

## In Dialogue with Richard Armstrong

Marufa Kasham & Alex Szyperek are Teen Curators at the Hill Art Foundation.

They spoke with Richard Armstrong, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

**Location:** Hill Art Foundation, New York City

5:00 pm

**Marufa:** This is Marufa Kasham and...

**Alex:** Alex Szyperek

**Marufa:** We are here with the Teen Curators Program at Hill Art Foundation located in the heart of Chelsea. Today we are talking with Richard Armstrong, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Currently on display at the Hill Art Foundation is *Maybe Maybe Not*, a show featuring works by Christopher Wool.

**Alex:** Our first question is, what is a normal day for you at the Guggenheim? Who are you at the Guggenheim, and who are you meeting with?

**Richard:** Well, I'm the head of the whole "shebang," so I've got meetings from A to Z almost every day. Those are frequently internal people who occasionally bring [other] people from the outside. Then I have a big ceremonial job. So, the president of Poland calls up and wants to take a view, look at the museum. [In that case] You've got to be there to say hello to the person. So, there's the typical administrative side, there's that ceremonial side, and then in the spare moments, you have to call people and say, "Can you give me a little bit of money?"

**Alex:** In prior interviews, you've spoken a lot about legacy about artists, and how collectors are responsible for upholding that legacy. As a director of the Guggenheim, what would you say is your legacy?

**Richard:** What's my legacy at the Guggenheim? Well, I said to the board, when I first came, that we have to return to two things: one is we need to redefine the museum in terms of its chronological reach, and I really feel like that should be 1880 to the present because they were doing shows about Ancient China, Ancient Mexico, Ancient this, Ancient that. That's not the expertise of that museum. So I was very opposed to that. And then

the second thing I said to them, and they agreed, was that if we look at the museum from its earliest days, it was very involved in radicality. The founder's idea was [that] society [needed] to be changed by looking at abstract art. And that sounds a little bit naive today, but there's a way we can keep that radical sense of who we are alive, and I think we've done that. So let's say my legacy might be redefining the museum in a way that I thought was correct chronologically, and secondarily helping all the people who work there feel that they have the freedom to make things as disruptive as necessary.

**Marufa:** The next question would be...the way we perceive art changes over time, as we were talking about, but how does a museum necessarily bring older artwork into contemporary art conversations? For example, the Hilma af Klint exhibition?

**Richard:** So, I have to prove to you, as a consumer, that the project of being creative is continuous from the first appearance of man and woman till now. So I could say to you — and this is why I used the word 1880 — in the modern era, there have been artists who today have a way of saying something to us about what we're looking at by demonstrating what it is that they were looking at and thinking about it. So Hilma was interesting because you didn't know about her previously. She was hugely ambitious. She was connected to all kinds of spiritual movements at the turn of the century and she devised a whole bunch of symbols that are legible and they're powerful even today. I think we can keep saying to you that in the modern period, thinking people frequently thought about the same thing over and over again.

**Marufa:** What do you think is the modern era? What is that to you?

**Richard:** I'd say 1870s onwards, like the crest of the first industrial revolution, or some people would say the second, until now. What would you say?

**Marufa:** Well, normally for me...

**Richard:** 1950s?

**Marufa:** Well, I would say even later than that. When I think modern, I think more 1970s and on...

**Richard:** Okay, you're right on schedule for your age.

**Marufa:** Yeah, for my age, but I assume...

5:05 pm

**Richard:** To me, the ideas that we're thrashing out even today, are largely ideas that would appear in artists who really got to know Cézanne, for example, or certainly Picasso, moving on others earlier in the century. I still think we're grappling with some of the same things. So that's how I define modern. You're looking at what is contemporary, and that's what you should be doing, probably because you are contemporary. I am not. I'm modern!

**Marufa:** I suppose that changes generationally, and you know, however society perceives those things day-to-day.

**Richard:** You both are children of the twenty-first century.

**Marufa:** Yeah, we're in Generation Z.

**Richard:** I was born in the first half the previous century, in 1949. So it's a very different, you know, a very different attitude.

**Marufa:** Another question that we have for you would be the collector themselves. In the past, you have expressed that you believe collectors are important because they build a collection that quote "tells people what we imagine to be important, valuable, and worth saving." I mean, how would you say collectors and institutions impact the legacy of artists today?

**Richard:** Well typically collectors are the most important next step in an artist's development. First, he or she will have sympathizers and probably copiers. Then you realize, 'I need another hundred bucks to pay my rent.' The way to do that is selling what I made to somebody who wants to take care of it. That's what a collector is. So, first, you go to your peer group, then you've got people who are older who have capital, and then you have to hope from my vantage point that they're going to give those paintings to a public institution. In the meantime, even though I don't have any capital, I can walk around and say to the artist that what you're doing is important, and maybe we can help you prove that by making an exhibition. But I'd say collectors in a way are the most important connective tissue.

**Alex:** So what would say is Tom Hill's impact on Christopher Wool's legacy?

**Richard:** Well he's been probably the most discerning collector, as you probably know from being around him. He's willing to have a discussion—a conversation with a variety of people. That's not always true with collectors. And he's, I think, had really deep and long sustained conversations, even disagreements with Christopher Wool. Christopher is not going to change, and probably shouldn't, and Tom isn't going to change very much. But they discovered a way to be in alignment. And then, Tom and Janine have this other way of saying 'I love you,' by buying a painting.

**Alex:** Galleries and Museums are arguably as important, and some might say even more important than the art itself, as a way of solidifying an artist's legacy. How has the Guggenheim Museum added to the legacy that Wool will leave behind?

**Richard:** Well, I wouldn't argue that galleries are that important, but I think public institutions are. When we assume the responsibility of making a show about an artist, one of the principal things we think about is how are we adding to the knowledge pool of that artist. And for us, the favorite way of doing that is by making a book, which is kind of old fashioned—or shall we say, modern. So we think that by training people to be critical and to be articulate we can help the public better understand what they're looking at, if they have the time to first look and then read what our curators are putting forward. We think we have a big job, that way, by enlarging the knowledge pool. I also think, and this is something I didn't get to say inside, you really don't have to know anything when you go into the exhibition. You don't even have to know the artist's name. I don't care if you have any knowledge about it at all. All I want you to do is to be able to look at it and make something of it, even if it's misinformation. I just want you to take it seriously. I think it's so sad when they say 'born,' 'die,' 'the year it's made,' 'the medium,' 'who's who,' and 'which movement,' and 'who's related to.' That's not usually what you need. What you really need is a connection to the thing. You can sort out the historical aspects later.

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**Marufa:** It's all about perspective, isn't it?

**Richard:** At the beginning, it's all about your willingness to really look. Are you willing to look? And from that, comes perspective, yeah.

**Alex:** So Christopher is obviously an artist that has had a huge impact on future generations. Do you still think that there's time to change? And grow? And how so?

**Richard:** Yeah, I think. I saw some paintings that he made recently in the genre of the one you're showing me there that, to me, seem more resolved and forceful. And knowing him, he's got another fifteen or twenty years or so where he can really make important strides and assertions, yeah.

**Marufa:** Sorry, I feel like you kind of answered this, but what do you think, in terms of this piece--specifically which is, for the record, *Untitled*, made in 2015--can tell us about the current times we're living in? And in terms of like the contemporary art world, what you consider the modern era?

**Richard:** When you look that painting, which is a little bit atypical in this show, to me, it looks like a title illustration of the whole show: *Maybe, Maybe Not*. And then I say, beyond that, is it tissue? Or something pulled apart? Is it a graph that tells the truth? Is it a mistake? Is it a triumph? Is it all those things together? I think the success of that painting is its willingness to be casual and contradictory. What do you think?

**Marufa:** I personally find it very morose.

**Richard:** Morose? You think it looks like blood?

**Marufa:** Yes.

**Richard:** Yeah, that's what I would think. Yeah.

**Marufa:** I personally, I don't know...this feels kind of...

**Richard:** Violent?

**Marufa:** A little bit.

**Richard:** Yeah--

**Marufa:** I wouldn't say violent, so much as dark, depressing, kind of like a little, stuck.

**Richard:** He has a lot of that, more generally. It's not a happy world, particularly. That's why I think these flower pictures that we're looking at are spectacularly contradictory. It's a happy symbol, but when you see it the way he renders it, and amalgamates it, it's not so happy.

**Marufa:** Do you think that his general--what would you call it--his style is intended to shed light on darker things?

**Richard:** Might be, I mean, he had that growth spurt as an artist in the seventies. Here in New York, it was such a different place; it was a dark place. And he had a dark moment inside a dark place. I don't think that's what he's doing with the pictures, but he's smart enough to allow the darkness to influence the lightness.

**Marufa:** So do you think it's all about the consumer's perspective then?

**Richard:** No I think it's more about what matters...can I incorporate an opposing idea into one composition? And I also say that when I show you my bare and naked gesture, and you can understand me, it's really revealing stuff. So, you might look at a different artist, where it's all beautiful flowers and green, but he's hiding behind that. Here, you've got an artist who's willing to say, 'this is who I am.' And if we look exclusively at the gestures, we can tell an enormous amount about who I think he thinks he is. Does that make sense?

**Marufa:** Thank you for joining us today, Mr. Armstrong. This was Marufa Kasham and Alex Szyperok for the Teen Curators at Hill Art located in the heart of Chelsea! Signing off!