

# Christine Frerichs In Conversation with Charles Long

Transcribed and edited from a studio visit on September 4, 2019

**Charles Long:** The exhibition is titled Viewfinder. What is that a reference too?

**Christine Frerichs:** A viewfinder is a tool used to compose a drawing or painting when working from life. Mine is a sheet of stiff paper with cutout rectangular and square windows that I look through to determine how to frame or crop my image. So, all the works in the show are observational paintings, meaning painted from life. I was thinking about how viewfinders work – the way they, at once, tell you what's important while also blocking out so much. And, of course, the view is always shifting, right? I was interested in that tension, those choices.

**Long:** Right. The frame itself is integral to the work. Duchamp with the urinal, and before him, the found objects made by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, for the first time revealed this it was the act of choice that was the primary condition for an artwork. Prior to our understanding of the readymade the condition was maybe some other weird mysterious thing, like a person was inspired and they made something and only then it became a work of art –

**Frerichs:** Yeah – out of nothing.

**Long:** It's boring to look at readymades and debate "Well I guess anything can be art". The real crux of the Baroness' discovery was this space where art is going to show up in. Now, the viewfinder in a way is kind of like that.

**Frerichs:** True.

**Long:** It's almost like a roulette wheel. Like, where does this does this thing stop? And, when it stops, how do we know that this moment, this arrangement of things is somehow significant over all others? And do we have to take the frame into account? Or is that part of the voodoo of this?

**Frerichs:** We don't know, I guess that's part of it too. Especially since it's handheld, right? There is a kind of arbitrariness of it. Or maybe not arbitrary, but it's entirely personal, subjective. It is just for one, for one person. I think about this a lot when teaching. It can be frustrating teaching students how to look through a viewfinder, because I can only talk about how and what I see through this window, but can't show them directly unless I make an image of it, a drawing, a painting, a photograph. No one can see through your eyes, obviously. And inevitably everybody's perspective will be different. So, the viewfinder feels very – for one.

**Long:** Do you think in a sense that the cropped image that somebody paints is an example, a manifestation of the problem of subjectivity? Of the irreducible mystery of selves?

**Frerichs:** *[long pause]* Yes! *[laughter]*. Well said.

**Long:** Which is why you fit into this tradition, that I see, of hardcore realists in an age of conceptualism and pop, and so much more. And those people have never gone away. I think that those works tended to speak of the basic existential question that won't go away. And in a sense, it feels they could argue that pop and conceptualism are just distractions from this very strange thing that's going on.

**Frerichs:** Right, you call it realism – I would just say observational painting. So, in spring of 2018, I decided to take a class in plein air painting.

**Long:** Wow *[laughter]*

**Frerichs:** Yeah, those people are really hardcore. They're no joke. I got my whole setup. It was so fucking challenging. It was just a strange little interesting thing that I did for six hours every Sunday. And so this whole shift in seeing, I think, started with that. I start every piece by writing on the back. Before painting, I write. I write about what I'm seeing and thinking and feeling and what have you. And not all of them have writing. Sometimes I just get right to it. Some are really boring. Some are not.

This one is 3/11/18. *[Holding up 'Elysian Park, after the rain' and reading the back]*

"Elysian Park. It rained all day and night yesterday so it's cloudy this morning and the air is crisp and clean. Trunks of the trees are nearly black and the grass is electric green. We just saw a small blue bird, rust colored under its blue wings, and a red-tailed hawk flew through the valley while Rob Sherrill painted. I've had a difficult week, feeling defeated and alone, not wanting to keep going with the work it takes to be in a relationship. Wondering if I can keep it up for the rest of my life. I've decided I do want to, finally. I sold 'Serenade', which I showed three years ago to the month. My favorite painting, I'm so thrilled someone wants it. Things take a long time. Longer than I think they should. But things do happen, good things eventually. I need to just keep moving forwards or else I move backwards. There is no stillness. Stillness doesn't exist."

*[Holding up 'Roof top view' and reading the back]* This one is from the roof top of my home/studio. "4/14/18. 2018. Painting number two, three p.m. rooftop – and then this address – looking north. Just finished lunch: grilled hotdogs. The wind has picked up. The mountains now seem the most beautiful shade of blue. Layers and layers of depth defined only by value shifts. We started bombing Syria last night. U.K. and France are involved too. So terrible and complicated and so far away. Anger begets Anger; mirroring, mimicking. It's so difficult to restrain anger. I often don't want to face my own, and under the anger is hurt... of course. I think these periods of sitting alone and looking out to the horizon bring up these thoughts. I value the stillness, the subtle stimulation, the beauty of subdued colors. It allows for thoughts. I wonder when Bach had this time. Maybe he didn't need it."

I keep thinking about Bach. He had like 21 kids or something. Did you know that? I think about him all the time.

**Long:** Wow. Do you listen to him?

**Frerichs:** Yes, that's most of what I'm listening to in the studio and while teaching. *[Holding a printed image]* Look at this sheet music of his. It's the most beautiful drawing because it has all of the corrections and smudges. The rhythm and complexity with the fugues that he made – the relentless tumbling of his music is just awesome. And then I just think of him as a person. How do you do that with that many –

**Long:** 21 kids. Yeah, and he was completely poor. And he was just cranking this stuff out.

**Frerichs:** Cranking that shit out! He had to feed his whole family, and so he had this structure of constantly working for the church. Having to put out a new composition every Sunday. It seems that his most fertile time creatively, is when he was forced to do these things, or work in this constrained environment. He played this organ music that everyone would want to hear, and then he'd like slip in a little like fugue moment, you know? And everyone would get furious because it was so crazy. *[laughter]*. But, he's so prolific, you know?

**Long:** Yeah – it's the kids – it was like a kind of trap that he got in.

**Frerichs:** It's funny, when you say trap I instantly think: bad. But I wonder –

**Long:** He had to put food and shelter before – [pause] and strangely it connected up to his art.

**Frerichs:** Well it goes back to that Adam Phillips book, where he wrote about obstacles.

**Long:** Yeah, “Looking at Obstacles” [from *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*]

**Frerichs:** Right, so when you say trap, I think, well, maybe it was this structure he had to put in place to bump up against, to define what he actually wanted.

**Long:** Yeah, in *The Beast in the Nursery*, early in the book he has a little parable about Henry James who is at a dinner party, and someone says, “You’re just here gathering stuff for your work. You don’t actually exist”. And then he says something like “Life makes interests, makes art”. Phillips tries to turn “interests” into interest as in money. James says something a little bit more than that. I’ve always found that kind of interesting, that there is no end goal. That you’re not trying to make money so you can make your art. When you’re in the good flow, you don’t know if you’re making art out of life or life out of art – and – it’s sustaining you as well, it’s such a weird thing. So far what you’re reading from the back of these paintings, it’s introspective and melancholic. Or, is it?

**Frerichs:** I think of it as just sifting through all sorts of feelings. I think that’s what strikes me now about re-reading them is how difficult it is to re-read them because they were never meant to be read. I was never planning on showing them. These were an interim project. And so, now I’m very self-conscious about them, which really sucks. But I re-read them and I see where I’m talking about how I’m not sure if I can really be in a relationship to – Oh! I sold my favorite painting to – something going on in the news. They are a bit everywhere.

**Long:** Yeah, it’s a little bit, like, journaling, but not, like, intense journaling. You’re not trying to figure some shit out. It’s a little bit more like “Well you know, these days are going by and this is happening.” “Someone just dropped this off, and now this is happening and we’re fuckin’ in a war – ”

**Frerichs:** Right. It’s the surface stuff and then it dips down into some other feelings, comes up, dips.

**Long:** I thought that the writing on the back was going to be a kind of voodoo to the image.

**Frerichs:** How do you mean?

**Long:** Well, you know when magicians, in shamanistic practice, they make a figure. They may put something inside it? The foam from cadavers’ mouths, or some amulet or some blood of a freshly killed goat, or something like that. There’s a way in which they’re charging the thing. And, it seems like that’s a possible intent here, with your writing on the back of the paintings. I was thinking, as far as I understand your practice tends to be about the observational. The person there, experiencing this, and laying down this record. And making this portable object which is a record of a moment, and it’s charged with power to go through time.

**Frerichs:** I never think about the word voodoo. But again, I’m self-consciously thinking about this now. At the time, I think the writing was my way to jump start or maybe sometimes I wrote to put off painting. I think I was asking myself ‘Who am I? What am I doing here? What do I have to say? What am I feeling?’ I think now about how this painted object has two sides of a thin surface, and how this writing on this side came before, and this image after, and these words do seep through or infuse the painted image in a strange way.

**Long:** The writing comes first?

**Frerichs:** The writing always comes first. And I notice on some of them I didn't write. I just didn't have anything to say, I guess? Like this is called *Orange Ranunculus, Pink Tulip, Fertility Test*. That title came after the image.

**Long:** That's a heavy one. It's interesting – so, there's this way in which you want this banality, but there's this chargedness.

**Frerichs:** Well – I think every object is charged.

**Long:** I've been a fan of Duane Michals work going way back. He was very big in the 70s, and now his career is just gone.

**Frerichs:** Yeah, you don't hear about him. I remember learning about him when I was 18 as an undergrad.

**Long:** It was interesting the way he just put it out there, writing personal thoughts on the front of the photos.

**Frerichs:** Yes! And I think of the Judy Chicago, those rejection drawings. I don't know if you know those? They're these colored pencil – I get very itchy when I think about them. They have floral like imagery up top and then on the bottom is her script writing about times when she's felt rejected. By her parents, or by the art world, galleries, what have you. They're diaristic works. They're somewhat uncomfortable to look at because they are so revealing and bold. Part of me thinks about the idea of integrating the text into the front. But, I'll tell you, all of these were made before thinking about showing them. I really was trying to pass time, be in my body, move through some intense grief, joy, all of the emotions. I was trying to move through it. The one painting that's over there on the floor, which I'm not showing, I did after deciding I was going to show all the work. I'm writing on the back of that one and I'm thinking about the reader! And it's a drag, you know? There's something about being read that's different than being seen, in painting.

**Long:** Right. Most of us got into this art business as a way of stepping outside of language.

**Frerichs:** Yeah, yeah! It's like sidestepping it, right?

**Long:** Yeah, because we know that there's this cool slippage in that kind of work that doesn't use language. It's a hyper-version of what it's like to experience the world anyways. You experience the world, unfortunately, through so much projection. You look at things and you project another version of what you saw. It's happening a little bit less with mindfulness becoming the rage. *[laughter]* Which is good.

**Frerichs:** *[laughter]* "Mindfulness is all the rage". For me, right now, I can't handle or negotiate that idea of consciously putting the written language on the fronts of the works, knowing they will be read. It's too performative for me at the moment. Like, preparing for you coming today – yesterday I walked through my house and I imagined I was you. I thought of all the things you would think when you look at every little thing in my house. It's exhausting! And of course it's totally invented. I stopped myself from reading the backs of the paintings through your ears, and your lens because it's exhausting! *[laughter]*. It's weird, do you ever do that, or no?

**Long:** Well, ok so last night, going to bed – I don't know what triggered it exactly, but I started thinking of all the things I gave a shit about, and I realized I gave a shit about way too many things.

**Frerichs:** Wait, just in general? In this moment?

**Long:** In general! I was able to go underneath the house I was in and I can see it decaying, it's structure slowly disintegrating. Or the eraser tip on this pencil that has become hard, and it's no longer usable. I think about the batteries in the remote, that, one battery is Eveready and the other is Coppertop and you shouldn't mix them. Last night, before I was going to bed, I said, "This has to stop!"

**Frerichs:** Oh, good luck! How did you – did you?

**Long:** I don't know exactly how to. I know the best way to get rid of it is to be Bach. Is to just be an artist and to just throw yourself into shit and to just go, and do it!

**Frerichs:** Yeah!

**Long:** And then you're just a machine. Martin Kippenberger talked about eating his way through the pudding. You're just in it, and you're eating, and shitting, and eating, and shitting, and you're just going through it. And that's how he did it, and – of course he died at 44.

**Frerichs:** Oh, did he? Jesus.

**Long:** [pause] To bring it back to your work. I think that what you're doing here, is you're bringing up subjectivity. These paintings are full of nuance and incredible, wonderful decision making, and depth. There's a lot going on. On the other hand to a very careless viewer, which most viewers tend to be, particularly about this kind of work, about most kind of work, because they're so used to having a big shiny thing that has, like, some appropriated piece of pop garbage brought into it, or alternatively some signifier that lets us know that, "Yes, this work is about identity, and we haven't given up on talking about how unjust our culture is."

**Frerichs:** Right.

**Long:** So, here that careless viewer could go, "Well, these are nice. It's just a thing people do. It's like a still life class." But, knowing you, and also being able to pick up some clues from the work, and also having the privilege, that word in all its senses, of knowing modernist history, so knowing Morandi and various other people – I think of about Morandi of course when I look at this beautiful piece [*holding "Studio window, rain outside"*]

**Frerichs:** Yeah, with those greys.

**Long:** You know, he's [*Morandi*] very interested in the space around the object, the way that these are on the shelf, and I'm brought into the world of the sacredness of every life, and every observer who has ever lived. And just because it happens every day and there's a million of them, doesn't make it any less sacred and magical or mystical.

**Frerichs:** Totally.

**Long:** And it's bringing that intensity to the practice as an artist that rescues subjectivity from being just an arbitrary thing to a mystical thing that is happening, and that just because it's happening everywhere, doesn't make it any less mystical.

**Frerichs:** It all matters.

**Long:** So, these pieces are kind of, you know, reverence towards the subjective experience.

**Frerichs:** 1000%. And I think come out of a lot of working with students for so long teaching beginning level projects. It's what most people want to move on from – beginning painting, beginning drawing, the act of just sitting with a thing and digesting it and spitting it back out, or eating and shitting, and eating and shitting, however you put it. I suppose people could argue it doesn't matter. I just think it totally matters. And it's ok if *this* doesn't matter to *you*, you know? But it matters to me in the moment. And I will be just as interested in seeing everything you do, and make because it matters so much to you. In some ways the paintings are ordinary, you know? But, I can't say these views are any less valuable than, some big painting of something else.

**Long:** But putting the text on it, there's no way that this isn't a kind of voodoo. There's just no way.

**Frerichs:** I just never thought of that word with it, but when you described it, that's exactly what it is.

**Long:** You want to charge this.

**Frerichs:** I don't know if I *want* to charge it, but it *is* charged.

**Long:** Right.

**Frerichs:** This one's called *Truman Show*, these ones were earlier and they don't really have much writing. This one is *The news today* and says on the back "October 6th, finally figured out what to paint on the blank T.V."

**Long:** Yeah, that was a brutal time. I couldn't believe how awful it was. I mean, it was a real turning point for the country I think. It was like, yeah we're fucked. I mean, you could see it however you want. But, I saw it as, you know, we now have some pretty serious fascists. So, that's an intense painting. We all know that day. And then the Truman Show, yet another interesting clue into this problem of subjectivity.

**Frerichs:** And illusion. It's that final scene when he's taking in the world around him as it is, and then reaching the edge of the sky, the horizon, touching the surface of what he thought was infinite. It is a profound scene.

**Long:** Wow, it's very interesting. These are beautiful, there's a viscosity and grit.

**Frerichs:** Yeah, that's the wax. It's watercolor paper with beeswax on it and then graphite and oil, and then I scratch back into it. That one is called, *Lifetime Guaranteed (sorting through legacy)*. This is a portrait of my great-grandfather. He was painter, and I have the most badass little self-portrait he made. It's so German – he was German.

**Long:** So, this is like a little shrine in your studio. More voodoo!

**Frerichs:** Yeah. And the bricks in this painting [*holding 'Wanted and unwanted'*] – I use them to support the work, to lean my paintings on while painting. Those are from Riverside too, and so they carry the residue of pretty much every big painting I've made. I guess in that way, these are all about what objects hold, you know? This one is called, *Pregnant Pink Vase on Mom's Cutting Board*.

**Long:** Wow, beautiful.

**Frerichs:** Thanks. They're all three hours, or sometimes one day paintings, because things change. So of course I'm looking at this now and thinking, "Oh, I wish I spent more time refining this, this, this, this –"

**Long:** Yeah, no, that's –

**Frerichs:** I know, it's just a part of me. Something I sometimes wrestle with – when is enough.

**Long:** It's an interesting thing, it goes back to Bach in a way. A viewfinder is also like a timefinder. It's whatever you get done in that time, that's it. Done.

**Frerichs:** Right. One more – this one is more recent. [*Holding up 'Janet's Vase, testing vessels' and reading the back*] “June 1st, Janet's Vase. It's a beautiful Raku vase that I've had my eyes on, and my mind on, for months. I finally bought it. It's the oil slick-like patterning but really the shape. It doesn't remind me of anything, it just feels good. Its lines feel good. I love too that the Raku process is unpredictable and improvisational. It cannot be repeated. Janet is very thoughtful in her creative decisions and that is felt in her work. I stopped myself from buying it sooner because Raku can't hold water. Then I realized, or rather, wondered: what happens if it tries to hold water? Does it seep out? Does it crumble? So I bought it and filled it up. Six days later the outside is cool to the touch, but no seeping at all. It's a delicate vessel, but still it's a vessel. I feel like I'm testing vessels lately. How much can I hold? How much of me can others hold? When vessels seep or break, does it matter? What's the big deal? What's the mess mean? Who cares!?”

**Long:** It's an interesting one, seeing the work while hearing you read. We're looking at the vase, and we can see it's filled with water, and we can see the Raku glaze on it, and, it's a subtle thing. And then that's so beautiful, it's so Van Gogh gorgeous. And all of the patterning on the back is beautiful, all these different shades of blue.

**Frerichs:** Thank you. Those are these Mexican marigolds. They remind me of the student. There are several things that students have given me in these paintings. Then, that guy [*small worm in the painting*] crawled out as I was painting, and I thought “Shit I'll paint him in real quick”. And then I saw later that little bite there in the flower petal that I painted, but didn't know what it came from at the time. There's the culprit!

**Long:** How cool is that.

**Frerichs:** Anyway, thank you so much for coming to talk.

**Long:** It was kind of just what I expected.

**Frerichs:** Really?

**Long:** Yeah, so powerful.

**Frerichs:** Thank you, I can't believe it's been a decade!

**Long:** I can't believe it either. And I'm so proud of you. You should be so proud of yourself. You figured out what was important to you, and you focused on it. Not a lot of people do that. People move on and give up.

**Frerichs:** I don't know what else I would do.