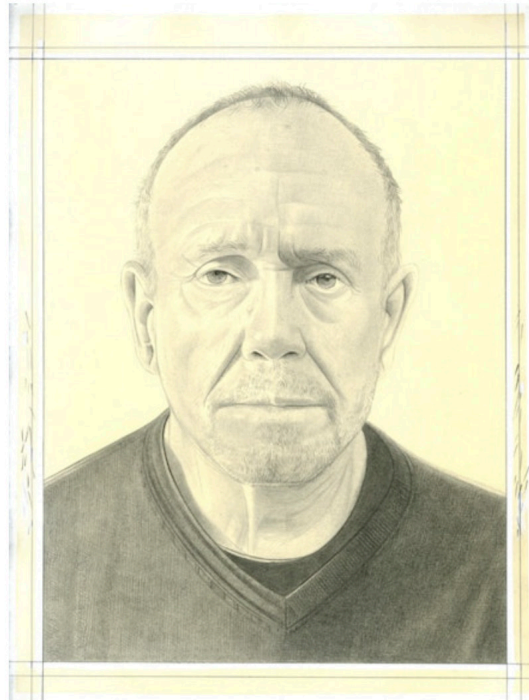


Art | In Conversation

GUY GOODWIN with Phong Bui



Portrait of Guy Goodwin. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Guy Goodwin has been making paintings of robust, energy-packed forms on a variation of materials for decades. I met him in 1991 through a few mutual friends, then later again in June 2006 at David Reed's storefront studio on Greenwich Street, where David occasionally exhibited works of his artist friends, as a way to keep things visible and in motion. There I saw Guy's monumental painting *C-Swing* (1974). A year later, I saw it again at *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* at the National Academy Museum (February 15-April 22, 2007), which established important critical reevaluations of many artists' careers. His first show at Brennan & Griffin in New York in 2012 further engaged the work with a larger audience. On the occasion of Guy's recent show, *Grotto Relief* at Brennan & Griffin (May 13-June 18, 2017), we enjoyed a long-overdue conversation on the exhibition's last day, in front of an audience comprised mostly of artists. The following is an edited version.

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Phong Bui (Rail): I was first exposed to your work in 1986 at an exhibit you had at a gallery called Dolan Maxwell on Walnut Street in Philadelphia; the same year, I was enrolled at the New York Studio School, where I saw at the school's gallery a three-person show, *Drawing with Respect to Painting: Guy Goodwin, Brice Marden, Elizabeth Murray*. I still strongly remember the paintings, especially those that were shown at Dolan Maxwell, which used still life as subject matter, strenuously painted in a very matter-of-fact manner. It was very interesting to see those paintings in the context of the eighties, when Neo-Expressionism was the predominant trend, owing a great deal to French Surrealism and German Expressionism, but your paintings had an emphatic homebrewed quality. But first I'd like to start from the very beginning: you were born in 1940, in Birmingham, Alabama. How were you exposed to art? Was it a specific experience that led you to decide to be an artist as a lifelong vocation?

Guy Goodwin: I don't want it sound like a deprived story, because as a kid, anything you look at is amazing! I grew up in a small town called Trussville, next to the city of Birmingham. On the other side of the Birmingham is Bessemer, where my friend Jack Whitten was born. Trussville was home to many steel mill workers of the Birmingham steel mills. There was no art class in school, no art in the town, but my mother, whenever she had to go shopping—which I hated—would drop me off at the Birmingham Museum of Art, when it used to be in several unused rooms in City Hall. It was there that I saw many small paintings from the 16th and 17th century. I don't think they had a Rembrandt, but they might have had paintings by Philips Koninck, Carel Fabritius...

Rail: All Rembrandt's students.

Goodwin: Exactly. My mother knew that I wouldn't leave because I absolutely loved being there, looking at those dark and mysterious worlds that someone had created. Also, in my hometown there was a self-taught artist named Joe B. Vann who, for every Christmas, would make paintings on large sheets of some kind of transparent film on his front porch—paintings of the nativity scene, or something like that. I just loved those paintings, and I loved Joe B. He was once the Chief of Police but didn't last long because he was too crazy. [Laughter.] One time he was chasing a criminal getting away in his car who wouldn't pull over, so he tried to reach out the window and shoot the escapee with his gun, but ended up shooting right through the motor of his own car



Guy Goodwin, installation view of *Grotto Relief*, 2017. Courtesy Brennan & Griffin.

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and he swerved off the road. He wasn't cut out to be a police chief. From that point on, he stayed home and his wife kind of took care of him, and he made art.

Rail: Whaaaaaat!

Goodwin: While he was making a painting one day, he told me this story: by a river bank called the Bend where we all used to go swimming, all of a sudden some trash washed up by his feet, and he just reached down and put it into the painting. That just impressed me, as I was a ten-year-old boy, the way he would be so accepting of things in the world. Joe B. was the first one who really did make me realize that art could be a way of life. The other person was my great-uncle who painted portraits of horses, some of them in full-scale profile; one is in the home of the Kentucky Derby, Church Hill Downs. I remember visiting his studio, seeing his horse paintings all around, and that smell, the turpentine. I just thought, "My God, I'm in heaven here. This is where I want to be."

Rail: High on turpentine. [*Laughter.*]

Goodwin: That would be it.

Rail: Why did you go to Auburn University instead of a traditional art school?

Goodwin: Actually, I went first went to Austin Peay State University on a football scholarship. I was a middle linebacker, all-state in my senior year, and I was pretty good, but became an art major during my second year at Austin Peay. I then went to the University of Alabama, which was very sophisticated for that time. I left there after one term and went to Auburn University. They invited well-known critics and artists, Dore Ashton and Carl Holty, for example, to come down to teach and give talks. Since I've always felt a little behind in my art education, this experience gave me a sense of confidence, so by the time I left Auburn, where I got my undergrad degree, I knew that I could develop as an artist, and that it may take time. The feeling was very liberating.

Rail: You then went to graduate school at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), a school that produced more well-known people in the entertainment and technology industries than artists or those from the humanities. Why go there?



Guy Goodwin, *Popsicle Grotto*, 2017. Acrylic and tempera on cardboard. 79 x 72 x 13 1/4 in. Courtesy Brennan & Griffin.

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Goodwin: I was accepted on a full scholarship. It turned out all right because it was there that I met Louise Fishman. We became quite close. Louise, as you may already know, grew up in a real art family in Philadelphia. Both her mother (Gertrude Fisher-Fishman) and her aunt (Razel Kapustin) were painters. Louise was so advanced, and I used to just love to hear her talk about painting. She could talk about it like nobody I ever heard; it was so visceral and real. She was really my first art teacher, even though she doesn't like me to say that. But it's true. She was further along and I understood; it didn't bother me. And even after I came to New York, she was showing right away. I should also mention, among the visiting artists from New York, which were few and far between, was John Cage. He was incredible and stayed for two years (1967–69). Once, he did a series of weeklong performances, which was mind-boggling, partly because they were multimedia collaborations. It was something I'd never experienced before. Lejaren Hiller (the director of UIUC's Experimental Music Studio) was responsible for making the music department far more advanced than the art department. Also, while I was in grad school I would drive to the Art Institute of Chicago to see the "real" contemporary paintings like De Kooning's masterpiece *Excavation* (1950), Gorky's *After Xhorkum* (1940–42), which I absolutely loved at the time. I remember reading Clement Greenberg's writings and would write down long notes about what was considered "high art," then I would make paintings just like what I'd just read. [*Laughs.*]



Guy Goodwin, *C-Swing*, 1974. Oil on canvas. 87.5 x 102 in. Courtesy Brennan & Griffin.

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Rail: What did you do between graduation in 1965 and your first show at John Doyle Gallery in Chicago ten years later? Were the *C-Swing Paintings* made in New York?

Goodwin: Yes. They were made on the Bowery, near Delancey Street.

Rail: What's so striking about them is: first, they're uniformly the same size (87.5 × 102 inches). They seem to each be made by five gestures: a vertical, a horizontal, a diagonal, an incomplete C shape that goes to the left, and another C that goes to the right. I was told, each gesture is painted in one day and you didn't go back and revise it. Why choose such a repeatable, prescriptive, self-imposed procedure?

Goodwin: At that time, there was somewhat of a movement called Lyrical Abstraction, and there were good artists who were making amazing works in this vein, but as a whole it seemed too amorphous to me. I didn't really connect with what they were doing. So, as I worked, I just naturally began to isolate events in my painting, and it became more and more pronounced and at a certain point I realized that I could create what I wanted with really just focusing completely on five or six moves. The source behind those paintings was primarily musical. There's a point in post-bebop, mainly Sonny Rollins, where he would take a melody and really simplify it. I was aware of La Monte Young and a lot of the more minimal music, but I was interested in Sonny Rollins's album *Freedom Suite*, (his last work recorded for the Riverside label in 1958), with Max Roach on drums and Oscar Pettiford at the bass. For the one year when I was making these paintings I didn't listen to anything else but this album, day and night. I couldn't get enough and it made sense for me to be working with this particular structure of music. I felt so connected to it and to what Sonny Rollins was doing. I was learning that much from him. Anyway, my upstairs neighbor, who loved to bug me, finally came down one day and said, "I cannot take this any longer. You have to listen to something else, or I'm gonna lose my mind." [*Laughter.*]

Rail: Were you aware of what Philip Guston did for two years, 1966 and '67, right after his exhibit at the Jewish Museum in 1966? He did not do anything else but make drawings. It's very interesting because they seem to be demonstrations of his rehearsing of pared down, stripped bare, elemental lines—sometimes one, and then two, and three, which consequently led to his alphabet paintings that were often made up by one single object in one painting: a head, a cup, etc. You mentioned Dore Ashton earlier, which reminds me that she once told me that she had lunch with Guston in the summer of 1965 on the day that the collector Robert Scull sold his Abstract Expressionist collection in the morning and bought Pop Art in the afternoon. As much as Guston disliked Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, and Pop Art, he

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extracted the essentials such as reduction, repetition, the use of images derived from popular culture. In your work, did you have a similar tension and rapport with Minimal Art?

Goodwin: I was aware of what Guston had to go through. Sure, but I should say from one painting that I showed in a group show at Bykert Gallery in 1974 I met quite a few artists who were making minimal works at the time, like Brice Marden, David Novros, Dorothea Rockburne. All were showing at the gallery at the time, and I met Ron Gorchov who introduced me to Elizabeth Murray and to his then-wife Marilyn Lenkowsky. as well as Bill Jensen and a few others. It was an overwhelming experience for me because I admired all the artists Klaus Kertess showed at Bykert, so I felt so honored to be included in this group. I owe a great debt to Klaus, because he always came to my studio when nobody knew who I was. He said to me the first time he came, “Anytime you want me to come back, I will.” There were no politics there. That’s the way he was. I remember everyone liking that painting, except David Diao, who had a show with Peter Young at Leo Castelli (1969) and two shows at Paula Cooper (1969 and 1970). One night at Fanelli’s Bar he told me he had a problem with that painting. Well, of course, nobody had been critical of me up to that point. He said, “I don’t understand”—because what I was doing was I would make a painting and then I would let it dry and then paint over the whole thing; I wouldn’t sand it down, therefore you would see all of these passages and the layers of gesso over oil paint, which, God knows what would happen now. He said, “What are you doing? Why is it that you keep doing the same thing over and over and then hiding it?” [*Goodwin turns to David Diao who is sitting in the audience.*] I wanted to knock your teeth out but I didn’t. [*Laughter.*] But you were right, David. [*Turns back.*] You know David is that way, he doesn’t bullshit people. And when he said that, it wasn’t that nobody else was being honest with me, I think probably they just weren’t looking that closely. He had looked, and it was right. That’s what caused me to start paring down and isolating my work.

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Rail: The painful truth can be useful when one is ready to accept it as part of one's growth.

Goodwin: I never have thanked you before David, but I thank you now.

Rail: Ron [Gorchov], who seemed to be an instrumental figure to many artists of your generation and younger, once said about you and Elizabeth Murray, that you both paint in rectangles, but you both do it almost contemptuously; in other words, you are not doing it for or against rectangles, the rectangle just happened to be there. What do you think he means?

Goodwin: Take Stella's painting as an example. There was so much talk about repeating the outside edges into the painting, not going against them. Whatever the shape it was determined what the painting was like. In other words, people would come to your studio and they would go over and look at the edges. "I want you to do the edges"—I just hated that. Quit looking at the fucking edges and look at the painting! It's a painting, you've got to feel, to see, and to look. Why are you looking at the edges? This edge thing was so common and overrated. I think that's why David's comment about the whole painting was so important to me. It's a thing that's breathing, that's in your world. Get off the edge. So when Ron said that, he meant that we were working on the rectangles just because it was a convenience.

Rail: Easy for Ron to say! When I look at those *C-Swing* paintings, because of their extreme physicality and their precariousness of form, they seem to have more in common with Ronald Bladen's elemental and geometric structures, than they do with any sort of gestural paintings, even with the potential reference to Franz Kline's calligraphic gestures.

Goodwin: Yes, Ronald Bladen was my mentor. The first time he saw my painting, he just looked at me and said, "You can do this, just don't mess around." He was a little tough, he didn't mince his words. Ron Gorchov was more nurturing, but Ronald Bladen was an artist who was so singular and so uncompromising to his own vision. And he'd managed to do all the things he had envisioned. Amazing!

Rail: Would it be fair to say that the significant impact both Ronald Bladen and Ron Gorchov had on your early formation as an artist—the perpetual mediation between what the two-dimensional demanded and a lurking desire for the three-dimensional—was visible early on? Now it's completely out of the closet!



Guy Goodwin. *Flowers in the Grotto*, 2017. Acrylic and tempera on cardboard. 68 x 68 1/2 x 13 1/4 in. Courtesy Brennan & Griffin.

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Goodwin: Yes. I'd say both elements have always been of interest since the early '70s.

Rail: It's more evident in the *I Tread the Dark* series of the late '70s. How did these come about?

Goodwin: I think because I was being so specific in my moves within a painting, they became kind of a detriment to a certain type of painting. Almost a little too real. In other words, "Okay, I make this stroke, if I could just take this stroke and put it over here it's like a thing." But a stroke isn't a thing, so I started thinking, if I want it to be a thing, then I should get rid of the constraints of a rectangle, and just work with the things, and try to create some kind of space. That way you could enter the painting, somewhat. They had elements of aggression in them undoubtedly. I was struggling with a lot of things, trying to shed my past. One of the things I grew up with in Birmingham was a lot of violence, so I was resolving these issues psychologically. I think I created objects that were almost like shields that I could almost get behind, even though it could be very uncomfortable at times. I also wanted to get lost. There is a line in David Ignatow's *Tread the Dark* (Little Brown, 1978), which was very important to me about feeling your way in the dark, one way or the other, trying to get away from your father or upbringing and so on.

Rail: What was the violence?

Goodwin: The intense racial issues. My father had a close friend, his business partner, who was a black man. Every time he and his wife came to our house for dinner, or just to visit, we had to pull all the shades down so our neighbors wouldn't see anything! I'm not saying it was ever a balanced community in any way, don't get me wrong, but there were shared religious beliefs, be it devout Baptists or Methodists, that tied the white and black communities together when I was growing up, at least until the '50s, when the white people just flipped. And the Ku Klux Klan had more of a face.

Rail: In the midst of McCarthyism which added more fear and intense paranoia among the public.

Goodwin: This time they focused on opposing, by every violent means possible, the Civil Rights Movement. It was awful.



Guy Goodwin, *I Tread the Dark: Fire*, 1979. Oil on wood, 44 x 36 x 5 in. Courtesy Brennan & Griffin.

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Rail: The second and third incarnations of the KKK often made references to America's "Anglo-Saxon" lineage and the notion of nativism, similar to Trump's rhetoric and that of his supporters. Art is certainly a refuge.

Goodwin: No doubt. I got out of Birmingham as soon as I could. The university was a kind of an oasis; they were in contact with the broader world. I felt liberated. Things weren't as intense and dark as they were back home.

Rail: The intense darkness is steeped in the heart of American Romanticism, running through the veins of Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Melville, Faulkner, and applied to the painting lineage of Albert Pinkham Ryder, Ralph Blakeblock, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Clyford Still and Pollock.

Goodwin: That was one of the reasons why I was so attracted to Ignatow's *Tread the Dark*.

Rail: Which brings us back to your haunting, dark still life paintings from the '80s, which included objects like a hammer, a cup, a shovel, sometimes a bundle of vegetables or a bouquet of flowers. They always seemed to be painted with various irregular black outlines, which move in and out of those objects, tying them together with space. In Eliza Rathbone's catalog essay of Bill Jensen's show at the Phillips Collection in 1987, Bill is quoted as asking you how you obtained the quality of murky light in your paintings, and you told Bill the secret was to not clean your brushes.

Goodwin: That's true. It also had to do with what I was doing at the time: one, I began to question the whole idea of abstraction, especially in relation to what was going on around me in the '80s. Two, I started teaching up at Bennington College; I was teaching a still life class and I thought, "My God, I've never painted a still life in my life. How am I teaching this?" I thought I couldn't go in there and tell these kids anything if I'd never really done one, so I started painting still lifes to just be able to teach it. The whole thing became overwhelming, and I became fixated with the idea of a certain sense of focus on five or six things outside and in front of me.

Rail: They were done from direct observation?

Goodwin: Yeah. I know that's hard to believe but they were. I actually made an upright vertical board as high as my chin so I could rest my head at the same place while looking at the still life. I felt a real need to do that, even though everything turned out so loose and unstable. [*Laughs.*] Even though I see myself as more exterior than those



Guy Goodwin, *Vacation*, 1985. Oil on linen, 48 x 55 in. Courtesy Brennan & Griffin.

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artists you mentioned, Hartley was one painter who taught me to make those still life paintings. I went and saw as many of his paintings as I could while making my own form of still lifes, which I did for five or six years. John Yau wrote a wonderful essay for a catalog of that work; I have to say, I'm proud of those paintings. I would re-paint the objects, even though they were right in front of me; I felt it was impossible to achieve synthesis of these two opposing things, the form and the light, solid yet moving, transparent yet opaque, for it to be alive in the painting and be an object. Impossible.

Rail: I applaud such intense effort. Why did you make a drawing of a list of words—food words—in 2007? It seems related.

Goodwin: It was an attempt to see how language affects visual images. When I write a word of a type of vegetable, I can say, "that's a word." It separates and obscures the word from the object.

Rail: There's a difference between a drawing where you can detect the letters C, O, R, N in "White Corn Oil" (2007), and a painting "White Chicken" (2008), where the words collapse into illegibility. How do you choose when letters are legible?

Goodwin: The process of making them determines how they end up. I start out with two letters, a form, or a word. Then I would thrust on an equally rigid or regimented shape, a kind of blob, and push the two together. The process is repeated in a somewhat random way, so the shapes become more abstract in their relief-like, stencil-like forms.

Rail: In a *New York Times* review of your 2012 show, Roberta Smith made references of your work to the discordant American abstraction that includes Stuart Davis, George Sugarman, leading to Ron Gorchov, Joe Zucker, Elizabeth Murray, and Chris Martin. I would like to add two more artists to that list: one is Patrick Henry Bruce, an American Modernist who committed suicide at the relatively young age of 55, for his still life paintings that were painted with block-like shapes, with geometric clarity, and cool tonalities. There's an architectural stability that exudes a certain rational calmness, although his life wasn't at all calm. And the other I'm thinking is Conrad Marca-Relli, partly because he had elevated the idiom of collage to a certain scale and complexity.

Goodwin: I've never thought of Patrick Henry Bruce's paintings in reference to my work, but I've paid lots of attention to Marca-Relli's collage painting, partly because I like how he treats the materials and the wide range of possibilities he had created within his collage language. I love his intense material manipulations that lead to a breakdown of gesture, or even the source of that gesture.

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Rail: When and how did you begin to use cardboard as a new and preferred material?

Goodwin: When I made my first plexiglas boxes in the standard size of 4 × 5 feet, I always had Ralph Humphrey in the back of my mind (especially those '70s paintings of casein and modeling paste on canvas). At some point, I turned it around and started working inside the box, and eventually got rid of the top and the bottom edges. To tell the truth, I had hit a rough spot: I wasn't selling anything and had a few misfortunes so I couldn't afford my usual materials. In any case, I was working in a studio in Long Island City that was surrounded by shipping companies, warehouses, all sorts of cardboard sheets, boxes in various thickness, and so on, everywhere. It was then, around 2010, that I began to use them as new material.

Rail: Seven years of cardboard, which rose out of necessity!

Goodwin: How about desperation! [*Laughter.*] If I had to keep working, that was the only way to do it. One thing I came to realize early was that working with oil paint on canvas had always made me aware of the weight of art history, whereas working with materials that aren't connected with art history was a real liberation. This is to say that although I've worked with unconventional—or I should say impractical—materials (such as oil paint on wood that weighted between 400 to 600 pounds), I've finally found a way to create an illusion of weight, and it's not that heavy at all—no more than 80 to 100 pounds in the biggest works.

Rail: How about the use of colors, which are quite distinctively non-referential? I've never seen colors like these.

Goodwin: The relationship I've developed with my color, which takes a day or two to dry, is the biggest step I've taken in my life as an artist. The miraculous thing is that when the color dries, it gets lighter and brighter. Especially when you stand in front and close to them, the paintings indulge you as though you're inspired to take the biggest breath you can. They really echo and enhance each other, which hadn't happened with such naturalness before in my work. They all seem to be somewhat decorative and artificial like the color of a child's room or a fast food restaurant, which was the very thing I had tried to avoid most in my life. Yet, this feeling of color and form really make sense together in a way I haven't experienced before.

Rail: It's true, considering your previous color palette was tonal. What gets painted first? The acrylic paint or the tempera?

Goodwin: The acrylic gets painted first as a base, then I mix my own tempera, which essentially is made of color pigments and Elmer's glue, to paint on top as many layers as needed.

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Rail: What about the layers of the cardboard? How do you know when to stop, and how to not let them be excessively built up?

Goodwin: I don't. But I do have a good sense simply because, before putting one layer on top of another layer, soaking them with Elmer's glue, and drilling in the drywall screw, each shape is first cut out for contemplation. In other words, this process occurs slowly, and over time I have had better control of the whole distribution of how thick and how thin the layers are formed in the painting.

Rail: It's like an orchestration of the symphony on stage proscenium, so it makes sense to me now why you don't need the top and the bottom edges. The two edges on both sides, left and right, are there as framing device for the space in between.

Goodwin: That's right! It'd be too literal if it were an actual box. Secondly, this way it allows air to travel through at least upward and downward. The holes have a similar function, though the breathing is inward and outward, quite the opposite. One last thing, I can't go back once the layers are built up, and get drilled with the drywall screws—they become hard, solid, and permanent forms. I should add that the ways in which the drywall screws are drilled all over the surface and the staples are fastened around the edges of each form are just as important as how the forms are composed, because they add an additional texture to the surface.

Rail: There's also a visual rhythm they add.

Goodwin: And that rhythm is partly created by the body pressure, not just the air compressor that feeds the pneumatic staple gun. It's very physical in the form, yet the colors are light and delightful.