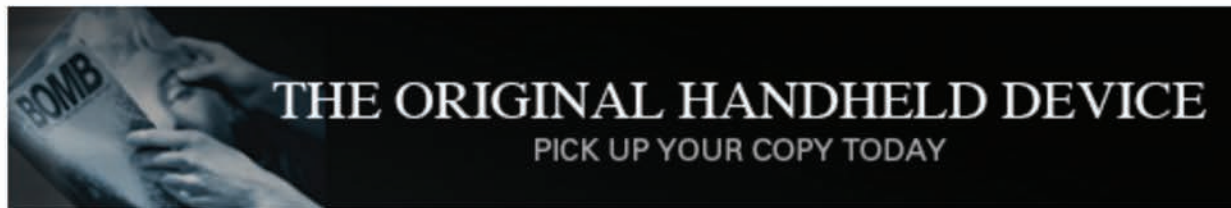


THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981
BOMBSITE



Toni Ross
by Jean Pagliuso
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On left: Untitled 1055 / TR 2, 2011. Shino glazed stoneware, 20.75x7 x 7 inches. On right: Untitled 1047 / TR 1, 2011. Stoneware, brushed black slip, 21.75x10 x 10 inches. All images courtesy of Ricco/Maresca Gallery.

Toni Ross and I had a budding friendship when we were serendipitously exhibited together in the Drawing Room Gallery in East Hampton in 2009. With our exhibit ahead of us, we began to exchange ideas about our work and its impact on our lives. In the spring of the following year, we traveled to Egypt looking for inspiration. Both of us are deeply private people, yet, after an end to each day of immersing ourselves in the chaos of Cairo and the exquisite quiet of the tombs of Luxor, we settled in to talk endlessly of our families, our childhoods, and how lucky we were to have gotten to this point—all this sprinkled with lots of laughter.

So here is what I have come to know about Toni: Toni Ross is a lithe, compact, and quiet storm of activity. Her inexhaustible determination is disguised by a seemingly tailored self-delivery. Beneath this surface lies a maelstrom of quandaries, hopes, and good, solid choices. In her life she has grappled with the complexity of being the daughter of the visionary head of Warner Communication, the tragedy of being widowed by the premature, accidental death of her husband, the responsibility of running six very successful restaurants, the realization of being the single parent to two college-age children, and, now add this . . . coming into her own as an artist of sublime ceramics.

Her recent exhibition at Ricco/Maresco in Chelsea is spare and elegant. It hits a perfect pitch of intent and purity. While she was preparing for this exhibit, I often visited her studio and watched its evolution from little clay coils and slabs. I saw that she seduces these forms as well as being herself seduced. The resulting groupings of pieces recall the past and exist profoundly in the present. She did her research and her history plays a part.

JEAN PAGLIUSO I have four words that I'd like you to talk about in terms of your art and your life. The first is *Morandi*.

TONI ROSS Hmm, I didn't actually discover Morandi until pretty recently at the Met and it was a pivotal turning point for me. There were these still lifes of vessels, and it was *not* about the vessels. It was about the forms and the shapes. They were simply the vehicle to explore paint on canvas. That really opened up some doors for me.



Quintet in White, TR 24, 2011. Shino glazed and abraded stoneware, 23" x 22" x 12".

JP And *Cycladic pottery*?

TR Cycladic art, I discovered really early on, in my early 20s.

JP When you were starting to study pottery—I mean we all had art history—did it come to you then, in relation to pottery?

TR I was doing ceramics. I had done some painting and drawing. I was, you know, *generally* interested in art. I had lived in Paris for a summer with a family when I was fifteen. I went to museums a lot and I was *really* into the Impressionists and seeing everything I could. So, I went to the old Getty Museum and it was the first time I encountered these Cycladic idols. I was riveted! I've never forgotten what the room looked like: I remember the pieces, their scale, and I remember being completely blown away by the simplicity of these forms, like I'd never seen anything that spare and powerful before, or it hadn't hit me like that. So, in everything that I did from then on, somehow that form would come back, unintentionally maybe, but I couldn't let it go. I just went to the Met this morning. My goal was to go see Heroic Africans because Frank Maresca had said that it would flip me out.

JP Did it?

TR It was pretty amazing. There were pieces that definitely rivaled some of the Cycladic work. The most interesting were from this culture, the Akan tribes, where the women made the sculpture and—this is really, really cool—these heads. On the Cycladic idols the heads are often tipped back at a certain angle and I've never thought about why, but these African pieces were tipped back in that same way. They were meant to be open to the heavens and all things above. There are holes in the backs of the heads of all of these sculptures! So they are vessels. And they would put—

JP Were they functioning as vessels?

TR Here's the thing, they had holes in the backs of the heads to put personal memorabilia.

JP Well, sometimes they're funerary objects.

TR The sculptures were vessels . . . and this was all invested in the women.

JP What years are we talking about?

TR These were from tribes who were still working in a primitive way up until the 19th century, so they might have been from around that time, but they *look* like they are thousands of years old. The Akan are in southern Africa.

JP Isolated?

TR Yes. This show explores six different tribes. These sculptures were their way of recording their history, until they discovered photography. A foreigner came in there and photographed them, and then *they* started documenting themselves that way and lost a lot of their tradition of documenting their lives through sculpture.

JP Okay, so the third word, *solitude*.

TR Solitude in my work or in my life?

JP It crossed my mind when I was looking at your work.

TR That's a profound question. I've always led a life of solitude even though I don't think it necessarily appears that way.

JP I started seeing that and it's amazing because your life is, by necessity, quite broad. But those pieces go so far in the other direction. I thought that maybe there's some retreat that allows you to reduce down like that.

TR Yes, that's so perceptive. As a child I spent a lot of time alone. I was an only child for six years, and I traveled alone a lot as a young adult. It's not something I like to do now, but I did a lot of things by myself. I was talking to a friend recently, saying how I left college and was traveling all over Europe by myself, and he kept going, "Alone?" But yeah, it seemed normal to me. But there is a place that I go to when I'm working that is *completely* solitary—

JP That's what it looks like in the studio.

TR I have the ability to shut out everything, which I hadn't realized about myself until pretty recently. I think my family had realized it earlier (*laughter*). I can be in a room with a lot going on, and just have no idea that it's happening. I've had to do that out of necessity because there is so much going on around me. I work through all of it. I guess the work does look very solitary. Even in the groupings.

JP It got that way. It didn't look that way in the beginning but once you moved into the grayish whitish glazes, it felt much more quiet.

TR My intent when I began this body of work—these groupings—was to quiet everything down—

JP It was an interesting challenge, wasn't it?

TR I felt that in order for the pieces to be grouped they needed to be quieter. Too much chatter can create chaos.

JP They fight.

TR They do. I wanted the work to be more about connectedness or the relationship between forms than I did about competing surfaces and chaos. So that's how I came up with the gray and black and white thing.

JP *Containment*. I was reading things that had been written about you in the past, about vessels of containment. I see it as a much bigger word than that.

TR I connect it to being a woman and to the restrictions that are put on us—or that we put on ourselves. It does feel like a personal, intimate sense of that. The cubes are a reflection of an energy contained inside and there's a desire to break out. This constant fight between respect for the boundaries but wanting to break the imposed boundaries and limits, all this seems very related to being a woman.

JP I agree.



Untitled, TR 44, 2011. White and black slip brushed and salted stoneware, 4.5" x 4.5" x 4.5" each.

TR I mean there are other more archetypal ideas about containment but that's not really what I think about. It's more of a sociopolitical kind of angst thing.

JP It's important to understand that in all you've touched on is the evolution of your technique. Is college where you started seriously taking pottery classes?

TR I had done some clay work in high school, just straight sculpture. I actually lived across the street from the Sculpture Center on 69th Street. My bedroom window looked out onto it. Then my grandparents, who were very supportive of artists, signed me up there. So I had done some sculpture early on but what I ultimately loved was clay. When I got to Wesleyan University I wasn't crazy about the sculpture department. I was working a lot with wood and some other materials that I just wasn't that interested in. The clay was in the ceramic studio, so I did that. I loved my professor, and I was pretty into it for a while and then I switched gears because I wanted to do—

JP Do what?

TR Film.

JP Which would certainly make sense. I mean especially with your background, you kind of have to get that out of the way.

TR I think you're right. The chairman of the film studies, Jeanine Basinger, who taught most of the classes at the time, was one of the most extraordinary teachers anyone would be lucky enough to have; a lot of my draw was to her. But my father encouraged me to stay with art and not do film; he felt that my strength was in the art world.

JP When *I* finally reached where I was going my father was dead. He raised chickens and I, as you know, used them as a subject.

TR Many of the men in my life are gone and it would have been nice for them see where I am now. But in the case of my father—less so with my husband, although I don't know—it would have felt like a different experience that might not have been entirely my own.

JP There's nobody there to please but yourself now, and that really helps.

TR Yeah, there was nothing else, just me and the work. It's a duality.

JP When did you install your first kiln? Were you out of college?

TR Yeah. I have had many lives since. I had pursued some film work after college, and then I went back to doing some clay, and then I ended up doing a lot of drawing and painting for a while.

JP What were you doing in Carrara in your 20s? What led you to there?

TR I had become very friendly with Elaine de Kooning. I was living in East Hampton. She found me a house and a studio out near her. And at some point I decided that I wanted to go to Italy, I wanted to go to the museums.

JP But Carrara is a little out of the way.

TR I'd already been traveling for a few months by myself. I actually met Bryan Hunt, I think, on that trip. I had gone to stay with Joe Helman at his house outside of Rome, and he brought us into Rome one night for dinner and we all went to the Caravaggio's in these churches. I was just like, Oh my God! This is how I remember it. It may not be true, but I think I went back to their house that night, packed up, and they drove me into Rome and found me some little hotel to stay. Joe remembers driving me there and dropping me off and watching me walk away. It was nearly 30 years until we saw each other again. Joe says he felt he was sending me off to my new life. He was.

JP I met Bryan just a few years before that, Joe too for that matter.

TR It kind of changed my life.

JP It changed your life in many ways.

TR I read *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, the novel about Michelangelo, while I was in Italy and I thought, Well, before I go home I want to go see the quarries where this all came from. So I went into the Carrara quarries where ran into this group of artists who were buying stone. One of them was my future husband. He was a sculptor.

JP Wow.

TR I know. I stayed another day, and I stayed another day, and then I ended up there for a year.

JP Oh! In Carrara?

TR Yeah. I was one of the few people drawing and painting, everyone else there was sculpting. There's a big international community of artists there. What was the original question? Oh, the kiln. Carrara was in 1984. I built my kiln in 2003.

JP Were you already doing coil and slab at that point or were you throwing?

TR I was primarily throwing. I rented a tiny corner of someone else's studio and that's where I worked, and I used a community kiln. After the death of my husband, I didn't want to be in that public environment anymore. So I ended up building my own studio and my own kiln.

JP Yours is outside, but they aren't all outside?

TR No, it depends on the kiln and the type of fuel you're using and the effects that you want.

JP When we were having our show together at the Drawing Room in East Hampton, it seemed to me that you either had just started using a larger kiln or that things had been changing. Maybe you had gone to somebody else's kiln because you couldn't do what you wanted to do in yours. Did that then lead to a different style of working? When you got to the point of grinding, was it because the glazes didn't work? It's such a great serendipitous thing to have happen.



Untitled, TR 1033, 2011. Shino glazed stoneware (abraded), 22.5" x 5.5" x 5.5".

TR Yeah, the grinding thing in particular had happened because I had so badly misfired my kiln. *(laughter)*

JP Your own kiln?

TR Yeah, I totally misfired my own kiln. I'm not a ceramic engineer. I have friends who are brilliant at this, but I was still learning. There are a lot of ways that you can misfire a kiln.

JP When I was reading about the Shino glaze, I saw that it's vast in what it can produce. But you had pretty much narrowed it down.

TR Yeah, I used three or four different formulations of Shino and—

JP Do you alter them for your own purposes or are these formulations pretty important to stick to?

TR No, actually for the show I found one that I liked and then I adjusted it a little bit and then I adjusted it a little bit more. But because I've really transitioned from ceramics, meaning functional ware, into sculpture, it's allowed me to be very open to what actually happens with the materials. I'm not limited by any particular type of surface that's necessary for utilitarian purpose, so that's opened up a whole other way of working.

JP But is it limited to a type of clay?

TR Well, it matters to me how the glaze fits the clay body because they have to shrink at the same rate—

JP Oh!

TR Otherwise you get a lot of cracking. I mean the glaze changes the nature of the surface of the clay. I limit myself to the type of high-fired stoneware when I'm using Shino because I know that these two fit together and I can somewhat predict what they'll do within some parameters.

JP It sounds pretty technical.

TR There's a lot of chemistry. With the abrading, since I had misfired the kiln, I had lost a lot of the pieces just from cracking, and then the rest of the pieces had blistered. It was horrible. I *couldn't* have afforded to lose all that work because you and I were having a show together two months later. *(laughter)* I contemplated the disaster for about 20 minutes and then started sorting through the work, discarding the unsalvageable pieces, collecting the ones that could be reglazed. I began grinding off the blistered surfaces to prepare them to accept new glazes. In the moment just before I was going to plunge the first of these pieces into the bucket of shine, I paused and thought to myself, Am I crazy or is this really beautiful, abraded and exposed just as it is? So I stopped glazing and continued grinding.

JP In your recent solo exhibit at Ricco Maresca Gallery, it seems that a whole new body of work occurred as well. I realize that the changes are minimal but they're pretty great when you put them next to each other. And there you were under the most amount of pressure, but apparently that's the way you work best.

TR I guess so. *(laughter)* I mean I couldn't be happier that I have that show, and that they had offered it to me and that I've done it, but I thought, Wow it would be kind of cool if somebody offered you a show and you_had_ the body of work and all you had to do was assemble it!

JP Well, yeah, I thought you had.

TR No! We had talked about the idea of groupings, but the rest of it was up to me. I'm not somebody who makes big changes really fast. I don't know what the perception is. They were like small steps that meant something bigger.

JP You showed me a lot of things in another little shed that were quite beautiful, and you then went another step from that to the show at the Drawing Room and then you went a *huge* step to Ricco Maresca. It's great to come over to your place under the guise of taking a swim, and then seeing the makings of that.

TR I don't know if this is true for other artists, but I can get too close to my work. I'm very isolated in my studio and it is really important to have a small group of people that I trust, to come in and respond to the work. It might not change what I'm doing, but it's interesting to see their reading of the work. I just lose all sense of where I'm at with it. I don't know if that happens to you.

JP Well, you held a pretty close line.

TR I'm totally emotionally involved. Either I like something or I don't like it, I can't even separate if it's aesthetically strong or not. But I had a couple of pieces that were *not* going to be in the show. I just thought that they didn't work and I had them off in a corner. And I can't remember if it was you or maybe it was my assistant, who said, "Why is that over there and not with the rest?" And I was like, Humph. It's a simple form, but it's gotten more attention in the current show than anything else. Sometimes it takes me a long time to come around to some of the work and I'm not sure why I have particular attachments to certain pieces. When someone asks me what my favorite piece is, it's not a relevant question.

Untitled, TR 31 2011, shino blushed and glazed stoneware, 23.5×5.5×5.5 inches.

JP No, it isn't. My answer changes from day to day, mood to mood—

TR Exactly.

JP Here you are: you're a successful restaurateur and very hands-on from the beginning—I didn't know you then, but I know you were. Then it comes about that your specialty is as a pastry chef—there's this funny jump from one to the other, there's the dough and there's the clay. Your hands don't look to me like a big workman's hands, and yet you're *really* in there. Those coils, when you finally showed me how it's done, you start with the simple little bottom of it and then work your way up. Do you change your mind as you go or do you have a sketch that guides you to a form?

TR Both. I almost always start with an idea in mind. But I know myself well enough to know that whatever is in my mind may not be the thing that I am meant to do because I may not have quite imagined it—

JP Well does it guide you or do you guide it?

TR I feel like it's this collaborative thing. That's also what's really appealing about all the material I use because it's collaborative. The Shino is collaborative because I'm helping it to do something but then it's going to do an added thing—

JP That's the most wonderful aspect! I've been around when you're anticipating bringing the things out of the kiln and it's a very anxious time.

TR Ugh, that actually seriously makes me feel sick. (*laughter*)

JP I get it—*all* that effort could either be the greatest thing you've ever seen or . . . But what a wonderful feeling, not being in total control.

TR During my recent gallery talk several people pointed out to me something I hadn't clearly realized—my keen interest in this line between chaos and control.



Untitled, TR 54, 2011. Shino blushed and glazed stoneware, 4.5" x 4.5" x 4.5".



Untitled, TR 55, 2011. Shino blushed and glazed stoneware, 4.5" x 4.5" x 4.5".

JP You mentioned somebody who was your teacher, and, in fact, you just recently connected with her at your last show.

TR There are really a few people who have been key influences for me. One was my film professor in college who is the smartest, most broadly educated person I've known. What she taught me was this extraordinary ability to go from mentoring someone—she mentored me a lot—to looking for advice from the same person. One day she came to me saying, "Would you edit this paper?" and she'd written thirteen books. It was such an extraordinary learning moment that someone can be that open to making those kinds of paradigm shifts. It just happened again with the woman who taught me how to do this coiling technique that I didn't want to learn—

JP Yeah, that's what I was thinking of.

TR Coiling sounded stupid—you make these little coils and it feels like you're in first grade. She taught a workshop in my studio, and I thought: It's in my studio and it's rude if I don't participate, right? It's like a three-day thing.

JP So where are we in your life?

TR This is only seven years ago.

JP And were you doing the slab art at that point? When I first met you, much of your work was made by cutting out slabs from the clay and placing them around a prescribed form. It was more like making a pie.

TR I was doing some slab work and I was throwing on a wheel, altering pieces. The pieces were relatively small at that point. I had met Joyce Michaud several years before at a workshop and we became very friendly. She knew *a lot* about Shino, and she was the first person that I had met who did. The only way I've learned anything—because I didn't go to art or graduate school—was by finding people who know things. So she came to do this workshop and I thought: I'll do this to be nice. And then I just *loved* it because the coiling was the right pace for me. It's slower; it lends itself to sculpture—

JP It's unbelievably slow!

TR Although in a way it also goes very quickly. When I'm really in it, I can create three forms of the size that are in the show—which are two-feet tall—in about a week.

JP If you were throwing it, it would be just over in an hour.

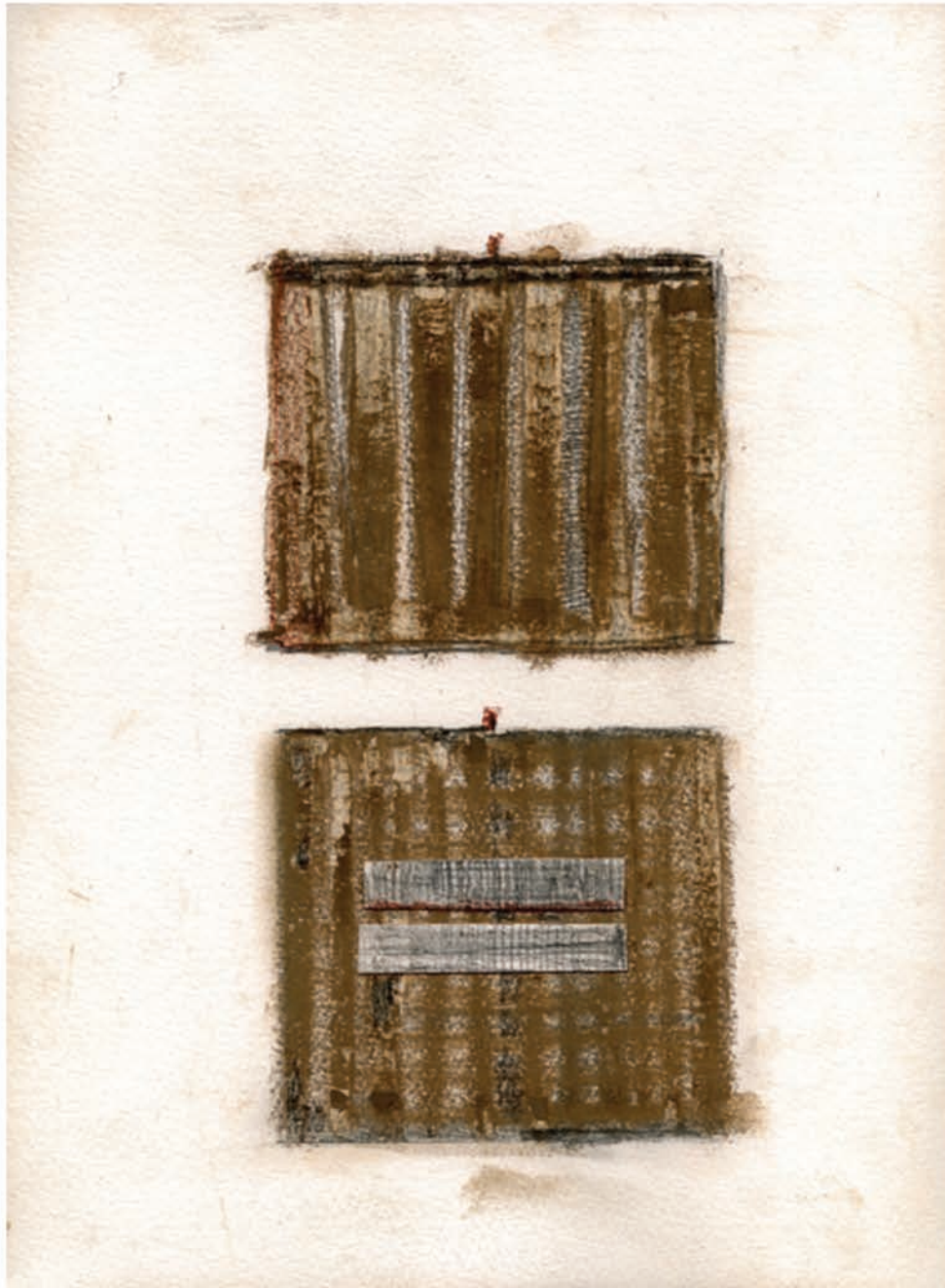
TR But it just feels like the right pace, the right amount of time. It feels very meditative to me, and I'm lost in it, which didn't happen quite enough for me on the wheel, although—

JP She must be thrilled. Has she seen the results, has she seen your show?

TR Yeah, she drove up from Maryland few days after the opening. We talked for a really long time. I was having these technical issues that I was able to talk to her about. She's a wonderful teacher and she invited me to come and teach a workshop to her MFA students.

JP You'll bring to them what she brought to you.

TR And I'm going to learn there. Just from having to put together my thoughts in some coherent way.



Egyptian Memories I, TR 13, 2011. Black clay, graphite, pastel and collage on paper, 11.5" x 9".

JP You and I had a wonderful trip to Egypt—when the times were good—and we were blown away by what we saw.

TR (*laughter*) Pray tell what do you mean? Just a few glitches . . .

JP Yeah, and the *incredible* art—living art!—of those dynasties. It was very different from Cycladic pottery. It seemed to reveal so much of the people's daily lives. Yet I know you were moved by many things. Did anything from that trip resonate for you?

TR Yes, but it hasn't come out yet because it takes a while for things to settle inside me. I find that my work is better when I'm not quite so conscious of where the influences are coming from.

JP Well, I wondered if the works on paper had anything to do with that trip? Did you always do little studies using the clay slip, kind of like paint?

TR No, I haven't always done that.

JP What was the original function of those drawings, were they studies? Showing them as finished pieces up there on the wall was a big step.

TR Well they never were studies; they were explorations of a different kind. As with clay, I'm drawn to paper. When I draw things they don't always translate to three dimensions.

JP They are beautiful. They're so minimal, but the texture is subtle—

TR That's another turning point for me. I've never shown my drawings to anybody, so when I first saw them framed it was shocking because some of them had been sitting on my bulletin board for a couple of years. Just tacked up! But I see those works on paper and the sculpture as feeding each other; I move back and forth between them. The chicken and the egg—whether one influences the other more or less—

JP Don't use the chicken metaphors!

TR Oh, I'm sorry. (*laughter*) I forgot whom I was talking to.

JP You have had names for your shows, but this last one was *Toni Ross*, and I thought, that's significant. Did you have another name, and then decide that it's really about Toni Ross?

TR Totally. I had come up with a title and then when we were going to do the poster Frank said, "It's just *Toni Ross*."

JP You were working with people that helped a lot. They understood, and that's just the best working relationship you can have.

TR I couldn't be in a better situation on every possible level at Ricco Maresca because they've pushed me but not too much, they've left me alone but not too much. And we have such great conversations and I've known them for so long. I seem to have these meltdowns at some point along the way leading up to a show where I just lose it and go, Oh my God! What have I done? You know, and then I'm crying alone in the studio. (*laughter*) I had so much trust in them that I felt that they would not put me in the wrong place at the wrong time. I had to take that leap of faith and that's all I could do. But when I was thinking of us—you and I—talking, I feel there is a commonality in our work, particularly in your landscape and architectural photographs and the fragile remains images. Although it's unintentional, there's something about my work that looks ancient. The fragility and the power in that exists in both of our work.

JP Concentrate on that, that's so nice.

TR The whole textual sensuality of your work. On the trip to Egypt, I learned so much about myself by the three of us—Bastienne [Schmidt], you, and me—looking at our photographs each night because it looked like we had been on three distinct trips! We were like, "Where was that?" And meanwhile we had been in the exact same place!

JP Yeah, you were like close-up, close-up.

TR I was taking photos of the corner of this little piece of stone—and you're taking these vast, beautiful expanses, and Bastienne was getting involved with village life. In a lot of the Egyptian tombs and the paintings, the Pharaohs are sitting on these cubes that are like chairs—apparently those were gates of heaven. And I had been making this imagery for so long. This is what I find happens—

JP You get validation—

TR But I didn't know that! Don't you find that that happens?

JP Yeah, yeah.

TR Like you're working, you think this is your own thing, and then it turns out that for the past 8,000 years, it's been a very standard vocabulary. Who knew? I spend every minute of my life right now going: *What?*