

# THE UNSETTLING MARK

The quirky and passionate Abstract Expressionist Milton Resnick had a profound effect on the author during his formative years as a painter.

BY DAVID REED

*I come to you like a snake.* —Milton Resnick

HOW DOES ONE LEARN ABOUT PAINTING? How does one become a painter? In 1966, I came to New York City, a 20-year-old from San Diego. I lived in a grungy, roach-infested apartment on the Lower East Side, and, determined to be open to new experiences, I walked every day to the Studio School, carrying my lunch in a clear plastic bag.

The New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture was then in a loft building on the northeast corner of Broadway and Bleecker. It was a breakaway program founded two years earlier by students and faculty from the Pratt Institute. Believing that they could better learn in a studio environment, they had rented the large loft, hired models and invited artists they admired to come to teach. One morning in the lobby, a limping homeless person entered the elevator with me. His face was emaciated and pale, framed by long black hair that hung over the collar of a ragged, greasy overcoat. I expected him to get out and panhandle on one of the lower floors, where there would be good marks in the resident clothing manufacturers and showrooms. But he remained in the elevator until we both got off. Perhaps he had once been a painter, I thought to myself. As he exited, I was able to get a better look at his face. His features and gestures reminded me of those of the French writer Antonin Artaud [1896-1948] as he appeared in photographs. I had been obsessed with Artaud. Was this Artaud's ghost come to haunt me?

I followed the man over to where a group of students were at work on their paintings. He spoke first with Lois Baron, who was sitting on a stool, painting a small brown cubist still life on a tall easel. Since she had mixed too much stand oil in with her paint, the thick surface was shiny and crusted. As I edged

Milton Resnick working on a student's painting at the New York Studio School, ca. 1968. Courtesy New York Studio School.

**CURRENTLY ON VIEW**  
"Milton Resnick: The Elephant in the Room," Chaim & Read, New York, Sept. 22-Oct. 29.



MILTON'S LECTURES WERE LIKE PUNK PERFORMANCES WITH EXTREME ATTITUDE, BUT ALSO LIKE A MEETING WITH A WORRIED, KINDLY GRANDFATHER.

forward to hear what the transient was saying, he scratched his nails over the painting, breaking the dried surface and smearing the underlying wet paint. Placing his hands under the tails of his overcoat, he bent low, bowing to her, then straightened while raising his coat behind him as if he were a huge bird trying to fly. Again I thought of Artaud. "You have to break through the surface!" the man said; "Oh, I know, I know. You think that you'll fall through the floor and end up in hell. But you won't. You'll be right here in this room!" Lois backed away in horror. Some students ran for help, others tried to grab him by the elbows and push him toward the elevator. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "You've misunderstood. I'm Milton Resnick. You asked me to come to teach."<sup>1</sup>

Resnick stayed at the school that day for many hours, moving from student to student in the large common painting studio and then speaking with half a dozen of us sitting around him on the floor in the small office of the director, Mercedes Matter. As it grew dark we could see the lights of cars passing by on Broadway. I was spellbound. The whole time Resnick spoke, I felt just on the verge of understanding, but at the same time was not sure that I understood anything at all. He used terms that could have many meanings, making his points indirectly through metaphors and stories. He must mean this, or perhaps that, I thought to myself, cataloguing possibilities and waiting for a confirmation that never came. I had never heard anything as compelling or profound. I had many discussions afterwards with other students about what he had said. I told my best

friend at the time, Richard Mock, that I thought I had seen light emanating for a distance of three feet around Resnick's face. Dick said he had also seen the light.

That first day Resnick told us that we had to decide between two ways of being painters. You could either "climb the ladder of art, struggle and sacrifice to make great works," or "get on the moving belt, just move, you and the painting which equals your brain." It took me a long time to figure out that he disapproved of the first and approved of the second. He told us that, as younger painters, we should put on "the shirt of Abstract Expressionism." Each of us would then have to admit, "I can't understand this shirt. It doesn't fit my mind." Only that way would we get on the moving belt.

Speaking of his generation, Milton said: "It's over for us. Something else must be done. We didn't make it: learn from our failure." Abstract Expressionist painters had too highly valued their personal techniques and too carefully protected their individual styles; "the ladder was forced under us" by critics and curators. He also exhorted us: "The space of the world is not the space of the mind." "Follow the painting all the way. Be in it; forced along with it, you will change. That's art." "Will-power must be separated from painting. Get inside and let the painting grow." "Painting is different from knowledge." "The soul is a vacuum. Let it be filled."

He said that the forms, indeed the entirety of the painting, should be open enough to let energy in but not open enough to let it out. He spoke of struggling with a painting, and hoping that, when he finally got it right, when the final mark was made, this mark would unsettle everything. If this mark was right, the painter would feel the floor shake and the walls tremble then fall. Everything would collapse, until only the painting would be left standing in the midst of the rubble.

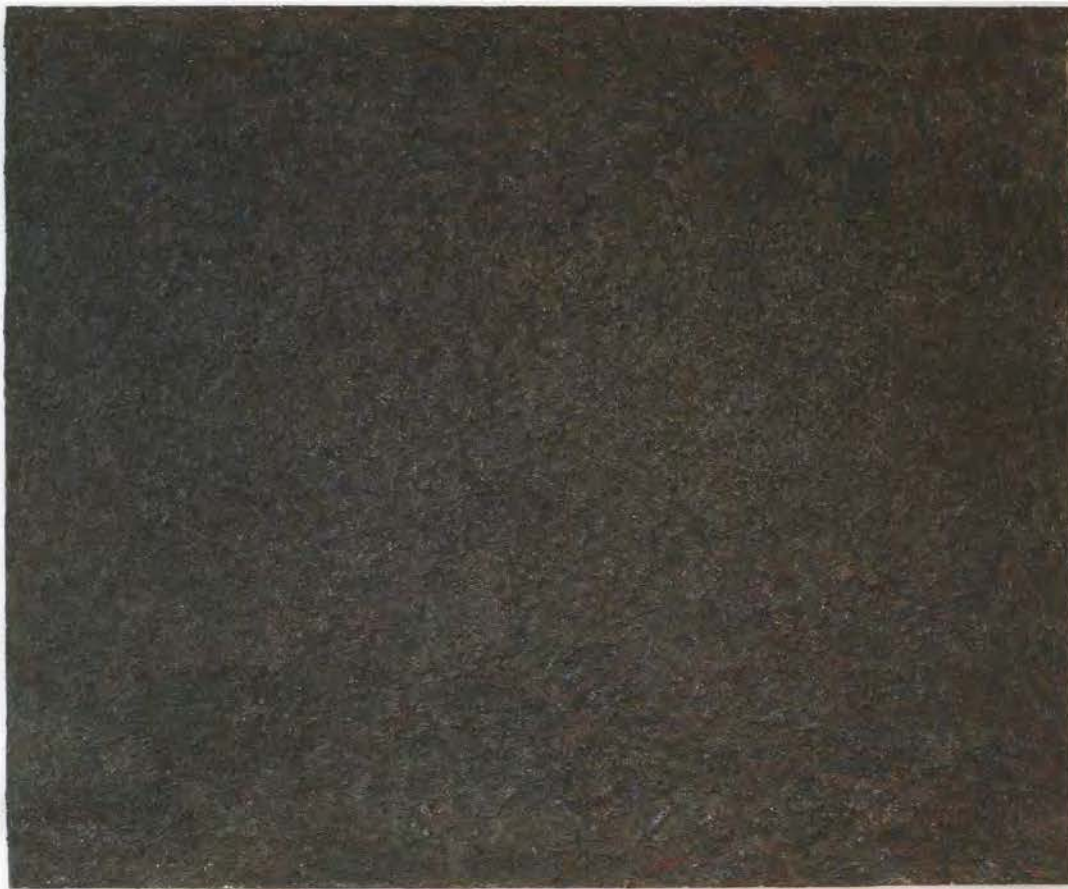
Once a week, Milton came in and made his rounds. Engrossed in my work and trying to ignore the other students working around me, I sometimes didn't sense his presence behind me. Once he startled me by saying that he "wanted to cut my legs off at the knees." Other times he would quietly request, "May I work on your painting?" I was afraid of this question but had to say yes. He would then ask for my brush or smudge his fingers around the colors on my palette, adding white and making a nasty neutral gray. He would then smear this horrible mess haphazardly over a part of my painting—always my favorite part, the part on which I had worked the hardest, of which I was the



Above, Reed at the opening of his exhibition at Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York, 1975. Photo Lisa Kahane. Courtesy the artist.

Right, a conversation at the New York Studio School, ca. 1968, with (foreground) Louis Finkelstein and (left to right) Geoffrey Heyworth, Reed, Eduardo Rosario, unknown boy, Morton Feldman and unknown woman. Courtesy New York Studio School.





Left, Resnick:  
*Saturn*, 1976, oil on  
canvas, 97 by 117  
inches. National  
Gallery of Canada,  
Ottawa.

Below, Resnick in  
his Spruce Street  
studio, New York,  
1963. Photo Robert  
Ellison. Courtesy  
Cheim & Read,  
New York.

proudest. "Look," he would say, "look at the whole painting." Then, "Isn't it better now?" It always was.

Visiting a Matisse exhibition, Milton noticed that all the paintings least resembling a Matisse were from the collection of the artist. He called these the "studio paintings": paintings done as experiments, attempts to break new ground. Milton made a distinction between studio paintings and paintings done for the market. Today, he insisted, there were too few studio paintings. When he was a young artist, before there was a market, the paintings that did not contain new discoveries were just thrown out. Immediately I decided I would only make studio paintings. I have always tried to stick with this commitment, even though it's not practical.

## "CÉZANNE'S EAR"

IN THE WINTER OF 1967, I was student president and opposed moving the school to the old Whitney Museum building at 8 West 8th Street. After losing this fight on a close vote, I left to paint landscapes in the Southwest for a few months. When I returned, the school had finished the move and the atmosphere had changed. Students no longer worked in a common loft, but in smaller rooms alone or in groups. I was not as comfortable in the new building, and Milton and I would sometimes meet at cafeterias to go over poems that I was writing. I still have notebook pages and napkins with my poems scrawled over, edited and changed by Milton. A poet himself,<sup>2</sup> he showed me how to keep my writing more evocative by avoiding ordinary verbal constructions, especially standard temporal sequences. Just as he tried to destroy my sense of gravity by "cutting my legs off at the knees," he tried in the poems to



scramble my sense of time. I learned as much from his changes to my poetry as I did from his comments on my paintings.

Avoiding the school, I went to see paintings by the pre-Renaissance Italians at the Metropolitan and by Abstract Expressionists at the Modern. I sat in on John Brzostowski's classes about Tibetan art and Buddhist philosophy at the New School. Because of the way I loved so many kinds of art, Milton said that I had "Cézanne's ear," meaning, I think, that I wanted to put diverse aspects of painting together. He didn't approve of this.

Reed: *Oljato (Moonlight Water)*  
(*Sunset*), 1968, oil on canvas  
on plywood, 39¾ by 45 inches.  
Courtesy the artist.



He thought that what I was trying to do was impossible. Reading back over my notebooks, I can see now that I didn't succeed very well in combining all these different influences. I was often confused or straining to reconcile the incompatible, but I couldn't resist the attempt. Milton also said that I "painted from John Brown's body": that I tried to bring dead art to life. He maintained that this, too, was impossible.

That summer I returned to the Southwest, to the Navajo Reservation, near Monument Valley, to paint landscapes. I liked depicting a lone tree at sunset, above the spring near where I lived. Sometimes I perceived a certain kind of light inside the tree that I tried to release. I showed these paintings to Philip Guston in a group critique at the school in 1968, and we spoke about Piero della Francesca. But when I showed these same paintings to Milton, he covered the recognizable parts with his hands. This made the uncovered parts look stronger. He said I should "let the power of the paint come out" and explained that the power I was looking for came not from the light in the tree, but from the paint itself. He characterized my paintings as "schizophrenic," a term Guston also used; but Milton intended it in a completely different sense. Milton meant I should avoid making a painting that was two things at once: both a tree and paint. For him, any inclusion of recognizable imagery blocked the power of the paint. When Guston used the term "schizophrenic," he meant that the painting was removed from life, that it had denied the tragic, something he felt happened too often in abstraction. He liked the double sense of something as both depiction and paint.<sup>3</sup> It's no wonder that I was sometimes confused.

Starting in 1968, in the library at 8 West 8th Street, Milton gave a remarkable series of five lectures. I have notes from some of these, some written on a handout of library rules; scribbled as they were in the rush of the moment, they are hard to decipher.<sup>4</sup> Discussing these lectures recently with Stephen Harvey, another student at the time, I was reminded of their extreme theatricality. Stephen remembers Resnick arriving with an entourage of other painters, all dressed in black, looking tough, like a rock band. I remember Milton standing alone and, although vulnerable, trying to antagonize the whole audience, as if to provoke a riot, or at least make someone punch him out. Then, in the same talk, he would be on the verge of crying, so sympathetic and desiring very much to help us young painters and understand our problems. His lectures were like punk

performances with extreme attitude, but also like a meeting with a worried, kindly grandfather.

## A VISIT FROM DE KOONING

THE COMPOSER MORTON FELDMAN became dean at the Studio School in 1969. He gave lectures in the library, and I often thought he shared Resnick's point of view. For example, in one lecture he asked us, "What's the matter with our art?" His answer: "We're too well qualified." This was something I felt Milton would also say.

That year, Feldman lured de Kooning into the building. I was working then in the library, and when he led de Kooning through about 20 of us gathered around and asked questions. De Kooning spoke with a Dutch accent but loved using American colloquialisms. What I remember most is a dialogue, almost a comedy routine, which the two men performed together. "The painters of your generation made tremendous breakthroughs," observed one student; "what made this possible?" We were very excited as de Kooning paused and took the question seriously. If we were to find this out, it had to help us also. De Kooning asked Feldman if the breakthrough happened in 1946 or 1947. Feldman thought '46. The summer, remembered de Kooning. Feldman agreed. "July or August?" de Kooning asked. Then, "The first or the second week?" We got more and more excited. They pinned down the date, de Kooning saying yes, that was the week; he remembered it well. That week none of the painters could work in their studios. They were all out walking the streets, or talking in cafeterias and bars. Everyone was in despair because no one knew what a painting was anymore. That one week of not knowing, de Kooning said, made everything possible. This twist of not knowing reminded me of Resnick.

Several times Milton told a story about working together with de Kooning on *Labyrinth* (1946), a theatrical backdrop for a dance performance by Marie Marchowsky. De Kooning mixed the col-

SOMETIMES WE NOTICED, UNDER THE PECAN TREES, A PARKED CAR WITH A SINGLE OCCUPANT, WATCHING US. ROSWELL WAS A VERY CONSERVATIVE TOWN, AND WE WERE UNDER SURVEILLANCE.

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ors—pigments in a fish glue—and he and Resnick put on the forms and colors based on *Judgment Day*, a study by de Kooning.<sup>5</sup> Seeing the huge painting displayed at Allan Stone gallery at an exhibition in 1976 (it was too big for the wall, so it was partly rolled at the ceiling), I thought I could see where Resnick had made the same kind of “corrections” to the de Kooning that he had made to my paintings. Using white and gray, I speculated, he smudged over areas that had become too tense, in order to release the painting and its energies.

## ROSWELL

IN 1970, BILL MIDGETTE, A PAINTER who had been my teacher at Reed College, helped me get a grant from the Roswell Museum and Art Center in New Mexico.<sup>6</sup> I came to Roswell with my wife at the time, the painter Judy Rifka, and our young son. Later Don Anderson, a painter himself and the founder of the Roswell program, invited Milton and his wife, Pat Passlof, and my friend from the Studio School, Richard Mock, to join us. We all lived in

what we called the “compound” on the outskirts of town. In the early evening we often came out from our studios to talk about our days, watching the light change in the pecan trees across the street. Sometimes we played badminton. It was a kind of paradise for me. We all had houses and studios, stipends, time to paint and whatever art supplies we wanted. Milton and Pat arrived looking like extras from a Sergio Leone spaghetti western, Milton sporting a beard. Now healthy and fit, he showed me his yoga exercises, and a few times we even worked out together. Bill organized slide evenings and we would talk specifically about various paintings. Milton’s comments connected me to a whole tradition of painterly painting which I had not seen as intellectually rigorous before: Tintoretto, Rubens, Delacroix, Renoir and Matisse.

But sometimes on those early evenings when we met together on the grass between our houses, we noticed, under the pecan trees, a parked car with a single occupant, watching us. Roswell was a very conservative town, and we were under surveillance. Thinking I was involved in an underground railroad smuggling draft resisters to Mexico, the FBI raided my house one night.



Willem de Kooning,  
*Backdrop for  
Labyrinth*, 1946,  
calcimine and  
charcoal on canvas,  
approx. 15 by 17  
feet; on view in  
MoMA’s “de Kooning:  
A Retrospective.”  
Allan Stone  
Collection.  
© de Kooning  
Foundation/Artists  
Rights Society  
(ARS), New York.

## MILTON SAID THAT I HAD SUCCEEDED IN BRINGING MY PAINTINGS TO THE WORLD AND THAT BY DOING THIS I WAS DAMAGING MY SOUL, SELLING MY SOUL TO THE DEVIL.

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Roswell was more familiar to me than New York, but like all of us, I knew that I didn't really fit in. Milton and I went to the local theater one night to see *Patton*, starring George C. Scott. Milton walked out shortly after the film began. He had fought during World War II in a unit that went behind enemy lines to prepare the roads for Patton's tanks. In the movie there is a scene in which Patton directs his tanks like a traffic cop. Milton said Patton would have been shot by his own men if he had tried to do that, and told us about other of his experiences during the war.

In our discussions Milton was unrelenting: "All the things you learn in the world—where the door is, how to work the stove—you are taught in order to live in their world. All that gets in the way of painting." And, "All that you have, that is what you must get rid of to paint." Once I mentioned astrology, and Milton responded: "David, don't lose your moral sense." Leaving Roswell, Milton gave me this advice: "Let Roswell stay with you, stay with that first look at New York. Returning, you will be a hick. Stay a hick." He added, "Ideas out here are destroyed. Art, good color and drawing seem silly. Art touches a piece of something much deeper. That's all that's important."

During one of his visits to my studio in Roswell, I told Milton how, on that first day in the elevator, he had reminded

me of Artaud. He replied that he wasn't surprised. He had also been obsessed with Artaud and, while a GI in Paris after the war, had seen him several times. One night he watched Artaud being photographed and other days observed him drawing in cafés. Once he had seen him working diligently on a beautiful drawing of a dog. But Artaud could not get the tail right. Drawing it over and over, he violently smashed his pencil into the paper until his attendant gently led him away.<sup>7</sup> Milton said that he had been so impressed by Artaud that he even tried to imitate his walk.

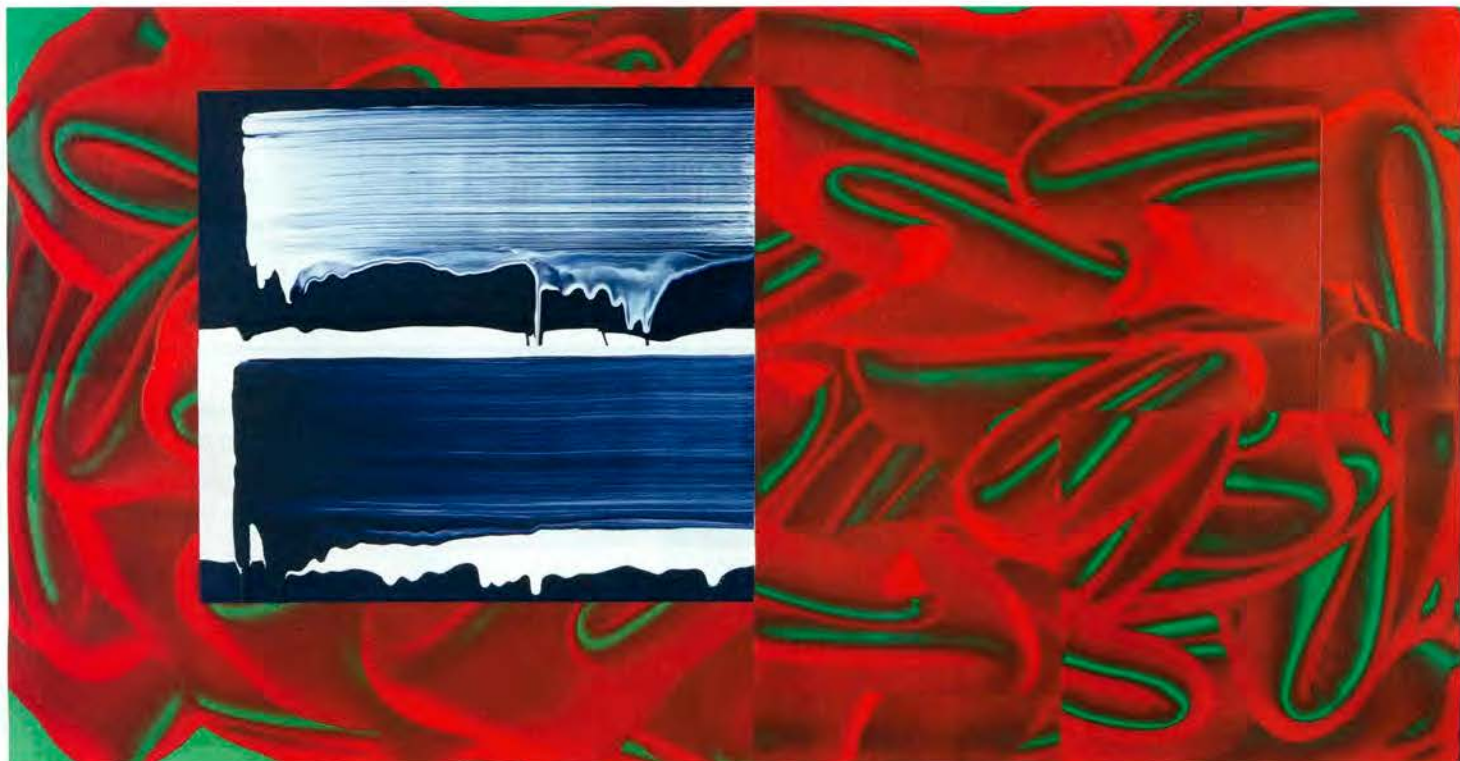
### BECOMING A PAINTER

IN 1975, WHEN I HAD MY FIRST one-person show in New York, at Susan Caldwell Gallery, Milton came to see the paintings. He said that "stripes" (in this case my horizontal brushmarks) were a problem in paintings because they go off the edge of the canvas. But, he said, somehow in these paintings I held the "stripes" in place because of my "love of art." Then he praised the paintings in a way that might not be recognized as praise by someone who didn't know his thinking and terminology. He said that I had succeeded in

Right, view of Reed's exhibition at Susan Caldwell Gallery, 1975. Photo Lisa Kahane. Courtesy the artist.

Opposite top, Reed: #605, 2006-11, oil and alkyd on linen, 26 by 50 inches. Photo Bill Orcutt. Courtesy the artist.





bringing my paintings to the world and that by doing this I was damaging my soul, selling my soul to the devil.

Writing this essay and reading back over my notebooks, I'm reminded of all the changes that took place in my life during the mid-'70s, a time of emotional and mental turbulence for me. I was divorced, became a joint custody father, fell in love again. I worked every day at a job to earn money. In 1978, Bill Midgette, who had moved to New York with his family, died much too young, at 40. During these years, my painting developed in stops and starts because of my financial desperation. I couldn't spend much time in the studio.

I wish I had spoken with Milton more during those years. His advice always gave me strength. Taking to heart what he said about the impossibility of painting and how it does not fit in the world helped me survive when painting was out of fashion and considered a reactionary, even destructive undertaking. One day, Bill Midgette and I unexpectedly ran into Richard Mock on West Broadway and invited him to join us for lunch at the Square Diner. After we sat down he told us how he planned to line all the painters up against a wall and shoot them; along with Resnick we would be the first. Bill and I got up and left.

Milton's advice was always that one should paint even while "knowing that you will be defeated, but making a good showing anyway." He taught me that it was possible to live a life in which one's love for art exceeded one's love for the world.

I went a few times for talks with Milton and Pat and other artists at their home, and I also visited his studio. But what I was

going through made me lose my comfortable, familiar connection with the couple. Sometimes I would see a homeless person on the street and, with a start, fear that it was Milton. This was absurd; it would never have happened. I was remembering that first meeting at the Studio School but nothing that had happened after. I was displacing my fears for myself onto him.

What I learned about painting culture from Milton sustains me now, but I'm not sure why. I'm often slow to understand. Perhaps I've finally had enough time to chew over his words until at last I comprehend a little more. What is it that I have learned? Not

ideas. Milton taught me not to rely on ideas. I have not learned a sensibility, nor how to express myself. I guess the closest way of describing what I learned from Milton would be to call it a way of working. But not "working" in the usual, positive sense, since that only gets in the way. Painting is more about a way of not knowing, and of not knowing for as long as possible while still working. It's not something to brag about. But it is very important to me and crucial, I think, to making good art. Sometimes I find myself quite surprised to feel so loyal to this pursuit of painting, which is so hard to describe and impossible to justify. Can one, should one, make sacrifices for something like that? I'm surprised that I meet young painters who are still willing. ○

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**1** Unless otherwise indicated, quotations by Milton Resnick are from notebooks I kept at the time. **2** There are three slim books of poems by Resnick: *Journal of Voyages*, *Journal of Voyages 2* and *Journal of Voyages 3*, New York, Pandemonium, Hauge-Passlof, 1961. **3** David Reed, "Soul Beating," *Art Journal*, Winter 2010, pp. 96-107. **4** Geoffrey Dorfman transcribed the lectures, in Dorfman, ed., *Out of the Picture: Milton Resnick and the New York School*, New York, Midmarch Arts Press, 2003, pp. 94-210. **5** *Judgment Day* (oil and charcoal on paper, 22 by 28½ inches) is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, acquired from the estate of Thomas Hess. The collaboration between de Kooning and Resnick is described in Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *De Kooning: An American Master*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, pp. 226-27. **6** See Ann McGarrell and Sally Anderson, *Roswell Artist in Residence Program: An Anecdotal History*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2007, p. 43; the epigraph that opens my essay comes from this source. **7** Resnick's experiences with Antonin Artaud are also described in Dorfman, p. 52.

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