# RUSH BAKER IV

INTERVIEWED BY GEORGE HEMPHILL ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION "AMERICAN SUNSET"

George Hemphill: Is it true you considered a career in law?
Rush Baker IV: This is a little embarrassing for me, but yes. I did consider law school for a time, but I think it's worth adding some context. Growing up, my mom worked as an anti–death penalty advocate at the ACLU before working on Capitol Hill and later leading the Government Affairs office for the United Negro College Fund, fighting for historically Black colleges and universities. My dad was an Army JAG and Maryland State Legislator. They were both lawyers and activists, and they were my earliest examples of people effecting social change through direct action.

GH: So, your parents' law practices and the idea of public service were an ever-present part of your childhood?
RB: Definitely. I spent my early childhood going with my mom to work at the U.S. Capitol. I remember riding the underground train that connects the Capitol to the different office buildings around Capitol Hill. If I'm remembering correctly, she worked out of the Rayburn building for then Majority Whip Bill Gray. A few years later, when my dad was elected to Maryland State Legislature, I would hang out with him in Annapolis. I remember sitting on the floor of the House of Delegates, and he used to let me push the yay or nay buttons when it was time to vote. Those are some of my favorite memories. When I was younger, I thought you had to be a lawyer to get involved in public service. This is completely absurd, of course, but most of the people I knew who were involved in elected politics were lawyers. I found a different path to have similar conversations, which is good because I would have made a terrible lawyer.

GH: Did you decide public service was not for you?
RB: Not exactly. After grad school, I moved back to the D.C. area and started teaching at Corcoran and University of Maryland. Between teaching and carving out time in the studio, I couldn't shake the feeling of needing something outside of my painting practice. I got an itch to run for office, and in 2014 I thought it would be a great idea to run for the Maryland House of Delegates, taking on a slate of three incumbents in a very competitive district. In part, I ran on an arts platform, including direct aid and subsidized studios and housing for artists and working people. I think early on, some of my artist friends thought it was some kind of performance art piece, but they ended up coming around to the earnestness of my run. I believe it was the wrong time for that kind of message, though I think it's resonating more and more with people now.

GH: Timing is everything. Every political movement fits into a context created by the stream of history, current events, and opportunity. What historical and political events presently most interest you?
RB: I recently finished reading "Midnight Rising" by Tony Horowitz about John Brown's life and how it led to the events at Harpers Ferry. I was reading this just after finishing "Last Best Hope" by George Packer. Packer talks about more recent US history, post–New Deal era, an era that gave way to a new party realignment divided into four separate Americas. In those four Americas, two are to the left and two are to the right, and they're all fighting each other.

GH: What is it about these events that interest you?
There are very clear parallels to the world in which John Brown was navigating leading up to the American Civil War. It's a world where violence was wrongly justified, and the factionalization of society led to ever-escalating civil unrest. It was a time of drastic societal change, and that interests me. Speaking more generally, I am drawn to moments in history when there was a spontaneous combustion of revolutionary political activity. Maybe not so much your textbook definition of a revolution, but rather revolutionary acts that changed the direction of human history. The world shifted and changed in a traceable way.

GH: Do you see those historical inflection points as affecting your present-day painting process?
RB: At this particular moment, yes. There are references in the recent works to specific moments in U.S. history that feel relevant to political events happening to us today.

I'm thinking about these moments and building a collection of visual reference materials that I keep with me in the studio. My practice has a tendency to go through cycles. The work in the past was more figurative, then it evolved into a more geometrically abstract system, and over the past few years, the paintings have become

more abstracted in a gestural way. The underlying image often becomes less recognizable due to the process of layering plaster, staining, sanding, and repeating. I›ve always viewed abstraction as a way of slowing down the reading of a work and drawing serves as the substrate or armature of my paintings. Then it›s a matter of adding and subtracting compositional elements until the painting reveals itself to me. I'm constantly synthesizing a myriad of influences from history, literature, and popular culture.

GH: Often, the organization of the picture plane in your paintings has circular movement, a spinning, a feeling of centrifuge, of things coming apart?
RB: Yes and no. It's more of a reorganization of elements. It's organized chaos. The collaged elements usually give the works a certain compositional structure. The initial layering of paint and plaster act as a disruption of that language, and then it's a matter of revealing what the painting really wants to be. The gestures, especially in the larger works, mimic the movement of my physical range of motion.

GH: The movement of a painter's body is a kind of measurement. The painting strokes and other graphic elements register motion, communicating scale.
RB: Scale is very important, and I agree that the moving of the painter's body is a measurement that can be registered. You're kind of creating a one-to-one ratio between you and the viewer. In that sense, you're essentially presenting a mirror. I think good paintings demand that the viewer mentally retrace the steps and attempt to deconstruct the process. De Kooning was amazing at this.

GH: Paintings descending from the European tradition often intentionally or unintentionally correspond to an underlying grid or a gridable organization.
RB: Yes. This is probably something I'm thinking about subconsciously. While in the European tradition, they used the grid to create something replicating reality or, rather, to paint a more accurate description of what was in front of them. I do use the grid, but more as an organizational tool for creating the composition of a painting based in a psychological space.

GH: De Kooning famously worked on Woman II for many mouths, seemingly unable to figure out a way to finish the painting. During a studio visit, the art historian Meyer Schapiro advised de Kooning not to be concerned with finishing a painting. Shapiro recommended an unfinished area would give viewers a safe entrance into and exit out of his relentlessly energetic work. For a while, an unfinished area in a de Kooning appeared at a corner.
RB: I can relate to that. His work became systematic in a way that allowed for speed. During that reflection period between moves, it can be hard to know when the painting is telling you it's done, especially if you're moving quickly. You really have to pause and listen because those spaces that lack frenetic energy are the moments where your eye can rest and catch a breath. It leaves room to enter and exit the work.

GH: Frank Stella described the problem for Abstract Expressionists as the inability to resolve the corners of their paintings.
RB: Frank Stella also talked about painting himself into corners which I can relate to. Dealing with geometric abstraction, which I've mined quite substantially over the years, is tricky. It sets up a proposition of complete control in opposition to the freedom of the gesture. In my opinion, corners and edges carry heavier weight in works of abstraction in a way that sometimes isn't true with narrative-based figurative work.

By activating the entire picture plane, I'm often denying the viewer a chance to rest in any particular place on the picture plane. In a sense, I'm giving equal weight to the entirety of the image by denying a singular focal point. This is not always true in my practice but often is. In my cave paintings, there is a focal point, but the corners, and even more importantly, the edges carry compositional weight.

GH: Although your work possesses a centrifugal presence, you manage to control the corners of your paintings.
RB: Right, I think this comes back to the influence of soviet constructivism and 70s and 80' geometric abstraction—think early Stella, Smithson, Davis, and Gilliam meet late Stella and Peter Halley's prisons. Their works continue to influence the way I think about the building up of an image. It can be through lines, color, or textural elements that give the illusion of a narrative through the fog of layering. Maybe the consideration of the corner sets up a proposition of a continued narrative between the paintings. The corners also have the ability to bring the viewer back into the image. One corner can lock you in, while another can imply movement outside the delineated confines of the painting

GH: Creating a state of mind in the viewer?
RB: Sure. The paintings are commodified manifestations of the way that I'm thinking about the world. Charline Von Heyl talks about the "mind-space" of her studio in relation to what ends up being depicted in her paintings. I love that. There's an intimacy to the environment that I'm working in, the imagery I'm surrounding myself with, what I'm listening to, viewing, and scrolling through. These all creep into the work and start to build a narrative of the world I believe we're currently living in. The historic through-lines to our past that lead to this current moment are also of interest. I'm creating an environment for the viewer to enter, and I hope it affects their emotional state in some way. How much or how little is subjective.

GH: Is depending on grid as a strategy for organizing the picture plane of a painting too predictable?
RB: It depends on how you utilize it. I do mistrust the grid even while being tied to it. In the same way, I usually mistrust every initial move I make in a painting. My practice, aside from political concerns, is formally about building up the surface, creating a patina, tactility, and sometimes the illusion of depth. My work is about creating a space, often a landscape that presents to the viewer a world both historical and channeled through pressing current contemporary concerns. I'm asking the viewer to enter that space, and I never underestimate the audience and their subjective experience of my work.

GH: Is there a particular way abstraction functions in your painting?
RB: Yes. I'm not interested in abstraction for its own sake. Abstraction for me is a strategy that I utilize in altering a predetermined idea. There's an oscillating tension between the didactic qualities of the more representational elements and the use of the gesture as erasure. Where the painting is going to land is always up for internal debate and goes back to your question about de Kooning and knowing when to stop. You can think about it more formally as well when considering the pull of the depth created by layering, seeing through in some areas of my paintings to the canvas, and the pushing outward of the almost topographically tactile surface elements in the work.

GH: There are references to historical events in your paintings. You mentioned earlier John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Are your paintings an effort to disassemble and possibly re-mythologize these subjects?
RB: It was not my intent to re-mythologize these subjects, but if that ends up happening, I'm more than ok with that. Thinking about Picasso's Guernica, it's honestly the only reason I know anything at all about the Spanish Civil War. Now to be clear, I am not interested in history in any linear sense, but rather I'm drawn to certain images and reference materials that carry historical through lines to moments where we are living through now. Considering the 54th Massachusetts paintings (Fort Wagner and Angels Descending) I made between 2020 and 2021, I asked myself what "are the sparks that lit the current flames of unrest? What are the historical moments that created those through lines to the contemporary world we are currently navigating?" There are important conversations happening around the founding of the United States and who we want to be moving forward. I wrestle with that in the studio.

GH: And what is the relationship between abstraction and the political?
I feel that objective forms of abstraction are inherently political. My work in the past often sets up a proposition of change through action, often a spontaneous combustion and the dissolving of hard-edge structural forms. Structure and uniformity versus a transformation into the unknown. The work is currently less vague in its historical reference points, and that's a conscious decision for more specificity.

GH: Are you referencing these events in order for the paintings to take a political position?
RB: Sure. This recent body of work emphasizes my belief in the cyclical nature of historical events and how the past always shines light on the present. When looking at the past couple of years through the lens of historical chasms in U.S. history, the lead up to and the events of the U.S. Civil War, arguably the most violent and schismatic, it is tragically clear that we have not truly come to grips with the lingering ramifications of our nation's split and tenuous reunification.
While my interpretations of current events or the perceived future threats are less representational, there's a clarity for me in historical events that allow for a more didactic specificity in the articulation of the works.

GH: Your painting technique involves plotting out the basic imagery, sanding and scraping away at that imagery, repainting, overlaying, and repeating. The process appears to dance between composition and improvisation.
RB: I love the thought of this being a dance, a dance between pattern and gesture, material and form, drawing and painting, round and straight, destruction and reconstruction. I'm definitely thinking rhythmically when painting. Not in reference to jazz or any specific type of music per se, but more of an internal rhythm. There is this moment when the image is disrupted beyond recognition from the source material and then it becomes a question of what information I'm allowing to come through to the audience. That's the fun part.

GH: The works in the current show have a feeling of a violent moment.
RB: Yes. After moving from the 54th Mass paintings and prints from 2020 and 2021, I became more visually engaged with lithographic prints and reproductions from that era. In my opinion, the event at Harpers Ferry was the true start of the Civil War. It was clearly the first time that many of the pacifist-leaning abolitionists of that time began to acknowledge that violence and an armed struggle might be the only option for abolishing slavery. My work is less about that violence and more about the exploration of change and the pushing and pulling of opposing forces that result in something completely new.

GH: Despite the explosive imagery, I feel a kind of calm within each piece.
RB: The feeling of calm makes sense. For me, it's more of a trance. There's a pacing to work that I'm looking for, a rhythm to the reading of the work that must make sense for me before the painting is completed.