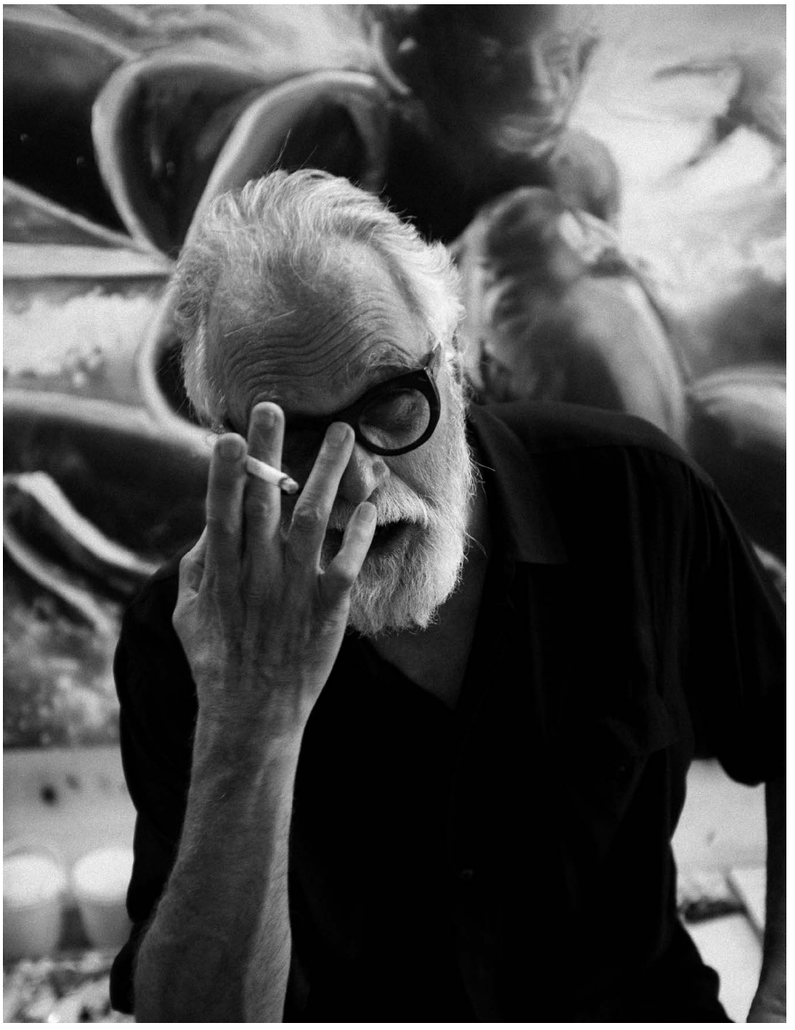
ROBERT YARBER

With Ben Lee Ritchie Handler

In Conversation

PORTRAIT BY OLIVER MAXWELL KUPPER



In the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was making America great again for the first time, lower taxes, trickle-down economics, and a surging domestic economy meant those toward the top of the food chain were swimming in it. There was more money than the high rollers could spend at home, so they traveled. Hotels became a frequent escape for the new rich and middle class, a symbol of moneyed freedom. They were oases for wholesome family fun, but also lawless, libertarian outliers from the shackles of societal norms—places to host one's extramarital dalliances, blast cocaine, and fly out the window. Robert Yarber was there, capturing surreal visions of these seedy, fantastic moments of late capitalist ennui on canvas in all their backlit, neon glory. His creations were steeped in art history—Titian and Tintoretto are visible references—but very much of the present. People noticed. His work was included in the American Pavilion at the 1984 Venice Biennale, selected for the 1985 Whitney Biennial, and snapped-up by major institutions and collections through the late '90s. Then the world turned, and his initial moment in the cultural spotlight faded.

Flash forward to 2018. A blobular, mutant version of Reagan is making America great again *again*, an increasingly cynical form of the trickle-down economy ensures that the luxury hotel set is more loaded than ever before, and Robert Yarber is back. His oil and acrylic work feels just as fresh and cutting as ever. Robert Yarber: Return of the Repressed, his first solo exhibition in Los Angeles in more than twenty years, opened at Nicodim Gallery in September. I spoke with him about his practice, his early life, and his blind eye as he readied his new paintings for the show.

IN MY CASE, YOU MIGHT TALK ABOUT AN OSCILLATION BETWEEN A SENSE OF VULNERABILITY AND INVINCIBILITY THAT HAPPENS ON SUCH A RAPID LEVEL THAT THERE IS A VERTIGO EFFECT.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER **Bob, you were born in Dallas and your father built the first Holiday Inn in that city that had a swimming pool. You were the oldest of three children. Your upbringing seems to be emblematic of the American Dream. Did it feel that way growing up?**

ROBERT YARBER **Yes, except for the fact that he was broke half the time. He was rich and then he was poor, over and over again...so I had to deal with process servers on occasion. He was in the real estate business, and he was also a gambler. He was on the edge of what we now know as the American buccaneer side of capitalism.**

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER

Did you live in the motels growing up?

ROBERT YARBER **We visited them. There were several, they were mostly in the Southwest: Houston, Arkansas. He built a Holiday Inn on Dallas' North Central Expressway. It was a purple and black motel with four flaming stanchions facing the highway, probably fueled by tons of kerosene, so anybody staying in the room would be choking in the room from these huge candelabras of flame.**

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER **So, you would road trip from the different motels?**

ROBERT YARBER **Yes, from the original one in Dallas to the one next to Love Field, and it's the one that was so famous for its proximity to the Kennedy assassination. It was adjacent to the airport where he arrived.**

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER **The '60s are often defined by the death of American innocence. The end point being, as you mentioned, Kennedy's assassination in 1963. You actually witnessed the motorcade before he was shot. How did this affect you personally? And did it change your approach to drawing and painting?**

ROBERT YARBER **One wouldn't know at the time of course, I was thirteen. This uncovered limousine went by and the sun was hitting this man's hair. And he was a god. He was a god revealed. He was incredibly handsome and had this incredible hair on his head, and then within an hour or two we'd heard he'd been shot. So it must have had an incredible influence on me.**

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER **Was there a specific moment that led you to pursue painting as a career?**

ROBERT YARBER **Well one theme in the earliest work was this sudden moment where things change and this may be in some way linked to the assassination. That moment where everything gets turned upside down. Also, the theme of the miraculous - I'd grown up a Catholic and was always interested in stories of miraculous situations and occurrences: saints flying and whatnot, levitating and such. This break in the natural order of things always interested me.**

UNTITLED (MAN OVER POOL) 1989 60 X 48 IN. OIL ON CANVAS. COPYRIGHT ROBERT YARBER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND NICODIM GALLERY.
PREVIOUS PAGE: THEATER, 2018 72 X 132 IN. OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. COPYRIGHT ROBERT YARBER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND NICODIM GALLERY.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER It's interesting, I don't think that a lot of contemporary painters have Italian Renaissance references in the way that you do. What appealed to you about these depictions?

ROBERT YARBER There was something about the dramatic tension of the Italians. When I finally saw the work in New York, when I was around twenty. I just gravitated towards that drama of gravity being overthrown. That's just part of the drama, the fact that we are all stuck here. And also, it had to do with the history of dream lore, my own personal experience of dreaming of levitation and flying. Later, during many openings where I would show this kind of work, people would come up and discuss their own flying dreams, and it worked into about a 50/50 break between people that flew like Superman: just extending their arms and propelling themselves by their will, and people who flapped and used their locomotive motion. I happened to be one that flapped, but at some altitude the power would be giving out and I'd start falling. Almost universally people would have a sense of vertigo and they'd stop falling. This whole vertigo sensation while you're asleep. I don't think I met anybody that went through the traumatic end result. That caught on and people identified with that. The whole metaphor of vertigo, of giddiness, of falling relates to a sense that we have that we are not firmly placed on the natural world anymore, that we are sort of on a carnival ride, the whole thing is a carnival ride, there's no sense of rootedness amongst modern peoples, if I may say. This giddiness can also be very exciting - this postmodern sense of glee at the very experience of getting this vertigo is the very counterpart of this. We like this sense of falling.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER Speaking of this, there's a lot of trippy imagery in your work. People are falling or flying. Can you tell us about your personal experiences with hallucination and transcendence? Has it ever nearly driven you mad?

ROBERT YARBER When I feel like I'm getting totally mad I usually feel like I'm on the right path, but then there's always survival that intervenes. You gotta eat, gotta maintain some kind of pastoral comportment. But the hallucinatory component is something that some people just kind of have. You have visionaries and people who experience this imaginary extension of themselves outside of the body. It's just this physiological situation that some experience and others don't. So I didn't really need LSD or anything when I was a kid. Eventually, over the course of my life, I was interested in that sort of experimentation.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER

Do you have any specific anecdotes?

ROBERT YARBER Well, I guess the pivotal moment for me was my trip to Peru, where I did ayahuasca...and that would challenge anybody. That was about ten or fifteen years ago. That was in 2005, so it wasn't that long ago. But that's where one goes to the depth of one's soul after all this struggle, and finds Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse, rather than some resplendent god. Instead of some worrisome manifestation of power, you find a chattering idiot. (laughs) That was my experience. It was very powerful. But, on the other hand, a lot of my work deals with the idea of space, cosmic space. That was the positive side of the experience. I'd read some literature on this thing. I saw what I'd call cosmocrators, builders of the cosmos and they were doing big movements, they were kind of like carnival musicians, moving around big geodesics of galaxies and so forth.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER So I guess on the topic on cosmocrators and chattering idiots, you moved out West in the mid '70s. What affect did moving to California have on your career, and what West Coast painters did you interact with along the way?

ROBERT YARBER The West Coast is where everything happened for me. I'd been to New York, and there was such a prejudicial division between the conceptual camp, and the minimalist camp, and anybody doing figurative painting that I didn't feel like there was any leeway to explore. I'd seen Peter Saul's work in San Francisco in 1969 purely by accident, and he hadn't lived in California for years, but he was a quintessential California artist: edgy. I asked him, because we became very good friends, his relationship to R. Crumb and he said that Crumb thought of Peter Saul as a gallery artist, and he wouldn't talk to a gallery artist, a sell-out. Although, at the time Peter was doing the Vietnam paintings and some of the more scorching, rough, intense paintings ever done.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER You are blind in one eye and it calls to attention that your paintings always have a very unique perspective. There's always a very distinct foreground and background that mesh together and are very distinctly yours. Is this because of the way you see things? How did you lose sight in one eye? How do you think it affects your work?

ROBERT YARBER I believe I lost my sight at birth due to a surgical slip of the tong. They used calibers to retract the baby, and that happens. There's very little study in people who were monocular since birth. Most studies are to do with people who have lost sight in one eye. One of the more interesting things a therapist has said to me, was that I was probably as a child, hyper vigilant. That all my senses were up. That I was assessing things in what some would call a more adult fashion, along with the bloated ego that might come with that.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER Do you think there's anything to do with your palette? Because you have a very hyper vigilant palette?

ROBERT YARBER Another researcher told me that I compensated for my lack of binocular vision by precognitively using other depth cues to enhance what I was looking at. Perhaps the colors are more enhanced, the spatial cues are more enhanced, any kind of indication of foreground would be something I came to use cerebrally. I had a great teacher at Cooper Union, Paul Georges. I was a sophomore, he was a totally wild character in the late '60s. I said, "Paul, I can only see in one eye." He held his thumb in front of my left eye and said, "Kid, you're lucky." (laughs)

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER I'm thinking of other painters that toy with extreme perspective, like Ed Ruscha and William Eggleston. Do you feel a special kinship with them? How do you think it affects the way you see other people's work?

ROBERT YARBER First of all, you see it in the desert when a road you are on disappears into the distance, into something as thin as a thread. Even in natural situations you may come across fissures, cracks, coastlines even, that strikes you as sublime, in the sense of the near and the far.... There was a whole polemic against creating space in a painting. When I create space in a painting it creates for me, and other people who are susceptible to this tendency, a sense of rapture, and release, and a virtual reality...

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER I come from a literature background, and I was introduced to the sublime with romantic writers, and later the gothic, but there was a sense in novels that if someone was sick, they would get in touch with mortality by going out into nature. But it's sort of the opposite in your sense of the sublime. It looks like these figures feel immortal. Even though it looks like they are in these lurid situations. You obviously think about the sublime. How do you consider your paintings in relation to that?

ROBERT YARBER In my case, you might talk about an oscillation between a sense of vulnerability and invincibility that happens on such a rapid level that there is a vertigo effect.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER I know you have a big cinema background. Would you say moving West articulated that at all for you, or helped put that in the frame? Because, I would say that when the Robert Yarbers became Robert Yarbers, was probably between the period of '83 to '95.

ROBERT YARBER Well, it started happening in the late '70s when I went to Berkeley and I met the film studies people, and they seriously studied Hollywood film in a way that was very engrossed in pictoriality and representation. Having come from New York, which was all about minimalism in

its stance towards the image, this was refreshing and invigorating, and that really gave me a license to fully embrace this. By the late '70s, early '80s I started having a following. And by the mid '80s, people in the Hollywood scene started collecting my work.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER Which films influenced you the most?

ROBERT YARBER I often mention *The Searchers*... a John Wayne movie. The sense of isolation. There's the final shot in *The Searchers* where he has re-captured the young woman who has run away, played by Natalie Wood. The tension of the moment is one in which you wonder if he's going to bring her back and kill her, and then he doesn't. You're supposed to say, "Oh he didn't kill her! Hooray for him!" I saw this when I was seven or eight years old and it was like testosterone poisoning, where he walks into the black frame of the doorway, and he's going out into the desert by himself, and that sense of isolation again takes the human body as a metaphor, or vector for some kind of will, and this sense of divorce and individuation to the extent of asphyxiation. Maybe he would have wanted to stay and have some ham, and do the happy dance of courting, but he's forced out, he's rejected. So maybe some of these figures that are pushed into the air feel rejected in that way.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER You're best known for these falling, flying pictures of nightscapes and flying figures over hotel pools, reflecting a hundred different types and rays of artificial light in these crazy neon palettes. They are at once identifiable and disorienting. What was the appeal of the neon palette?

ROBERT YARBER I had a job in Berkeley teaching in the early '80s and also in Austin, Texas. So I would teach in Berkeley in the Spring and Austin in the Fall. And I had a studio in Oakland, and I would drive back and forth to these two separate gigs over the course of those few years. I was very familiar with motel architecture, the American road architecture that other writers had written about, like Robert Venturi, and especially this ionization of the object and these neon milieus where a lone palm tree on the highway would be lit on one side by green light, on the other side an orange light that would make it this electric, supernatural image. That's why I say this plague of good taste that is sweeping America is erasing it all. But that sort of delirium of light, it came from Vegas, it was part of any American city back then. The neon lights and displays were resplendent. So, that was one aspect, the other would be the use of technicolor, the use of color in Douglas Sirk movies like *Imitation of Life*, *All that Heaven Allows*. They'd use gels. There'd be purple on one side and yellow on the other, almost inspired by comic books. So, suddenly you'd see it in film. In some penultimate scene they'd have some orange or yellow on their face. They just threw naturalism away.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER Speaking of the locations themselves, you deal with very specific environments. In a Robert Yarber painting there is typically a casino, a motel, a bar, a theater. How did you decide on these as the backdrop? And how do you pick the right backdrop for these very solitary and individual moments that take place between new characters?

ROBERT YARBER Well, I guess Modernist architecture had an impact on me, on my thinking. And my thinking about the failure of Modernist architecture. For instance, Le Corbusier and these housing blocks that he was designing. I was also very interested by Lapidus who designed the Fontainebleau in Miami, where Modernism becomes flaunty and you get all this nomenclature, like a woogle. There'd be this kidney shaped hole in the ceiling or a staircase to nowhere. Maurice Lapidus was a great early inspiration. Then of course going back to film a little bit, because I always revisit Michelangelo Antonioni, who was actually trained as an architect, in those early '60s Italian films, which were supposed to be the miracle period of modern Italian history, with these office blocks and they were already using that as a metaphor for alienation. You'd have Marcello Mastroianni, looking about at some endless face of some modernist building. Those films were a huge influence, and Fellini's films, and that architecture, that promise of perfection, and the sense that we all felt: that it failed. Linking back to the Renaissance again, it did provide these perspectives that tie to the more dazzling architecture of the day, like the Trump Tower, where it's all reflective surfaces and there's no elicitation of perspective. It's all about bedazzlement, having to do with your intoxication or something. But perspective and space, as in Renaissance painting, and in that early Modernist period, specified your position in space, and for me that was ennobling and diminishing at the same time. The whole idea of the architectural sublime.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER Was there a moment when you put those things together? When did you realize that your were making Bob Yarber paintings?

ROBERT YARBER Well I was reiterating this a lot, but, in that five years between '75 and '80 it all came together. I think in 1980 I was standing in front of the Ambassador on Wilshire at two in the morning, the great Ambassador hotel where Bobby Kennedy was shot, and I was looking up at the sky, and it was orange, and you had this green palm tree against this orange sky. I said, 'This is amazing! This is it!' I think that was one of the pivotal moments, but I'd done a few paintings before that where the periphery of the body is all about different sources of backlighting, and one becomes a sort of phantom passing through that space. You also had the discotheques and the strobe lighting, that probably had some effect on me...and then acid.

BEN LEE RITCHIE HANDLER Your show is called *Return Of The Repressed*, which is happening at a very interesting time after we went from a very straightened arrow President who played by the rules and did everything by the book, and now we have a new President that is all id. On the one hand the disorder is exciting, but on the other hand it's dangerous. What kind of repression do you think is returning, and why do you think now is the right time for this?

ROBERT YARBER That's a heavy question. In a way you are talking about the perfectibility of the human, the enlightenment was driven by this sense that there could be something close to human perfectibility. I think that mathematical algorithms are bypassing the nebulous utopia of human perfectibility. We might end up with a kind of perfectibility, but it might not be human. But at any rate, the return of the repressed implies on many levels, the diminished or surpassed element that through some therapeutics pops up somewhere else. There has to be a release valve. We have a perfectibility impulse in art... ×