

# A Conversation with Sandra Reed

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This interview accompanied *Survey: The Paintings of Sandra Reed* organized by the University Gallery, University of North Florida, January 11 - February 15, 2001.  
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Sandra Reed transforms the banal topography of empty lots, city streets, and generic buildings into oil paintings of exquisite order, balance, and beauty. Frequently working on site, she uses subtle fields of color and tone to reveal both the underlying structure and emotional intensity of the urban landscape. Reed earned her BFA in painting and drawing from Drake University in Des Moines on a full *National Alumni Scholarship*. In 1988, she was the first recipient of the *Morris Louis Fellowship*, a major national



*Pink and Blue, 2000, oil on panel*

grant given to an incoming graduate painter which allowed her to study at George Washington University, where, in 1992 she graduated summa cum laude with a MFA. Her works have been recognized with many awards, group and solo exhibitions, and are found in collections throughout the United States, most notably in the *U.S. Navy Memorial* in Washington. In 1996, Reed was elected to *Who's Who Among America's Teachers*. Reed has been a Professor of Painting at the Savannah College of Art and Design since 1993. The University Gallery is proud to present this selection of 24 oil paintings and 10 studies on paper produce by Sandra Reed over the past several years.

**Paul Karabinis/Gallery Director:** When did your interest in painting begin? Was it as a child?

**Sandra Reed:** I was interested in a lot of things as a kid. I grew up on a farm in a big family, and since I went to a small high school, I could be involved in all sorts of things. I had confident parents, and they watched for my interests to emerge then made the means available for me to do it - whether it was music or track or drawing. From the outset of college, I asked myself, "Is it

art? Is that what I'm supposed to do?" My main undergraduate painting professor, Jules Kirschenbaum, was a mentor and set high standards for what it meant to be an artist by his example.

**PK:** How do you select a site to paint?

**SR:** It's an inexact process of elimination. For each painting there might be twenty to thirty other sites that I considered with small, quick sketches that were done because of how the place looked at the moment I saw and decided to sketch it.

The visual is the impetus and then it's trusting that through the painting process, layers of meaning are found and constructed. Light and shape and pattern are important visual elements - how the light hits a wall or how the spaces are broken up. At another time of day [there wouldn't be that] marriage between the character of the light and the forms...

I attach all of those notes into a larger sketchbook where I can group and regroup them to sift through ideas. [Some of these drawings are included in this exhibition, for example, *Compositional Notations*.] These notes are my creative life line in the midst of the business of life. Here's one from this morning, "dead leaves on branches in a pile-light against shaded bushes." It's just a description of that location, [but] it reminds me of this powerful juxtaposition of the idea of that branch in the bright sun that someone pruned. Leaves are dying and decaying on the branch; and behind it is this dark, lush mound of shaded bushes. I included them [the sketches] in this show because they inform the paintings. I want the energy and gesture in them to be in the paintings as well...

After these initial sketches, if the site seems to have both visual and intellectual potential, I'll go back and do a watercolor or more involved tonal studies to see where the lights are trapped, where the [compositional] shifting occurs, where I might stretch or compress placements, and so forth. All of this helps to narrow down the possibilities of which sites merit the greater commitment required by an oil painting.

**PK:** What do you mean by the phrase that a painting is a *marriage between the character of the light and the forms*?

**SR:** Objects are informed by the light that strikes them. Light is transforming, even a shadow is the presence of a reduced quantity of light. When it is the sun that is the light source [laughing] you have to have your critical vision open for the combination that makes [that scene] speak to you. I think my paintings are a lot about that clarity of feeling [that can occur when] the light and nature of forms and the nature of the space all work together at one time.

A painting orders the relationship between parts. You are always creating this new level of balance. It excites me. I like that you [PK] did not know if that [painting] is finished or not [pointing to a painting]. It does have a degree of balance right now for what is there. But revisions give visual richness to the work - they give it a history. When you see the paintings in person, you can tell that there are many layers [of paint]. You see *pentimento*, underdrawing and underpainting and layers and scratching out. You feel that things have been built up on the surface. I think it slows the viewer down so that the associations and themes of the painting have a chance to enter into their awareness as they are engaged in the physical surface. [*Pentimento* refers to evidence of an artist's alteration of a painting that has become apparent with time. As a painting is developed, the artist

may chose to alter (or remove) particular elements within the composition. Although these changes are initially invisible on the finished surface of the painting, they can become visible over time. This is the result of the fact that paint, particularly oil, tends to become more transparent over time.]

**PK:** Talk a little more about your process for making a painting. What



*Public Phones, 2000, oil on panel*

steps do you go through before you apply any paint to the panel?

**SR:** It varies, but recently I take the format sketch and scale it up onto brown craft paper and use transfer paper to get the lines of the main structure onto the panel. At this stage, it is a very delicate ghostlike line drawing. I then take that panel to the site and begin painting. In several of the new works for this exhibition, I've used India ink washes as the first stage of painting [see *Neighborhood*]. It works beautifully on these (Windberg) panels. It is a developed tonal underpainting that is compatible with the oil paint . . .

I would like to stress that each phase of this process is an opportunity for reconsideration of previous

decisions. I determine if I want it the way I thought I did. For instance, the foreground is an emotional space to separate or place the viewer within the illusionist scene. I design and scale the foreground through this process - to see what works visually and what it suggests. The sensation of movement in the work is something else that this extended process helps me achieve. The positioning of forms within the format of the work allows or interrupts movement from side to side, top to bottom, and in illusionist depth, front to back. It's the choreography of the work. One might look at *Entrance* and *Bridge and Tree* to see what I mean about shifting in these different directions.

**PK:** Is the India ink wash done to give you an understructure or foundation to work from?

**SR:** Yes. The classic development [of a painting] is from line and shape to value, hue, intensity...

**PK:** And the India ink wash is...

**SR:** It is the value - the tonal range. In traditional underpainting, the tones are kept pale so that the glazes of color impart the additional darkness as well as color at the same time. In this series of work, the more developed underpainting is showing through transparent layers of paint interacting with the glaze. That is what a glaze should do. It should interact with what is under it, not obscure it.

**PK:** What exactly do you mean by glaze?

**SR:** A glaze is a transparent or translucent layer of color. Some pigments are very transparent, others are opaque. You can take a medium - linseed oil, Damar varnish, and turpentine is the most common - and add it to a transparent pigment and it would make it even more transparent. You could add it to opaque pigments, which are not naturally effective for glazes, but can still be used. I do this quite a bit. I did it with *Public Phones*. I

put a hazy, pale yellow over the top [of the painting]. It wasn't a transparent pigment, but an opaque one with medium in it to spread it. You feel the obstacle...the pigment is held between the light and the form.

**PK:** Painters have left their studios to paint outdoors for a variety of reasons. What brought you to working on site, and what does it give you?

**SR:** Before I moved to Savannah, I considered myself to be a figure painter. Throughout school, I hired and bartered time, sometimes paying the model with the work I created just for the experience of making it. As a reaction to losing access to university-provided models and studio after I finished my MFA, I began to do [outdoor] studies, mostly drawings and paintings in water-based media. About a year after I got the full time teaching position I now have in Savannah, my husband John, he is also an artist, gave me a French easel for Christmas. The French easel enabled me to pursue on-site painting.

It is a mistake to think that painting or drawing from life is the replication of a frozen moment; It's an invention and accumulation of innumerable shifts and adjustments. When I work with a model, I ask them to bring a friend so that they are talking and animated while I'm painting. Models are thankfully not still-life, they move around. The painting becomes a composite of different inflections of mood and position. It was an important connection to make that landscape painting also offered this interactive process....

Painting *en plein air* has benefits for the process of painting. You have to have a plan [and] have your equipment in order. It's very constructive. I could grab my French easel and red duffel bag, tuck some panels under my arm,

hop on a plane, and paint almost anywhere in the world. [The French easel] is like a suitcase with telescoping legs, with the easel on the lid. It's a wholly portable studio. Also, I can view the painting from afar, literally across the street, to see if the tones 'ring' from such a distance. As much detail as the works have, I want them to project across an expanse....The whole



*Above and Below, 2000, oil on panel*

experience of being out doors and in the moment gives me a feeling of elation.

**PK:** Returning to this idea of how the subject changes. Obviously, the site you are painting is a bit different every time you return to it.

**SR:** Change is integral to the creative equation. The constancy of my repeated return to the same site at the same time of day is punctuated by perpetual change wrought by man and nature. Buildings are moved, demolished, renovated. Plants brown in a sudden freeze, blow in the breeze, and bloom unexpectedly. Skies open and close, carry bird and plane, block light and cast cloud shadows in unexpected patterns. These and many other relentless variables redirect and refine the form and feeling of the work. While I'm painting, I watch the shadows

tick their way around like a sundial marker. I choose shadows from different times to get the strongest composition.

These paintings are composites of many different things that never coexisted. And change happens at different rates. The shortest interval of change is the time it takes to look at the painting and then to look up

at the subject matter. Within several minutes, the scene will change because the clouds come over and something goes into darkness; a wind picks up and it blows the branches in a different way. Over weeks, maybe someone starts to renovate, tear down, or paint - alter something about that place. And then, the seasons change. I love the full vigor of the weed tree in *Bridge and Tree*. The tree is now completely bare. In the painting, it's at its height of Spring vigor. I'm not going to paint it as a barren tree, but the fact that it is now barren allows me so see what's behind it. It gives me an understanding that I didn't have before. I'm going to keep working on that tree.

I'm not satisfied with the feeling of volume to it.

..The subject matter can refer to past and future eras. For instance, pay phones [see *Public Phones*] are on the cusp of being obsolete. They are an icon of this transition to a different means of communication. If you can afford it, you have a cell phone.

**PK:** Why not work from a series of photographs made of the site at different times of day?

**SR:** Photographs are finite, and I just don't they ask enough of me. Plus, if the photograph is good, it is already a work of art and doesn't need to be remade. But the idea of accumulation, reaction, connection - a photograph wouldn't contribute any of these to my experience of creating a painting. The philosophy that the artist is their own product

seems true to me. You are changed by the creation of the work of art; The painting is a by-product and evidence of quality actions and decisions that tempered and formed you as you made the painting. The art object is an artifact of the artist's purpose.

Life, a figure or landscape, is a primary source. Imagination is primary. Dreams are primary. The artist has to be strong to direct and mold a primary source, to not give in to its strength. I do that by scrutinizing my paintings not as a representation of the site, but as a combination of forms that are trying to say something.

**PK:** Do you finish a painting on site or is there additional work done in the studio?

**SR:** For several years I was a purist and didn't touch a painting unless I was on site. It gave me a lot of discipline to be in the moment, and trained my eye for a feeling of integrality of forms and subtle shifts of angles and movement in space. However, I always spent a lot of time analyzing the paintings in the studio in between painting sessions - asking questions such as: "What degree of intensity will move the eye over to the side and back? Is that plane overly dark - is it more still than I intended or is it possible to move past it?" And now, important changes at the outset, in the midst of, or as closure may happen in the studio, even though the studio painting time is proportionately small. An essential change might only take a few minutes. Because I was spending time looking at the paintings in the studio, it was a natural move to begin making the changes I visualized.

**PK:** Can you elaborate on this?

**SR:** *Entrance* and *Darkened Foreground* are paintings where the studio work was a very important counterpart to the on-site time. The color stages of *Darkened*

*Foreground* began in the studio. The central building is an ethereal pale green. Somehow, I felt that the entire painting had to be variations of pale orange and rose, even the sky and trees. It is an optical phenomenon that when the eyes see an excess of one color, here perhaps green, there is a psychological desire to see the complementary color. The rose/orange combination was in place before I returned to the



*Rental, 2001, oil on panel*

site and worked through its consequences for the painting. It was the final moments of painting time on *Entrance*, rather than the initial stages. After fifteen or more on-site sessions beginning in 1999, the resolving transitions happened in one or two hours in the studio. The plein air/studio balance is variable, unpredictable, and practical.

...These paintings are made slowly. It's nothing to brag about. It's just that edge control, intensification, focus, restating, refining, paring it down is a slow process....The reaction I've had to them is that many viewers like to stand in front of them and look. So maybe the slowness of the accretion in the painting is echoed in the viewer's tempo in looking at them. I want to have something that is a strong

appeal from a distance; And when you are close enough to touch them, the paintings opens up new realizations to you.

**PK:** What is your work about to you?

**SR:** Over the years, my work has had several pulses. In undergrad it had strong emotional and imaginative basis. In graduate school, formal and technical concerns were my top priorities. In the intervening years, I have been able to bring those together as a foundation for an intellectual impetus, and come full circle. I think it is clear that these paintings are not illustrations, and that depiction is not their motive....

...I am a country girl living in the city, and on one level, I'm recreating the landscape of Iowa in these paintings of the city. My husband pointed out to me [when he said] that my houses look like barns and the empty lots look like fields. Iowa is rolling hills, deep expanses and then a homestead. Sometimes it's like being at sea because you can turn all the way around and have an unobstructed view to

the horizon. Things appear at a distance. In a lot of my paintings, I take things that are far away and I bring them near [and] I paint empty lots and places where buildings have been razed. I push the buildings back to get open space to look towards them. [His] observation helped me understand the emotional origin of these works.

**PK:** That comment by your husband intrigues me. I bring all this up because I get a sense of sadness or melancholia in looking at some of your cityscapes. Maybe that's because there are no humans in them, or maybe it's that atmospheric haze that seems to engulf the work, or maybe it is some sense of longing for your roots in Iowa...

**SR:** Any bitter sweetness that is in [my paintings] is an outcome of

having grown up on a farm and having been around all the decisions and travail that happened over the years.... A good farmer will try to get the soil up to a level of richness - fertilize it, put humus in it, rotate crops to give the land relief. And yet, as much as you would do, you are not in control. You could have made all the best decisions, and the day before you harvest a tornado or hail could come and knock everything down and the full crop is lost. So there is this sense that as much as you would try to form nature to your intention, all those efforts could be wiped out.

In a city, we build buildings to live in - try to form our environment to suit our needs. And yet, a heavy vine will crush a fence that was supposed to form a property line; a weed will grow in between boards and destroy a building. A sidewalk can be broken up by tree roots. These human structures, as well built as they might be, are not going to be there for ever. You see, what I've discovered is that it's not just the look of Iowa that moves me, but the universal lesson of human frailty and temporality that plays itself out not only in Iowa and Savannah, but everywhere. One of my reactions to an undeniably temporary existence is to use archival materials and sound painting techniques that the works have a chance to enter into other lives and future times. The fact that I am making something that will have a relatively long lasting life is important to me..

In addition to the essential emotional engagement with these works, over the years, I've read several important books that have strengthened my insight and intellectual foundation. [Kenneth] Clark's *Landscape into Art* categorized landscape painting

which helped me understand what I'm *not* doing. Through Brinckerhoff Jackson's *Vernacular Landscape*, I realized that I was drawn to sites of dual or multiple functions that could easily be altered by human action/use.

Most recently, I worked my way through *Landscape and Memory* in which Simon Schama explores the



*Darkened Foreground, 2001, oil on panel*

history of metaphors and meaning for woods, rivers, and mountains. The painting, *Grove*, in the show corresponds to the Germanic practice that even a single tree can be defined as part of protected lands. This wild array of growth, tidily bounded by pavement and curb, is the direct interface of nature and human action. Behind it all is a pink strip that may or may not be identifiable as the brick facade of a WalMart. I work a lot with juxtapositions. Culture, by definition, requires cities, and in a city opposing human needs are fulfilled in close proximity: Boundaries of public and private space are tenuous and porous. The language of architecture refers to time and expectations of commerce, shelter, and communication. My goal is to imbue the intellectual into the visual language.

**PK:** Do you think about a time when you might exhaust the parameters of plein air painting? If

so, what other directions do you think you might go in?

**SR:** I've been painting on-site for seven years. Whenever I think I'm closing in and will have done what I needed to through this mode, I find something else I want to try within it. For instance, could I sustain the idea and the abstraction and all the concerns of surface and feeling and mood on a larger scale? The new

works are two or three times larger than a couple of years ago, and I am working on the largest Windberg panels available. I'll have technical issues to resolve if I work bigger since I'll have to change to a different painting surface. The materials of painting engage me, but alone, aren't enough to open up the work.

**PK:** These urban landscapes have no figures in them...nor do they need them. But have you considered

putting figures in these paintings? If so, how would you go about it?

**SR:** These paintings are about humanity and about culture and about the people who have made these buildings - the people that live in them, the people that trim the trees and mow the grass - without showing them. There is a term, *staffage*, which refers to the use of figures to suggest scale as an accessory. I don't want that so I came up with a rule for myself that the figure has to be either the first or the last thing that is noticed. It is either the clear, dominant focal point, or part of the texture that might never be identified.

**PK:** The way you make these paintings - returning to the site - the essential elements are all still there; But a figure, if included, has to be done so on the basis of a very short observation.

**SR:** I sketched the young woman that is in the foreground of *Entrance* as she walked by and used that as the basis for scale and placement.

If I had wanted, I could have hired a model or had a friend pose. So there are ways to do it.

**PK:** In a review, you were quoted as saying that you *proceed in the face of uncertainty*. In other words, when you start a painting, you don't know exactly how it will finish; You find your way as you go. This seems to suggest something about the creative act that is different from what many believe. Many have this notion that the artist is struck by the muse and it's just a matter of going from the brain to the blank canvas. To me, it seems that the creative act is a process of discovery. You work on something, come to a point where you are not sure of what to do and you have to take a chance. You may even have to let the piece guide you. Could you talk a little about this for the benefit of students and other artists?

**SR:** That phrase is part of Wallace Stevens' definition of creativity, the ability to proceed in the presence of uncertainty. I have found that not only do the preparations I make in preliminary stages lead me to more subtle, and insightful questions once I move to the actual painting surface, but that I can take more risks without jeopardizing the work.

**PK:** Talk a little about how you teach.

**SR:** One of the phrases I found myself using last year in teaching was *follow the thread*. In other words, as a student, how are you going to relate a new assignment to what you have just done? In a self-assignment, that question is equally important. It is the basis of the ability to independently move your work forward. A work of art is in a mesh of interactions - drawings, color studies, or previous paintings, or things that were read or conversations that were held, or works of art that were seen, before paint ever touched the canvas. Students and young artists often think that they can just sit down and make a painting that has the degree

of merit of what they have seen in museums. Here is the canvas; I have this idea in my head, and I'm just going to make it. Naivete is refreshing because it represents confidence and possibility. However, it is the source of discouragement when their work doesn't come out well. The idea of preliminary drawings, under-paintings, the *process* of building

anything by Annie Dillard, whose work is based on noticing what happens in her world. She sets a great example.

**PK:** Any other advice?

**SR:** Persist. The process of a fine art education is a mind-body-spirit undertaking, it requires thinking, doing and feeling. It prepares you for the act of painting and much more.



*Study for Three Trees (MLK Location)*

toward the final painting becomes important. If they want depth and resonance in their work - these are some of the things that will give them the means.

**PK:** I find it increasingly difficult to impart the idea to students of the importance of slowing down and looking....

**SR:** Getting inside of something you like is a good place to start, whether that is music, literature, or a form of visual art. Drawing is a way of knowing, and contour drawing, conducted at the rate an ant travels is a great way to avoid visual generalizations and stylizations. I also would recommend reading almost