Thank you, Cara – thank you, Art Workshops Boulder. Today I’m going to talk about painting and presence. I’ll start by presenting some thoughts and ideas. Then we’ll take a look at some paintings that I had the good fortune to see this summer. And then we’ll have time for any questions that come up.

What is presence and what is its relationship to painting? Through exploring these questions I hope to also open up some possibilities into the nature of painting itself.

Since we’re all pretty visual here let’s start with a short video presentation of recent work of mine to give you a sense of where I’m coming from – and an introduction to these questions.

[PLAY VIDEO: SONG CYCLE WITH BLUE CLOTH (short version)]

What is the relationship between form and awareness?

So, let’s start with presence. When I speak of presence I mean the simple daily experience of something being here. Here it is. It is present. It has presence. I am here. I have presence. You are here. You have presence. And sometimes there is a STRONG sense of presence. Something is REALLY here. I think of nature. Being in the middle of a forest, that dense quiet – being by the ocean, that calm vastness. Sometimes with people, we sense them strongly. Sometimes an object – that little vase that we suddenly see clearly, holding the space. Perhaps fresh flowers that are standing present and opening, looking back at us. They have presence. And sometimes with art, painting, we may notice its presence. We may be walking through a museum, strolling easily or pressured for time – and something catches our eye – we may even ‘feel’ it before we see it, and we come up close and this thing, this painting, has presence. It seems alive. It is, somehow, alive. So – what’s going on?

Let’s look a little deeper into the nature of presence. In The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle he writes,

“Have you ever gazed up into the infinity of space on a clear night, awestruck by the absolute stillness and inconceivable vastness of it? Have you listened, truly listened, to the sound of a mountain stream in the forest? Or to the song of a blackbird at dusk on a quiet summer evening? To become aware of such things, the mind needs to be still. You have to put down for a moment your personal baggage of problems, of past and future, as well as all your knowledge; otherwise, you will see but not see, hear but not hear. Your total presence is required.

Beyond the beauty of the external forms, there is more here: something that cannot be named, something ineffable...Whenever and wherever there is beauty, this inner essence shines through somehow. It only reveals itself to you when you are present. Could it be that this nameless essence and your presence are one and the same?” p.96-7

Let’s put it this way: in order for me to see that little vase, to see the flowers, in order to ‘catch’ the painting – I need to be ‘attuned’ to them. I need to attune to them in order for us to meet. And there is the possibility that it isn’t actually a question of ‘meeting’ but of recognition: that we already are connected, and the awareness of their presence is an awareness of our forgotten bond, a kind of
friendly recognition, or remembering. So, awareness and presence are intimately related. In truth, awareness and presence are the same thing. Tolle continues, “When you become conscious of Being what is really happening is that Being becomes conscious of itself. When Being becomes conscious of itself – that’s presence.” Everything has Being or it wouldn’t be. When we meet something and slow down and really meet it, Being meets Being, and that is presence.

So, if everything, every object, every painting, carries presence – why do some paintings seem stronger, seem to carry more presence than others? And this question brings us to the question of the relationship between Presence and Making. Because the answer to the question has to do with the process of making the painting – and the state of awareness of the painter during that process. A lot of us here are painters – we make stuff. So it becomes an important question – how do I make a painting that is STRONG? And by “strong” here, I mean it has strong PRESENCE. Something about it compels; it is here.

As painters, as us, learning to be painters, there is often a long journey. First there is a period of gathering. We’re learning skills, how to draw, how to mix color, how to touch and control the material. But also how to organize and unify everything on the canvas; how to make some kind of wholeness there, that is, how to compose. And we gather influences, other painters, important teachers, great masters whose work inspires and ignites us. And we experiment with different ways of working, testing various attitudes, discovering unknown sympathies and questions.

Then there is a period of integration, in which we start to synthesize and put together all of these skills and influences and begin to find a way of painting that feels like us, our way. We begin to feel more at home with our work, and then a second kind of experimentation begins. This time not so much to discover what kind of painter we are, as much as to explore our own intimate questions and concerns; experimenting as a way of investigating and being close to what we care deeply about in our lives. Here the experimentation is more like an open-ended engagement with our work, with our painting. It is living our life in, and through, the paint.

Now let me back up and look again at what I just described through the lens of presence.

When we first begin our journey and are learning skill development, essentially what we are doing is integrating our hands, eyes, mind, perception and materials. We are creating a unified system that will allow for a directness in touch, a kind of intelligent, aware engagement in paint. Our inner life gains more access to a more fluid expression in the material. Our life force moves more directly into the paint. The separation between what we think of as ourselves and what we think of as our material begins to break down and at times even disappear. And the material begins to take on more presence.

As we encounter important teachers and discover inspiring painters and masters, essentially we are discovering our own potentialities, what lies waiting within us. Their teaching, their painting, strikes a chord within us: “this is how I long to paint!” Here, this is my life-force. This is my direction. Again, more presence.
When we experiment with different ways of working, different modalities, we are in a process of locating, temperamentally, energetically, what is the way for me to catalyze my energy and get my life-force into my work. As fully and directly as possible. Presence.

When I practice composition as an ongoing discipline – that is being sensitive to and adjusting the various formal elements in an ongoing open process – moving the painting and all of its disparate elements to wholeness, I am practicing awareness, with a caring, intelligent attention, over the whole surface – no aspect unattended, no transition, no edge unseen, unfelt, uncared for. This attention imbues the work, steeps it, in awareness.

As I integrate all of these influences and begin to paint in the most personal way, as I experiment and explore the questions and experiences that most deeply engage me, my life is lived in the paint.

Mary Jane Jacob, in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, puts it this way, “…the artist’s mind-in-making is not just the result of studied knowledge (getting the facts straight) or skills acquired; it is always determined by the actual process of making and the depth of awareness one brings to bear during that process...The work of art derives its ‘presence’ from this heightened awareness — from the artist’s presence of mind.”

This life force, this awareness, in the act of painting, activates the material, opens it, wakes it up. And all that life, all that juice, in the material, creates strong presence. Presence to be met by a receptive, attuned viewer. Being meeting Being. Life meeting Life.

So, we paint.

Taking this interaction between painter and viewer further, we might say that painting actually acts as a kind of weave. If what is occurring through the interaction between painter and viewer is a sending and receiving, the painting is functioning like an energetic weave of maker and receiver, and the stronger the presence, the more vibrant and myriad the threads. In our materially-based culture, we tend to think in terms of isolated bits rather than interconnected processes. We think of painting as an object – albeit a wonderful, aesthetic object, but an object among other objects, nonetheless. But the nature of a painting is more dynamic than that, and more radiant: a radiance powered by the energetic presence of awareness of the maker, the painter – a radiance ceaselessly shining as the painting continues to exist in the world, to be received by all who are open to receive it.

When we are engaged deeply and fully in our making the sense of separateness – from ourselves, the motif, the material, the world – this separateness begins to dissipate and dissolve. Our awareness doesn’t disappear – we don’t disappear – we are just more fully connected. For the viewer of our work who is attuned to receive it, this loss of separation that we experience as makers is available as a loss of separation for the viewer in relation to the painting. This intimacy with the painting becomes an experience of wholeness, not only with the painting but with the world. Sometimes this experience is referred to as the aesthetic emotion, and it is what Herbert Marcuse describes as the true revolutionary quality in art: once I taste this wholeness, how do I live and act accordingly and what else is possible? What are the implications for our world?
Rupert Spira describes this collapse between self and object as that which we usually call beauty. Here are more of Spira’s words:

“Art heals the fundamental malaise of our culture, the feeling of alienation, despair, separation, the longing for love.

“We do not view a work of art, we participate in it. The nature of art is to bring the world that we have rejected, the world that we have deemed other, separate, made out of dead matter...to bring it close, intimate, to realize our self as one with its very fabric.

“It is not a relationship made of seeing or hearing – that is too distant – it is a relationship of love, intimacy, and immediacy. An artist is simply one who doesn’t forget the freedom, innocence, freshness and intimacy of experience.

“The role of the artist is to transmit to humanity the deepest experience of reality. Art is remembrance. It is love.”

Presence, Volume One, p.133-4

For us, as makers, as painters, imbuing our paintings with presence means dropping into the act of painting wholly, relinquishing willful control, letting go of thought, opening to risk – to the unknown, daring to take it further, to fail, to fall, and all the while opening further, from the inside, vulnerable and engaged and aware and present.

When we move into this place of vulnerability, this place of open boundaries, the actual mark-making takes on a curious quality. There is something like what we would call decision-making, but it isn’t quite the firm individualized decision-making that we usually think of. It feels more like collaboration. There is a clarity, but it may not be exactly my clarity. Somehow, something is occurring. And I am involved, but it doesn’t feel quite like my doing. It is an open situation. I am making decisions, but I am also following. But of course, it is my making. And yet not. It is an open-ended situation that is unknown, and so, fraught with risk, because in spite of the not-knowing I must continue to make marks, make decisions, move forward and be present. It is often an anxiety producing situation, until one gets used to the not-knowing and one learns to simply show up and continue.

It is a situation that I do not know how to put into words because it does not quite fit into thought. It is too close for that, too actual. The painting is getting made, and I am somehow involved and watching and grateful.

So -- we learn our skills, locate what is real for us, show up, and paint.

Now, before taking any questions, I’d like to look at some images of some of the paintings that I had the good fortune to see over the summer. So many with extraordinary, often staggering, presence. And one word about slides – they really work best as triggers of memory, memory of the actual painting and material and surface. The painting’s actual presence and impact, of course, cannot be transmitted. So, as painters it becomes invaluable and critically essential to find ways to stand in front of as many physical, actual, great paintings as possible. Body to body. Being to Being.