the labels in the end.

John: I am not thinking what particular category I fit into when I'm painting. I just don't do that. It's all spontaneous with me. I tend to produce fairly evolved imagery. It all starts out in a very spontaneous way. It's what I do, discovery. That's what the tools are for. Every time you approach a canvas, there's something waiting to happen on it. I have done and can do paintings that have plans for them, pre-set preliminary drawings. I can stay fairly close to that if it really works, but very often, almost always, something changes along the way. I can start out with sketches or an idea, but it always changes. All towards getting to its own end, the fulfillment.

Jordan: When do you feel satisfied with a painting?

John: It's really hard to say. Not to associate myself with Michelangelo in any way. I always remember the movies *The Agony and the Ecstasy* when Pope Julius comes to Michelangelo and he says, "Michelangelo, "When will you make an end?" He goes, "When I'm finished." How do you know when you're finished? Well, you just kind of know. At some point, you maybe realize, you maybe beating on a dead horse, as they say.

Jordan: Even, on the same note, Michelangelo has some work that he just never [finished.] He just did not fully carve. It brings the question: Was this intentional?

John: Ricardo and I have talked about this before. For his day, it was very advanced. It looks like he thought this is what this needs to be, and he didn't need to go any further than that. To do that would make it something else entirely. It would kill it. I found some very interesting things in some of his sculptures. I've seen where they almost look like studies. I remember looking at some terra cotta figures done by Bernini at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco many years ago. These were studies for larger sculptures. I looked at them and thought, that's really weird. That foot is almost as long as the entire shin. Then I realized later that these were studies, basically, and he was concentrating on the foot. It made for some very odd-looking figures. I think Michelangelo did this also. Ricardo and I, I discussed one with him once where there was a leg sticking out of the rock, one of these evolving pieces. It looked like the foot was reversed. It was the left leg, but the big toe was on the left side. I thought, that's odd. He suggested that he may have just been using that as a study. Some of them were and some of them were finished pieces as well. It looked really odd. We have to pay attention to things like that because it's fascinating.

Jordan: Have you ever dabbled with that in your own artwork of trying things out that are very unconventional? I guess it kind of goes back to your idea on the rules of art.

John: Rules are meant to be broken, but you have to know the rules. When I do that, it's not as a study. It's always destined I think as a finished project on its own in a sense. If I were drawing a leg with the foot reversed, it would be a finished product, and I would have done that purposely just to throw the viewer off. That's how I would have done that. It would not just be a study or a study within a study or something like that. Even then I simply don't approach it like it's going to be a finished product. It's just a drawing. I go where it takes me. I guess that's one of the reasons we look at certain human figure studies or gesture poses as finished works. They become finished works some time later. If there's is a student producing them, then they're studies. Later on, we look at them, if somebody has achieved a certain notoriety, we look at them as finished products. Who's to know where one becomes the other? It's all a matter of human perspective after all. I've done certain drawings where I wanted things to begin and end rather quickly. It was a gesture essentially. Certain paintings like that also. The most variety you're going to see in my work comes from the pallet paintings. I have the one back there of Athena's head on the wall you've seen which is a completely different piece to the one next to it which is very abstract in many ways. Neither of them have anything in common with those two on the wall that you're looking at. It goes where it's gonna go. Those are pallet paintings. I really love doing them because anything can happen. In fact, in my stuff, anything can happen in pieces that I'm concentrating on the canvas also.

Jordan: That's for sure.

John: It's in a different sort of way with the pallet painting even though the themes, if you want to talk about themes, there is a relationship and a certain constant of focus that you're probably going to find.

Jordan: Another interesting theme I have seen in a lot of your work is the idea of the desert and the ocean. They're often very similar, but your paintings often use them.

John: It's an interesting thing that. I tend to be... I really love the way water moves. They're all obsessive sorts of things, basically. I'm kind of a desert rat by nature. I love the desert. I'd be very happy to live there. I don't think I could live by the sea, but I like being there on occasion very much. Then, I realize, it's part of the same thing. The desert was the sea at one point. I'm constantly going back and forth. You probably saw when I showed you the first two paintings when you came in today, *The Old Roads* piece and the *Forgotten Quarry*. Not much to do with the ocean as we know it today. I found myself because I had been spending so much time on that ocean piece, the *Argo* one that I found myself more interested in going back and doing a few more *Forgotten Quarry/Old Roads* pieces. What happens next? Well I guess I'll go back to my nautilus painting and finish that one off. But who knows what will happen. Eventually, it will probably be after the show we are working on right now. I was just given some really nice heavy stretcher bars. You can see them in the corner there leaning up. They're six feet long. They would be making a square canvas which would be the biggest that I've done thus far. I have enough for two big pieces that I'm already thinking about in the back of my mind as possibly companion pieces, not a diptych or anything like that. Two pieces that more directly relate to each other in some way and might have a come theme.

Jordan: That might be interesting to do the same scene covered by ocean versus by desert.

John: That might be something to think about.

Jordan: The ocean and the desert are the same force in that they can cover things up. Things are hidden that are unknown because they are inhospitable to humans.

John: They are very intriguing and very compelling and yet inhospitable at the same time. That's a good way of putting it. That might be a very interesting approach for that sort of thing. Who knows where it's going to go? I really don't. You need a springboard for some of this. One idea leads to another. I'm all about the evolution of ideas and the unfolding of things on the canvas. I can't bring myself to... It puts me in position as I've said before very often of painting myself out of situations that I have created for myself, paint myself out of a corner. If paint myself into trouble, I have to paint my way out of it. That happens on a fairly regular basis, but that's part of the process, making it work. To do that I have to be, sometimes, ruthless in things. I've painted out imagery in certain paintings that I have concentrated on for several weeks because it just plain didn't work. You have to be able to do that, to make the thing happen the way that it is supposed to.

Jordan: Going beyond just the ocean and desert theme, one thing I think that's very vital to civilization, is that you don't include things like plants and nature. Farming is the backbone of human civilization as well, but that's never depicted. Why do you think that is?

John: It is very rarely. The only time I really depict foliage essentially is when I'm doing a basic landscape like an Oregon landscape. Then I do that. It took a long time to get me to use green. And that basically with oceans. I guess looking at... Well I remember Allen Monroe telling me once, he was a very Oregon state professor who did some very fine abstract work out of one of the Midwest's abstract expressionism school. [We were t]alking about landscape painting in Oregon, "John, the Oregon landscape is very seductive." He was basically saying be careful when you get into that. Because first of all, everybody and their uncle wants to paint your basic, flowery or tree covered landscape and the barn. You could use that as a springboard to something else, but it becomes in a sense too much of itself very often. It doesn't have the... foliage just doesn't produce the defined forms that I'm looking for in the impressionist sense or the *plein air* sense which is fine. I learned from that. I learned more about how to push paint around and use more impasto effects which I do a little more of now than I did in other work because I was able to apply it to. I had actually started doing that probably in about 1995 occasionally using thicker paint in certain areas. When I started doing some of the Oregon landscapes, I started doing a lot of it. It was fun to learn, but I did a whole lot of Oregon landscapes and seascapes that I just couldn't stand. It just... I had to really be psychologically involved with a piece to make it work. I don't know how many paintings I did of Mount Hood. I don't want to do it anymore. When I did Mount Hood, I found very often it was devoid of snow. I was more interested in the mountain, the structure of the mountain than the snow cone. Everybody wants the white painting of Mount Hood in the back, okay... It just didn't really do much for me. The ones that were more successful of Mount Hood, I got from imagery later in the year after all the snow had melted. Foliage is not something that I spend a lot of time with. On occasion, I do. I have a painting that you've seen called *The Sacred Journey* with the figure. It definitely has trees, and brush, and stuff in it, but that was kind of necessary for the theme that I was working with. That was one of those paintings where I had an idea to begin with. It started out as a little drawing I was doing and evolved into a larger piece on board. I can paint foliage; I just don't do it very often. It just doesn't address my focus as much of the workings of geology, the forces of water, the forces of acting on stone or rock. I guess that's where my mind goes.

Jordan: I'm just surprised because I would think of, especially in Panama, the idea of the jungle reclaiming all these stone structures.

John: It does, but in that case, I'm not as much as concerned with the jungle as what it's doing to the stones. That's how that seems to work. If I were putting it in there, it would be blocking out the stones I want to look at.

Jordan: Very fair.

John: It's not as though I haven't considered it, doing ones involved in that like the moss and the brush. I guess I go where my tendency is, basically. For better or worse, that's the way it happens. We'll see. I'm open to lots of things. Anything can change. My focus might change tomorrow. I don't think so.

Jordan: That would be an interesting twist.

John: It certainly would for me. I don't know if I could survive the shock. That's essentially why I don't... I find the foliage always blocking my view.

Jordan: That's a very interesting way to think about it because so much of... I guess it depends on how you view earth reclaiming. I guess plants and stuff haven't been a constant on earth. They are still a rather new idea.

John: They don't really... They can change almost overnight whereas the process of change that I'm looking at, while it's interspersed with huge events occasionally, like when we talked about the uniformitarian as opposed to catastrophism theory. I am both, a uniformitarian and a catastrophist in a sense, because nothing happens on this earth for a long time then something happens. And then nothing happens for a while. I don't know why one has to be one or the other because both are what's going on. In the middle of all this, plant life changes overnight. Look at the way ivy grows for god's sake. You can't keep control of it. It changes rapidly. That's about the best way I can address this question.

Jordan: Is there anything in your artwork you think you would be able to express the way you want it? Perhaps just a topic that just never seemed right to fit into a painting.

John: I find things that I already put in that don't work that I take out. Ideas that I don't think would work? Yes. Because I'm not sure, it goes back again to my very earliest beginnings in Panama when I told you the little story about all those orange crabs on the beach. I don't know how the heck I could effectively capture something like that. It would have to be an explosion of color on the canvas that would have to be very abstract. [It] would be the only way that I could express it, and I don't think I could even begin to deal with what was there. It was what the experience did to my mind that had the most effect. Of course, at the time I wasn't even considering replicating it or drawing from it to produce a work of art. I was only two and a half years old at the time. I look back on it now, and I realize that even now if I were sitting there watching that happen, I wouldn't know what to do with it. The only thing you can do is sit and watch in amazement. That's how that seems to work. That would be difficult, [the] sort of things would be difficult to put into a painting. Or if I tried to use it, it would probably become something other.

Jordan: Yeah. I'm trying... In my head I have such, I really like that story and the idea of the crabs just set a picture in my mind. For me to see you turn that into something else, it almost... I would never be able... It would change how I imagine that scene so much.

John: I don't think I would want to do it because it would change my experience so much or my view of the experience. It was so profound in its own way for what it was that... For those who live there on the beach and see that on occasion, it maybe just *passé* for them, "Oh this happens all the time." When you're two and a half years old and you've never seen anything like that before, that's a totally different experience entirely. And no, I had nothing to relate it to because I didn't have much of anything to relate to anything. I wasn't old enough, but I knew that was different. I don't know if I could, I don't know that I could address that particular thing. There may be others as well, but I don't spend any time really thinking about those. I just go with what's absorbing me and my focus at the time. Then it is, it becomes your focus and obsession. That's how I finish paintings or at least move them through as I'm looking for what I call "a window of opportunity" in a painting, something that is speaking to me that needs to be worked on. Then it's a matter of seeing something that isn't there yet. Painting it, the act of painting, has been done almost before I put the brush on the canvas. I spend far more time looking at a painting than I do painting on it. It happens pretty quickly, but it's all that time looking and contemplating. But that's part of painting too. It's a big part for me, maybe the biggest part in a sense. Then, when I know what I need to do, I can call forth immediately all the things I learned way back when and do it quickly and naturally and put those principles to use.

Jordan: It is very interesting to think about the different ways we see and depict and what we are. In a lot of my work, I try to depict things I've seen from memories. It's very interesting to think of how trying to depict something can kind of detract from your own idea of it.

John: It's easy to get lost in the concept of process. When we become subservient to process... The more we become subservient to it, the less we're engaging our creativity very often. It's not always the case, but a lot of it is like that. Process to me is something that I use naturally from what I learned along the way. Once you know how to use the tools and that sort of thing, your instruments of production, shall we say, you should be able to call those forth without even thinking about it, basically. I learned how to mix paints, that sort of thing. But it was something that I realized fairly early on that I had an ability to get the color that I was looking for and not concentrate so much on a process while doing it. It's what looked right. For some reason, I'm able to... If I'm looking for a certain color, I'm able to find those colors that I need to mix to produce that. It's having a basic understanding of the color spectrum. How we move from warm to cool and back. Which is why I like certain paints that I can use that transfer from one to the other very readily. There are a couple of pastels produced by Gamblin that I like very much. Violet-

gray is one of them and a couple of others as well that are easily used in both cool and warm patterns. All I know is I have to mix a little bit of this, and I can mute it in the cool framework or little bits of muted in the warm. It works perfectly for that. Usually, I add a little of this and a little of that. I do it until it just seems to work. I actually don't know how I got onto that.

Jordan: Still interesting nonetheless. Mixing paint is a skill that some people [don't have.] Even in high school when I was taking an art class, some people didn't know how to make orange, purple or green.

John: Part of this so-called process is, I think I may have mentioned this once before, when I try to analyze the way I paint, I've finally realized I don't really know what I'm doing until I've realized what I have done. The key is to realize that you've done. If you don't then you're totally lost. It's not like I'm flying blind. It's just everything is a question. You finally realize what's going on, and you work towards that. You make the decision yourself as to whether it's working or not. Anything else you will leave to the eventual viewer. Let them figure it out, that's for them to figure it out, not me. Which also gets back to the idea why I focus on what I do. Some people might ask, "Shouldn't you be doing more socially applicable content?" Don't you owe it to [them]?" What the artist owes is immediately to themselves and what they're concentrating on. If they're not doing that, they're not doing anything for themselves or anybody else. That's why we look at other people's work. That's why they become important. Why do we read about the famous writers in history? Those people believed in the idea of their own ideas. Whatever worth you may be! I don't believe in absolutes because I have always found as has been said before, "If you compare yourself to others, you will always find that there are those who are greater and lesser than yourself." You have to be your own favorite artist or musician. Part of that is being able to be critical of what you're doing, to be able to give yourself the kick in the rear and the pat on the back. Sometimes you're the only one there to do that. I've had to do a lot of that in my life. I've always been kind of an outsider when it came to the art scene. That's just my nature. That may have been for the best really. I just have always felt ill at ease around the art scene as it were. It's part of getting back to what my dad told me about his conversation with Thornton Wilder about him seeing a lot of young people who want to be writers but very few who wanted to write. It's about the act of doing rather than being about something. People who want to be about something will hang around situations that are about that. They may read a lot about that, they may learn this and that and any other thing about, but if they're not involved in the physical act of doing the thing, they're not really a part of it in a sense. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about that. It's just the way I am which almost makes me seem antisocial which I'm not. I get along very well with people. I have a little trouble with the species sometimes, but people I like a lot. It is an obsessive sort of thing. There are various states of dysfunctionality in the human species. Some of them may not be all that bad. It takes a different type of perspective to produce paintings, art, music. It takes a certain view of the world and yourself in that world to be able to do that. No matter

how you are seen by other people. People will see you in a certain way. They have ideas about what they think you ought to be doing, what they think you ought to be. If I'm ever remembered for anything or if I'm not remembered for anything, it will be because of who I am not because of somebody else's idea of what they thought I ought to be. That would do nobody any good. I am at home with my obsession.

Jordan: That's a wonderful way to think about it because there's only so much we can project about how we want to be viewed. At what point, are you sacrificing what you want to do to be able to have them perceive you as how you want?

John: In my life, I've really fought a silent battle against being told what to do. I don't try to argue a lot with people. I'm stubborn, I guess, in that regard. I can't be anything else. If I acquiesced, I would just be a cog in somebody else's machinery. That's not my nature.