

*Robert Marshall is an artist who draws and paints on reflective surfaces such as mirrors and Mylar. I spoke to him recently at his studio in Brooklyn. The atmosphere was more or less congenial. The following is an excerpt from the interview.*

- Robert Marshall: I'd like to ask you about documentation. These must be difficult to photograph.
- Robert Marshall: Some of them are *impossible* to photograph.
- RM: But you do photograph them. So it can't be impossible.
- RM: OK. Half-possible. But it's impossible to do it *accurately*.
- RM: Why?
- RM: Each time there will be a different image.
- RM: Isn't that always true when you photograph a painting?
- RM: No. Or only to a very slight extent. But with these it's true to an enormous extent. It's kind of essential to the work that you *can't* document it.
- RM: Why?
- RM: Because they are reflective, each photograph will be different. It will reveal the conditions under which the piece was documented. If a different person takes the picture, the image won't be the same – a different photographer will appear in it.
- RM: In a way that reflects what it's like to look at the work.
- RM: So to speak. Each person will see something different. And it's not just that they'll see themselves in it. If the room changes, the work is different.
- RM: And if the lighting changes?
- RM: A slight shift creates, basically, an entirely new picture.
- RM: It's not a *new* picture.
- RM: It is and it isn't. It's a completely different visual phenomenon. But it's still the same physical object, the same square or rectangle. It's the same *thing*. But what's seen isn't the same. So it's still but always changing.
- RM: Why is that important to you?
- RM: It has to do with the way I see things in the world. Things aren't still, or they rarely are.
- RM: One could argue they *never* are. From the point of view of physics.
- RM: And even if they were still, I'm not. I'm moving. I'm moving past things; my eyes are moving. Life isn't made up of frozen moments. So in that way I'd like to think these pictures are life like.
- RM: So for you this is a kind of realism.
- RM: Narcissistic-realism.
- RM: Is that the school you belong to?
- RM: Can narcissists have a school?
- RM: I'm remembering something you said in an earlier conversation. About looking through the window.
- RM: Yeah. Let me see. I was talking about the idea in art history of the picture plane as a window.

- RM: Right.
- RM: And I think the thing I was saying was that a window is always, also, a mirror.
- RM: *Always?*
- RM: Usually. When you look through a window, you often see yourself, your silhouette. I've always been interested in the world seen through windows – especially the world seen in *passing*, when you're driving by, or when you're seeing it from a train.
- RM: Or a plane.
- RM: Of course.
- RM: There's something sort of primal about it.
- RM: Yeah. Being in a car, when you're a kid, on the way to the mall, or on a road trip maybe, your face pressed up against the glass. Everything seems available. In a way it is and in a way it isn't. In a moment you'll have driven past. And anyway, you're on the inside, and there's that pane of glass between you and everything out there.
- RM: And there's your silhouette.
- RM: And I suppose for me that's a metaphor.
- RM: For?
- RM: The way self-consciousness interferes with your perception of the world. The way you get in your own way.
- RM: You mean that kind of feeling you have when you're looking at nature, and you're so *aware* that you're looking at nature?
- RM: Yeah. I'll go out on a limb here – with people too. I'm with you, I'm talking to you, we're interacting, but then there's my awareness of myself talking to you.
- RM: This is of course a special case.
- RM: I suppose.
- RM: Since you brought up metaphors, I have to ask about Lacan.
- RM: What about Lacan?
- RM: You must have thought about him. Since your work is about mirrors.
- RM: I'm not sure that for Lacan the mirror is a *metaphor*. But I'm basically faking it here.
- RM: Join the club.
- RM: I've tried to read him. But I'm pretty much at the Lacan for Beginners stage.
- RM: Could you talk about your work in terms of Lacan for Beginners?
- RM: As I understand it, his big point is that the self becomes organized at the moment when the infant sees its reflection in the mirror. Maybe I can get a real Lacanian to come and explain it better. But the thing is, mirrors aren't the only reflective surfaces. We're reflected in other ways, in other places. In windows, for instance.
- RM: Right now I'm looking through the window, and I don't see my reflection.
- RM: Get closer and you will. Anyway, the point I was trying to get at: when you're looking through the window, there's a reflection, but it's interwoven with the stuff on the other side of the pane. Plus there's the other stuff in the room; that gets reflected. So the question I would ask is: what sort of self is organized in these moments of ambiguous reflection?
- RM: And you would answer?

- RM: Perhaps a self that can't quite see itself or its boundaries – a penetrable self.
- RM: Do you want to talk about your work in terms of other theorists? What about Walter Benjamin?
- RM: That takes us back to the problem of photographing the work. As I understand him, he's arguing that paintings are largely known in the world through mechanical reproductions. And according to Benjamin, mechanically reproduced objects can't have presence. For him, that's the defining characteristic of a work of art. That's why painting has lost its "aura".
- RM: So you're going to argue that the difficulty – or the impossibility – of photographing your work – is a virtue? Because these *aren't* mechanically reproducible?
- RM: It's impossible to photograph the mirror pieces in a definitive way. From the documentation, you're only able in a rather general sense to know what you're going to see when you see the piece. And that's not just because you're going to see yourself. It also depends on where the piece is hung. And just as importantly, when you're looking at this work, the visual phenomenon shifts *a lot* depending where you stand. Move a few inches and it's completely different. So you can photograph it, but that's not going to come close to reproducing the experience of standing in front of it. There's something Sontag wrote that I thought was interesting. She says that, increasingly, paintings aspire to the qualities of reproducible objects. And it's true. We think we know someone's work from seeing the card for the show. Or from looking at it online. I'll feel I don't need to go see the show because I've seen the picture. So maybe I'm trying to make paintings that aspire to *not* be reproducible objects.
- RM: But aren't there are other ways to document the work? What if you made a video?
- RM: That would come closer. But the camera would still be in the picture. And it's movements wouldn't be the same as yours -- it's up to the individual viewer to complete the piece. To enter in their own way. But a video would certainly capture something a photograph would miss.
- RM: Sometimes I wonder when I'm listening to some of this theoretical stuff whether it all just comes down to the fact that you like working with these materials?
- RM: I *do* like working with them. They fascinate me. And my ideas develop through *doing* the work, through being engaged with the material. In the end, I'm following my intuition. I don't think that's bad. I think these materials are interesting for a *reason*. Or for many reasons. I'm not interested in art that starts with an idea and then doesn't do anything other than illustrate it. There should be some discovery involved. If you completely knew what it was going to do before you did it, I'm not sure why you'd want to do it.

*Robert Marshall is a writer and critic who lives in New York.*