Leland Bell: Painter and Teacher, by Jennifer Samet, October 2010

Leland Bell's pursuit as an artist was a constant search for wholeness, purity, and completeness. In this, his goals differ radically from those of many of his peers, and from the zeitgeist. While Abstract Expressionism was driven by personal expression, and theorized as a movement about process, Bell prioritized the universal over the personal, the concrete over the temporal.

Bell was born in 1922 and died in 1991. Over the course of his career, Bell developed a unique pantheon of artists who were his heroes, and he dogmatically asserted this pantheon as a teacher and lecturer. His canon included Arp, Mondrian, Jean Helion, the late work of Derain, Giacometti, and Balthus. The slide lectures Bell gave were his preferred mode of educating students, debating contemporaries, and asserting an alternate canon of art history, at complete odds from the mainstream canon… totally against the grain. I'm sure many of you here today know about this. But in some ways this pantheon, and even Bell's confrontational way of speaking, became taken for granted so that we don't really stop and ask what it all meant. Why did Bell revere the artists he did—what exactly was he looking for in art—what did he want his students to know, what did he want them to change in their work. I will look to Stanley and Simon to answer some of these questions, but I will begin by presenting the major figures in Bell's canon, along with images of his own work, that illustrate his development and also his unchanging goals – for a total reality, a total penetration of the subject.

Even as a young artist, these goals of Bell's are clear. During high school in Washington, D.C., he spent time at the Phillips Collection and was introduced to the Provincetown painter Karl Knaths, who regularly taught adult painting classes at the Phillips. In 1940, Bell followed Knaths to Provincetown. Bell explained:

> I became a kind of disciple of Knaths, that is, I would listen to him in awe. He would talk about Swedenborg and Kierkegaard and would read from the writings of Mondrian and Klee, which he was translating. He gave me the feeling that art was noble and that it was something that had nothing to do with self-interest, rather with a disinterested passion.

Bell recalled an experience in which he was copying work at the Phillips Collection, which became a defining moment in terms of codifying his artistic goals. He was drawing Thomas Eakins's portrait, *Miss Amelia Van Buren* (c. 1891). Bell said that after a while, the painting "began to seem confused. The folds didn't flow as part of the mass of the skirt. The more I worked on my drawing of it, the more I felt that the small articulations in the painting didn't have anything to do with the larger forms… It didn't exist in space." Near the Eakins was a Henri Rousseau painting and two paintings by Chaim Soutine. He found that, as opposed to the Eakins, these works had "what Gris calls 'the flat-colored architecture of the planes.' That's what the Eakins was missing. Eakins really didn't master the technique of painting." Bell felt that every part of the painting should reinforce a central sense of structure, and so he objected to the inner folds in a skirt, which did not reinforce the entirety of the form.

A continued drive toward purity of form and organization would motivate Bell throughout his career. In the early years of his career, Bell made abstract paintings. He was adamant about the superiority of abstraction, and his heroes were Mondrian and Arp. In the 1940s, Bell met the artists who would become life-long friends and peers. He had met Robert De Niro, Sr. and Virginia Admiral in Provincetown. He first met Albert Kresch at a weekly gathering of writers and artists at poet Kenneth Patchen's house. Kresch, Nell Blaine and Robert De Niro were all studying with Hans Hofmann. Louisa Matthiasdottir, who would become Bell's wife, also enrolled in Hofmann's class.

In the 1940s, Bell, Blaine, Kresch, and Matthiasdottir, all became members of the Jane Street Group, the first artists' cooperative gallery in New York. The gallery became a forum for abstraction, in the days before abstraction had widespread support in the art world. These are all paintings from that period, the mid-1940s: on the left, an abstract painting of Bell's, and on the right, the top painting is by Nell Blaine, and the lower painting by Al Kresch. Among his friends and others, Bell was a proselytizer for abstraction. Why did he believe so adamantly in abstraction in those years? It seemed to hold the greatest capacity to achieve those goals of concreteness, purity, and wholeness. Bell even defended abstraction to Jackson Pollock, who, at the time, was working on his more representational paintings such as *She-Wolf*, and had, along with Bell, taken a job at Hilla von Rebay's Museum of Non-Objective Painting. Around the same time a Mondrian show was being held at Dudensing Gallery. Bell apparently told a visitor looking at work in the Non-Objective Museum, "That's not painting. You want to see real painting, go to the Mondrian show at the Dudensing Gallery." He was overheard, and fired from his job. Bell was so impressed by the Mondrian show, however, that he personally visited the artist on four occasions, discussing jazz as well as painting.

Mondrian was an important figure for all the members of the Jane Street Group. Turning to this more "pure" form of abstraction – which involved a complete negation of naturalism - was something of a rebellion from the teachings of Hofmann.

For the Jane Street members, who were jazz lovers, the concept of "rhythm" in art had profound resonance. Hofmann called it "the highest quality in a work". Mondrian also advocated for "rhythm" in art.

A profound influence on Bell and the Jane Street group was the French painter Jean Hélion. Bell and Hélion became friends and neighbors in 1944 in a Hudson Street apartment building; Bell was the building's superintendent, in part because he had noticed Hélion was one of the tenants.

Hélion had published, in 1934, an article entitled "Poussin, Seurat, and Double Rhythm." In this essay, Hélion lauded Poussin and Seurat for the use of both an internal rhythm (of individual elements within the composition), and an external rhythm (of the entire picture at large). He found in Poussin a total unity of composition in which each form is purposeful. He found the same quality in Seurat:

> … [The] rhythm is double. One aspect of the rhythm is strung on the general gesture of the picture and of all parts of it. The other aspect runs entirely through each individual part and completes it.

Hélion associated "double rhythm" with the idea that individual elements in a picture can be both "closed", but also "opened" to the picture at large, and even to the world. In fact, Hélion used this essay to literally open the door to a possibility of figuration after abstraction. He advocated looking to nature, rather than eliminating it. He wrote "To go far in his work, the painter has to go everywhere at once, as nature does." And he continued, "The least figurative painter cannot go far without getting a permanent lesson from nature," qualifying this statement only by writing, "The chief point is to work within the *meaning of nature* instead of its appearance." This program – of a double rhythm – was central to Bell's project – it was the same thing that Bell found lacking in the Eakins painting, and it was what Bell was looking to achieve in his mature work.

Hélion, who had been one of the great activists for abstraction in Europe in the 1930s, ultimately abandoned neo-plasticism. After he escaped from a Nazi prisoner of war camp during the war, he became fully committed to paintings representing human and city life. His break from abstraction, which he had so vigorously championed, was a catalyst for the Jane Street artists following suit.

Bell would make the same, radical and deeply felt transition, from abstraction to representational painting. Bell's project remained concretely focused in composition and he was notorious for avoiding discussions of subject matter or symbolism in his work. Instead, Bell suggested that there is a universal element to representational painting: that the ultimate achievement is a deep, total penetration of reality that transcends the individual.

The painter Rosemarie Beck recalled being on a panel discussion with Bell, and she asked him about a painting from his Morning Series, saying, "Am I right in thinking that this means the loss of innocence?" that "Bell was furious." Avoiding such discussions was likely a strategy - a strategy for positioning his work; and continuing to link it to abstraction. Many of Bell's contemporaries, who made representational work, made similar claims – that nature was just the structure or starting point, symbolism or subject was barely relevant, and formalism was the end-goal.

Still, Bell's choices of subject matter were specific and his own. He made self-portraits, portraits of his wife and his daughter, some still-lifes, and there were 3 major Figure Group motifs.

The three main figure group motifs were his Morning Series, his Family Group series and his Dusk or Butterfly Group series. These latter motifs, which Bell painted repetitively and refined over many years, are unmistakably potent images.

In the Morning paintings, a man in bed and a nude woman standing respond to a bird brought into the room by a cat. In the Family Group paintings, a couple and presumably their daughter, react to a bird on the table with a still life. Similarly, in the Dusk paintings, a similar family group gesture toward a butterfly near the table. There has been some investigation, though not a whole lot, about what these paintings mean, what they suggest - sexuality, infidelity, violence, strength. Interestingly, it has been difficult to wrest a narrative explanation out of these paintings; these subjects – like the family unit – are indeed universal.

A few days ago, I went to see this painting again, Figure Group with Bird, from 1991, which Bell left unfinished at the time of his death in 1991. Bell's

paintings truly gain their dynamism and force at this meeting-point of representation and formalism. There's the pressure and intensity of this interaction of the three figures, but it's achieved through the vibrancy of these areas of uninflected color – harmonies of blue and blue green and the geometries, like the circular forms of the bowl, the fruit, the collar of the red dress, the head and face of the male figure. The geometric forms that the gestures of the figures create is echoed and rhymed throughout – in shapes like the shape of the bird, the outlines of the eyes, and even the negative spaces. Bell used dark outlines and uninflected planes of color so that these rhythms – and spatial rhymes - are unavoidable: Bell did not want to suggest; he wanted to tell, to insist upon.

The other artist Bell came to admire deeply was Derain. And he liked the late work of Derain, while art history has always prioritized Derain's early Fauve paintings as his primary achievement. Bell, in 1960, published an article entitled "The Case for Derain as an Immortal." It centered around Bell's admiration of Derain's "wholeness"- his pursuit of "absolute reality." Bell considered Derain an artist who painted with his whole self, and achieved a harmony of all elements, a perfect balance that was not reliant on synthetic devices.

Bell considered the most admirable issue in Derain's painting that he gave relevance to each element; the painting became a perfected sum total. In this sense, his paintings had that double rhythm I discussed before. Together, the elements convey a sense of reality. Bell – instead of narrative – called for an essential object-ness. The artist must communicate and declare the feeling we most identify with that part of nature. For example, Bell wrote, of the Derain painting I'm showing on the left:

> Derain's 1939 *Still-life with Fish and Frying Pan* is a still-life which exists in freedom. Its dark night space contains the woodness of a table, the limpness of a cloth, the suppleness of fish. Flesh, wood, iron, cloth, earthenware are contrasting densities which sing together. There is a hierarchy of curves; fluid, smooth, abrupt, sharp, drooping, limp. Derain's is the mysterious search for the subtlety and diversity of curves which would express the resilience of fish in contrast to the hang in the folds of cloth; or those other curves which rim the kitchen utensils or form the delicate envelope of the kidneys. He explores their degrees of difference and similarity as a range, a progression and a circulation. Derain senses the virtue of these objects; they remain intact. He paints them as clear entities. He preserves the integrity of their appearance, of the "skin" that represents their interior being.

How to achieve this intense reality, this "thing-ness"? Bell considered that the artist had a two-part challenge: to allow each element its own place and integrity, and to simultaneously create relationships among the parts so that the whole painting gained a circular movement and completeness. Bell wrote about this two-part mission in describing Derain's 1930 Saint Maximin landscapes. Bell wrote:

> I can relate the dark tree elements of the foreground to the light tower elements in the distant monastery. Their verticality is an apparent

> two-dimensional relationship, but each stays in its zone and keeps to its proper function, a tree near, a tower far. Every rock and shrub throughout, all the elements keep their distance, they are in their true place and yet they are part of an intense circulation. They are not fixed, predetermined. There is no trace of rigidity. By assuming their proper role they are liberated.

Bell admired Derain for allowing his paintings, and nature, to speak purely, without the ego of the artist or novelty getting in the way. In this article, and in other lectures, Bell quoted the following statement by Derain. Derain wrote, "Nothing really belongs to us, neither our emotions nor our sensations nor any of the gifts which are furnished us by nature. Why pride ourselves on our so-called originality?" Derain then quoted the saying of a Chinese philosopher: "I do not innovate, I transmit," with the comment, "there was a wise man."

In preparing this talk, I have particularly tried to address those of you here who are students at the New York Studio School, who may have not been familiar at all with Bell's work. I feel that his work and these ideas – of a double rhythm, of achieving a total realism, but not just through representation- are of continued relevance and importance to young paintings students today. And to that end, I'd like this panel to focus now on Bell's teaching. Bell taught here at the Studio School in the 1960s and 70s, at Yale University, and he was a founding teacher at the Parsons Graduate Program, which ran throughout the 1970s and 80s. What ideas did he communicate as a teacher? What did he offer that no other painting teacher did? He was an incredibly dynamic person, who inspired his students with a contagious enthusiasm for the art historical masters he admired. He preferred to teach by taking his students to the museum, and by delivering slide lectures rather than with studio critiques. To answer some of these questions and to hear more about Bell's teaching, I have invited two former students of Bell's to join me on this panel – Simon Carr who studied with Bell here at the Studio School in 1972, at Parsons from 1979-81, and was his teaching assistant in New York and in the Parsons summer program in Paris in the 1980s. Stanley Lewis studied with Bell at Yale from 1963 to 1964.