

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Beer with a Painter: Tal R

Tal R talks about “watching” paintings — not just looking at them. It might be a language tic, but it also feels specific.



Jennifer Samet

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Tal R, "Cabaret Closed" (2016), pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas, 78 3/4 x 98 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Cheim & Read)

The Danish painter Tal R and I met at his gallery, [Cheim & Read](#), the day after the opening of his solo exhibition. While the rooms were still quiet, we sat on the gallery bench and looked at his work together. Tal talks about “watching” paintings — not just looking at them. It might be a language tic, but it also feels specific. The experience of looking with him was like sitting at a sidewalk bus stop — both of us focused out in the same direction — while he dropped one challenging pronouncement after another.

This kind of alert, energized openness characterizes Tal’s work and process. He has worked across media and with collaborators, such as the German performance artist Jonathan Meese, clothing and furniture designers, and students. His approach poses the rhetorical question, “Is it possible to do this?” — technically, socially, and in the context of today’s art world. He’s unafraid to play, test, steal, and work from all kinds of sources, in all directions.

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Tal has made large-scale ceramic sculpture using Raku firing (a technique more suited for small objects because the intensity of the heat leads to unpredictable results). He created a group of nine collage-paintings, each approximately 100 inches square, titled "Adieu Interessants," by transforming his studio into a collaborative laboratory with his University of Düsseldorf students. They gathered image fragments from vintage books and porn magazines, arranging them into densely layered compositions inspired by the structure of a Ferris wheel. He has made and altered furniture, including a limited edition of the Arne Jacobsen-designed Egg Chair, covered with a quilt-like collection of patterned fabrics.



Tal R (photo by Noam Griegst)

The current show, entitled *Keyhole*, is comprised of paintings and drawings based on the façades of sex clubs and porn shops. He photographed red-light districts, and asked friends in other cities to do the same. His previous body of work, exhibited in 2015 at Cheim & Read, stemmed from his inviting strangers and acquaintances to pose in hotel rooms, where he drew them from life. He has a way of mixing the highly charged and the quotidian in a way that makes you question what the work is really about. There is whimsical, bright Fauvist color, but also an abundance of black. He uses pigment and rabbit skin glue as his medium. The sex clubs, as subject matter, echo these delicious contradictions in terms — they are playful, malevolent, superficially banal, and elusive.

He was born Tal Rosenzweig in 1967 in Tel Aviv to a Jewish father and Danish mother, and raised in Denmark from the age of one. He lives and works in Copenhagen, and from 2005–2014 held a Professorship at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Recent solo exhibitions include: Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht (2008); Camden Arts Centre, London (2008); Cheim & Read, New York (2012, 2015), Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Germany (2012); Museu Brasileiro da Escultura, São Paulo (2012); Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Israel (2011, 2015), and Contemporary Fine Arts, Berlin (2015, 2016). In May 2017, he will be the subject of a major exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, curated by Anders Kold.

**TR:** When I grew up, there were no computer games, so you would always have children drawing in school. I was dyslexic, but I could always draw. When I was eighteen, I wanted to escape high school, so I needed to tell my parents what I was going to do instead. It seemed logical to say, "I want to go to art school," because I had been drawing my whole life. However, that logic is like deciding that if you had been baking chocolate chip cookies with your mom your whole life, you should be a baker.

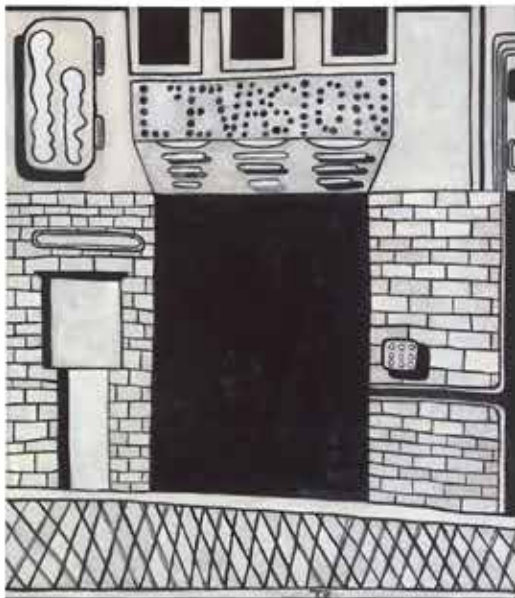
In art school, I was told that it was not enough to sit and draw what felt necessary for me to draw. I had to reflect on things outside myself. I think they were right, but everything to do with drawing left me, and it was very painful. From the age of eighteen to twenty-eight, I had to work my way back into something I could appreciate.

In the process of becoming an artist, there is a child world that needs to be destroyed. It sounds brutal, but there is no direct link between being a child and becoming an artist. Then you rebuild yourself. You find the way to work with necessity again.

When I was in my mid-twenties, I realized that I wanted art to be about necessity. If you know what you want to do, then a lot of mistakes — a lot of spelling mistakes, a lot of dyslexic mistakes — will be okay, because there is necessity. Later, things will correct themselves. If you don't have necessity, but instead have only strategies, you end up just doing experiments.

I think that is the biggest misunderstanding of the last thirty or forty years of art education, the idea of "just experimenting." You don't try just for the sake of trying. There is something you want to say and you can't. Therefore you try, and you fail. And from failing, you learn.

That is all I tried to teach my students. I said to them, "You should invest in failing. Invest in losing. Get comfortable with that. Don't ask why something meant something to you, but try to articulate it. Slowly you will find your way. There will be things that you hate in your painting which will suddenly become your option and your possibility."



Tal R, "Division" (2014), pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas, 78 3/4 x 67 3/4 inches

**JS:** *What kinds of failures were you talking about?*

**TR:** I think the idea of the "beauty of failure" is almost becoming a standard conversation in painting. The moment you can have a standard conversation like that, failure moves further away. There are certain predictable failures, like things that are a bit ugly. But those are junior failures.

The more interesting failure is when the painting turns against you. You produced a painting, but you are also outside the painting. It's a bit like when you are on a ferry, and you spit against the wind. Suddenly, you get it in your face. This is a great moment in an artwork. You are left parallel to the viewer.

**JS:** *Your recent body of work depicts sex clubs and porn shops. Why did you make this your subject matter?*

**TR:** The sex club is just an entrance. What I like about depicting sex clubs is that you get people on the dance floor. You get people into watching. I need to throw something at people, to set up expectations, and start talking to people. If you were just to say, "façades," that is not interesting. But if I say it is a sex shop, people are interested.



Tal R, "Pussy" (2014), crayon on painted paper, 13 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches



Tal R, *House Tiffany*™ (2015), pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas, 98 1/2 x 78 3/4 inches

**JS:** *I notice that there are a few artists you mention in terms of points of reference, like Balthus and Bonnard. Can you talk about some of the figures in art history who are touchstones for you?*

**TR:** You know what's scary, especially when you are a young artist? It's scary to look at the artists who made their whole life their art. That is why art students are often interested in the peripheral figures — the weirdos. The weirdos open up doors for you. But, you're a coward if you stay with them. There is something painful about a lot of those peripheral figures. They are unfulfilled. They never went all the way.

Bonnard and Matisse are much more dangerous to get close to than some Surrealist painter from Helsinki in the 1940s. Think about the artists your mother would like (and who very advanced painters like as well): Bonnard, Matisse, Picasso, Van Gogh, Munch, De Chirico, Beckmann. You should walk next to them.

I have artist friends who will forever stay close to someone like Picabia. I love Picabia, but it's a trap to stay only with people like that. I think Picabia is a doorman. He's a great doorman. From him, you can steal stuff; you can learn stuff. But to stay with Picabia, you're just being an idiot.

Bonnard was Bonnard until the end. His work was very much about sitting in the garden, having a cup of tea, or being in the bathroom. He always stayed very close to what he was seeing. Or Munch's painting, "The Yellow Log" (1912) — there is nothing beyond that. You just get beaten by that. Matisse went so far in his day; it is elite but also not elite. It is open for everybody. These artists pose a real challenge.



Tal R, "Shop Intim" (2015), crayon and gouache on painted paper, 8 1/4 x 11 3/4 inches

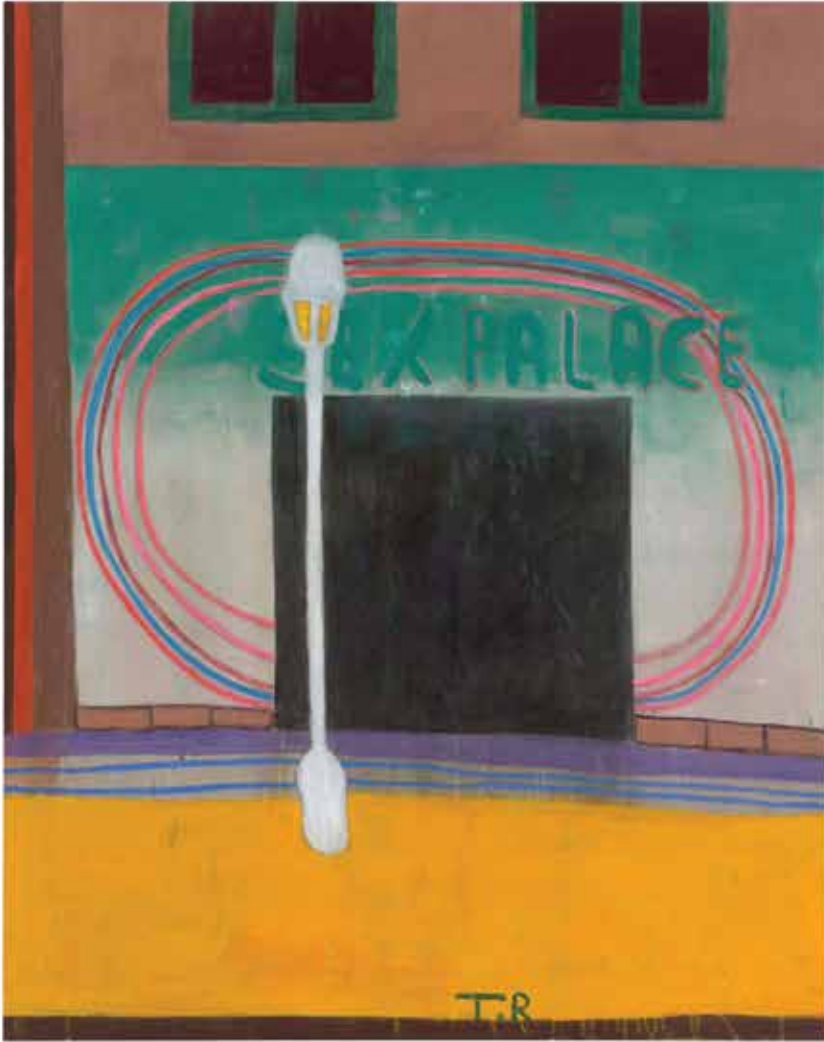
**JS:** *Your previous body of work showed women in hotel rooms, and, in particular, there were a few paintings and drawings that focused on the woman's ass. Was this also about leading the viewer into engagement with the work? Was it about the process of working from life?*

**TR:** The story about the ass painting is that it comes from somebody posing like that, but it also comes from something else. If you look at the moon reflected in water, you have the same kind of pattern. The most stupid thing you can do is draw or paint the moon reflected in water, because then you have two holes. That collapses your painting, unless you find a way of organizing it. The butt becomes the same problem.

In reality, when you are looking at a butt like that, it becomes very abstract. The figure disappears, and it looks like the shape of a tooth, or reminds me of the moon reflecting on water. And then I am lost in the painting.

I am interested in doing life drawing, because it's not something at the center of the art world anymore. It is something we have put behind us. The first thing you feel is, "This is not possible." I also feel it. When you ask somebody, "Can I draw you in my room at nine o'clock tonight?," it is just a bad idea.

What is going to come out in the painting when you feel intimidated by sitting near another person? Maybe that person is going to undress. How are you going to feel about that? Is it productive?



Tal R, "Sex Palace" (2016), pigment and rabbit skin glue on canvas, 67 3/4 x 50 1/2 inches

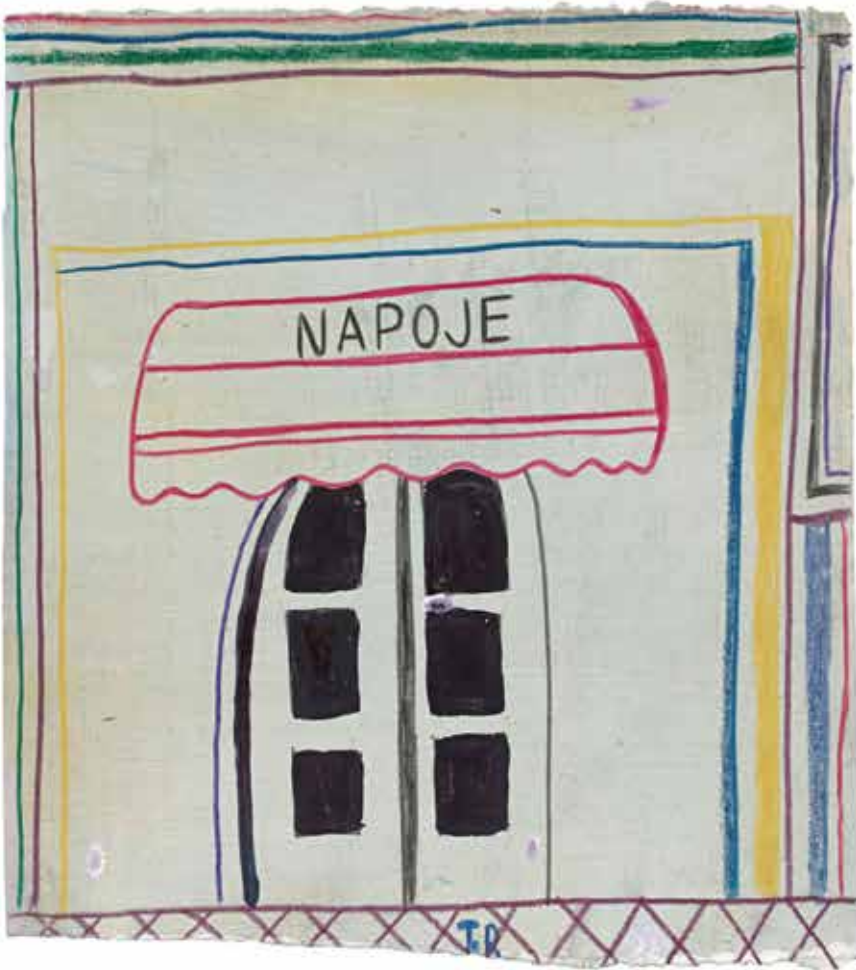
**JS:** Was it posing these kinds of questions that led you to the paintings of sex shops?

**TR:** When you work with "families" of paintings, there is usually one of them, on the edge, that is going to lead to a whole new group of paintings. In this case, it was the painting "Snow" (2016), which was based on a bar on the beach in Tel Aviv. The façade of the building was being taken down and exchanged. So the building became a grid. At the bottom, was a rundown bar, called "Snow." The idea of something on the beach with the name "snow" was beautiful. Then, when I was working on the painting, I thought about the grid, and how every painting, eventually, will play with the grid. It's kind of cute; like trying to put nature in a lattice.

When I grew up, there were three kinds of paper: blank, lined, and graph paper. Blank is the paper on which you can go everywhere. On lined paper, there is direction, for writing. On the graph, you have the illusion of putting nature into mathematics. You can place elements into a system.

On the plane to New York, I watched a spy movie. There was a line about an agent: "He's been off the grid. Now he's back on the grid." It made me think; that idea is so beautiful. When he's on the grid, you can read him. Off the

grid, he is unpredictable.



Tal R, "Napoje" (2015), crayon and gouache on painted paper, 10 1/4 x 11 1/2 inches

I think part of my practice for the last at least 20 years has been walking in and out of the grid. You learn a lot when you leave the grid, and put it in context when you put it back in the grid. You add the context; you put it back in the world where there is something up and down, morals, mathematics, yes and no. Scientists, as well, have to move off the grid to solve problems.

The artist always educates himself by moving in and out of the grid. If you do that in your life, you end up destroying yourself, or hurting a lot of other people, because you are moving between the law and lawlessness. There are reasons why most of the world believes in the Ten Commandments. But, if you are always in the grid, you ask predictable questions, and you get predictable answers. When you move off the grid, things become unpredictable. There is no room for morals; you have to be the beast. You move around like a fish, searching for possibilities.