Joe Fig interviews Peter Campus
East Patchogue, New York
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JF: To start off, can you please tell me a bit about your background?

PC: I grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan near Columbia University, 113th and Broadway. My father was a doctor. We had a ground-floor doctor’s office apartment, rather large, and at that time the neighborhood was very safe. The shopkeepers along Broadway would look after the children, and we would walk down and play in Riverside Park. There was a lot of freedom. I went to a private school called Walden School, which I started at the age of three. A very significant tragic event in my life was that my mother died when I was just seven, and I became very depressed as a young kid. Additionally, in school I was picked on terribly—I was bullied really badly. It’s something I’ll never forget. I’m glad there’s a lot of attention these days to bullying because you just don’t forget it. Maybe some motivation to succeed came from that bullying?

We had art in our house. My cousins, who were about the age of an aunt and uncle, were artists. We had their art in our house and Baziotes’s,¹ which I still have, and Ruth Gikow’s² work, which I really love. I grew up with art; I grew up going to museums, in particular the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum.

I started painting at Walden School when I was twelve. I spent a lot of my time just painting. The love of art and making art at that time was so strong that it brought me to being an artist. There was nothing I enjoyed more than that. I don’t like calling painting a language, but it was something different from speaking that allowed me to express myself.

One other important thing from that time is that I’d walk to the Symphony Theatre on my down during the day and see movies. That theater showed English films. I was seeing a lot of films directed by Michael Powell.³ Those films were a big influence on me.

So my father met a woman from the building whose husband had recently died. She asked him if she could care for us boys and the house, and my father said yes, and she moved in. Eventually they got married, and we moved to Bayside, Queens. And it was so different. At Bayside there were no art classes. I was still going to museums and the movies but I was doing it on my own; there was no outside encouragement.

JF: What’s the earliest art piece you made as a child that got recognition?

PC: It was a picture I made in tempera of a ship’s mast with a man in the crow’s nest looking through binoculars off into the distance. I was probably

¹ William Baziotes (1912–63), American. Abstract expressionist painter influenced by surrealism.
² Ruth Gikow (1915–82), American, born in Ukraine. Painter known for figurative works that reflect the humanity of her subjects.
³ Michael Powell (1905–90), British. Writer, producer, and director of classic British films.
thirteen or fourteen.

JF: Where did you go to college?

pc: After Bayside High School, I went to Ohio State. At first I studied engineering, and then I studied experimental psychology. It was very interesting work. I also did very well in mathematics. Ohio State is a big university, very different from New York. It was my first taste of anti-Semitism.

I graduated in 1960. I went directly into the army—there was still a draft at that point. There was a program where you did six months’ active service and then six years of reserve, so I did my six months, and I just avoided the Vietnam War. My brother, who was an officer, sheltered me. He took me into his own unit and protected me. When I got out of the army, I lived with my parents for a while back in Queens.

JF: When did you consider yourself a professional artist and able to dedicate yourself full time to that pursuit?

pc: When I got out of the army my father asked, “What do you want to do?” I said, “I want to be an artist.” He said, “Absolutely not. You’ll starve; it’ll be horrible. Your brother’s in the movie business—why don’t you go into the movie business?” I said, “OK,” and my brother got me a job with U.S. Productions. I was very ambitious, but the job I got was as a gofer. Periodically I would go to my bosses and ask to do more, so very quickly they made me a unit manager. I worked at that job for about five years.

JF: What type of productions were you working on?

pc: Mostly documentaries. I started teaching myself how to edit. One day I asked the company to give me an editing job. I happened to be really good at it. At that time everyone was doing drugs, and the editing room was where people came to do drugs. The top people would come in, and sometimes they’d bring clients to smoke some weed, so we were in this atmosphere breathing in weed all day long. [laughs]

I was in my early thirties at that point and said, “Fuck this, if I don’t become an artist now, I’ll never do it.” So I quit that job. I had some money saved up and just lived on next to nothing. I moved into a loft on Twenty-Second Street off of Eighth Avenue, before it was Chelsea, and that cost me $125 a month, and I started making videos immediately.

JF: Were there other artists at the time working in video?

pc: I think Nam June Paik, Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Beryl Korot, and Andy Mann were a bit before me, and then, of course, the person who interested me more than any of those people was Bruce Nauman.\(^4\) I thought his work was spectacular. In video, if you used a console, the reels lasted one hour, so Nauman was doing one-hour videos. I had come from working in film and everything was cut, cut, cut, so to do one endless take on video for an hour—it

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\(^4\) Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), American. Sculptor, photographer, and performance artist working in video. He was a pioneer in his use of video in art. His work incorporates the activities, speech and materials of everyday life.
was extraordinary! Here I was an editor, and here’s someone [Nauman] who’s doing something that is not about editing—it’s about performance. With video it’s start and stop—you press a button and get rolling. It was about as crude as you can imagine. If you wanted to edit video, you’d have to add on. The work that I did was not edited; it was all about performance. This was around 1969, 1970.

JF: How did you get your first real gallery show?

pc: It was very easy for me. I was a thirty-three-year-old man. The ten years I might have struggled to gain recognition didn’t happen to me. I put out my videos and almost immediately got a NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts] grant.

When I decided I wanted to show my work to galleries, I would travel around with these big pieces of equipment. In one hand was this suitcase-type thing, and in the other was a monitor. It was like Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman5 walking around like, "Would you like to buy my videos?" [laughs] I had no fear.

One day I saw Klaus Kertess, from Bykert Gallery, and he was interested in my work. At that time I had only shown my videos at museums. I thought, OK, what does it mean to show videos in a gallery setting? It’s interesting because most people spend about twenty seconds looking at any work of art. I thought, If I’m going to make this video, people are going to spend only twenty seconds looking at it. So I came up with this idea of using closed-circuit television that had no videotape involved. The first piece I did was called Kiva, and it showed at Bykert [Gallery] in 1972.

JF: Currently we’re sitting in your studio, which is in your home. Is that what you prefer?

pc: There have been very few times that I’ve had a studio separate from where I lived. I’ve always liked to be able to get up whenever I want and work. The work I’m doing often requires a very long time on the computer, just processing, so I often do that in the middle of the night.

JF: Has the location of your studio influenced your work?

pc: It’s probably the other way around. I chose the location for my work. I’ve been working around Shinnecock Bay for about ten years. The fishermen there probably know me by now and don’t mind my presence. The light and the physicalness of the place is extraordinary. I’ve been coming out to Long Island since the early 1970s.

JF: Please describe a typical day, being as specific as possible.

pc: I get up around six o’clock and Kathleen6 gets up usually about nine; I spend the time before she gets up reading the [New York] Times. Then we eat breakfast together, and that’s all done by ten thirty. That’s when I come in here [the computer room]. This is where I spend most of my time. Depending on what

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5 Willy Loman is the protagonist of Arthur Miller’s play Death of a Salesman; he is a traveling salesman whose career is in decline.

6 Kathleen J. Graves (b. 1951), American. Artist whose work is based on nature and technology.
I'm doing, I could work into the evening or be finished in a few hours. The processing, even with this very powerful computer, takes hours, even to do a two-and-a-half-minute test strip.

I work in multiple layers: picture and sound. Each of them has all these attributes, and within these attributes are more attributes, so there's almost infinite variety for each layer—it's infinitely complicated. When I feel like it's finalized, I say to the computer, "OK, give me a composite—compress all the layers with the sound." It's a three-stage process that takes about a half hour. Then I present it here [monitor mounted to the wall across the room] and look at it because there's a difference between how video looks on a monitor and how video looks on a computer. So I do a test strip and look at it, make notes, and see what I want to alter. This stage can take weeks, just going back and forth, back and forth. When I finish a piece, I'll sit here and look at it over and over again. I'll leave it on the monitor for a day or even a week until I know everything that's going on. Often enough, I have to go through that whole process again. It's pretty laborious.

The days that I go out shooting video are not so different. After breakfast I'll drive out to Shinnecock Bay and start working. I shoot for about four hours. When I come home I want to look at what I shot immediately, so I start downloading it and converting it to see what the possibilities are. Ninety percent of the time I'm disappointed. These videos are not edited; it's all one continuous shot. The complexity comes in the layers—there's no cut. In German a cut is a Schnitt. There's no Schnitt. [laughs] The take in the field is about eight minutes, and then I extend the time. A lot of what I do is adding and multiplying filters for each layer. It becomes very complicated.

JF: When you go out to Shinnecock, do you know something's going on, or do you go on a whim and see what you can get?

pc: I want to be surprised. I really try to go with absolutely nothing in mind. A lot of that has to do with what's going on in the present with my psychology; I want to have some resonance between what's inside of me and what's going on out there in the field. I keep thinking of Michelangelo releasing the sculpture from the stone. I have this video footage, and I'm trying to find the piece from inside that footage. I really need to be very receptive to what's out there.

JF: Is there a difference in light over the seasons?

pc: Dramatically so. I'm a fan of summer light—it's extraordinary. The winter light is not like Bergman's winter light. Out on the East End, it's much more beautiful than that. It's not gloomy at all, but it's definitely a different color. I think it's bluer, and in the summer it seems warmer, more orange.

JF: Can you tell me about the materials you use and how they came into your practice? Maybe talk about the evolution of the medium for you.

pc: Well, my art career started with video. I liked the immediacy of it, and it
seemed to me somehow related to painting. What I was feeling when I was painting was: this is happening now, while I’m doing it, and that part was really exciting to me.

JF: Video is different from film in that there’s no cutting. You’re doing this in the moment, for an extended period of time—a one shot, which is similar to painting, where you’re really in the moment, trying to get that action, trying to get that moment down.

pc: Initially, the work had a lot to do with what was available at the time; later it became something quite different. My interest became what I call duration versus time. My videos are in duration, and time is really minor. I’m interested in duration, because the land itself has duration. It [the land] isn’t particularly interested in this pent-up time, this Schnitt [laughs], these breaks in time. It doesn’t occur in the landscape; it’s continuous. It’s part of the land. That’s the time that I’m interested in. And I manipulate that time; I slow it down, yet it’s still duration.

In the seventies I worked in video, for the most part. Then from 1980 to 1995 I switched to still photography. I became digital while working in photography.

JF: You didn’t do any video for fifteen years?

pc: None. Not a bit.

JF: Was that a very conscious decision?

pc: It was a very erroneous conscious decision. [laughs] My thinking was that since my video is still—I didn’t move the camera—what could be more still than a still camera? But, slowly and surely, because of the still camera, I got deeply into landscape both physically and emotionally, which I hadn’t done in my video work. The photography gave me the experience of being in landscape, and that became really an important part of my art making. I was always good with technology, so it was natural for me to start working with computers, but the first couple of years working with computers really determined what I was doing because of my technical limitations. Finally, I was able to get past that, but it took a while. I do feel that one of the limitations of technology is that it influences people and their work. My advice to my students, and myself, is to go on location, but don’t take the camera out of the bag. Just go out there and look and see what’s there, then pick up the camera and follow up. I see my looking as a very strong part of what I do, and that wasn’t the case before.

JF: Then how did you get back to working in video?

pc: After fifteen years it took someone to say to me, “I’m going to give you a chunk of money, and you can do whatever you want. What do you want to do?” I said, “Oh my God, no question—I want to do video!” So they bought me a video camera and a video editing system. I made a couple videos, but they were very narrative. One of them I even sang on. They were extremely personal. I did that for a number of years, and then slowly but surely I started getting back to this idea of duration and away from the idea of time. The first few pieces I did out in Shinnecock Bay were composed of forty-second chunks, and then two-minute chunks, and then finally composed of just a single shot, so it really evolved slowly.
It’s the same thing with the evolution of this current work. Kathleen was in the hospital [for a month in 2009], and I didn’t want to be far from her, so I stayed home working on the computer. I took footage that I had previously taken and started fooling around with it, and all of a sudden there was this abstract stuff! I knew abstract art from the twenties, thirties, and forties. I was very interested in [Milton] Avery, for example, so it didn’t come out of nowhere. But all of a sudden I was working abstractly on this [video] footage that I had taken, and, as we used to say in the sixties, it blew my mind!

JF: Hold on—this is amazing to me. Because Kathleen was in the hospital, which caused you to stay home, these new abstract works developed?

pc: Yeah. But I don’t think anything’s quite that simple. In science, an abstract is something that derived from this big body of work—it was derived from another thing. It kept occurring to me, and I want things to happen naturally. I really want things to happen in their own way, and not force anything.

JF: Do you have any special devices or tools that are unique to your creative process?

pc: Yes. I knew from my still photography days that I really was attracted to Leica lenses, so I started buying Leica lenses to put on my [video] camera with an adapter, and it’s worked out really beautifully, particularly for Long Island light. Every group of lenses is responsive to something; Leica’s happen to be responsive to a certain area of light that I’m really interested in. I love the tones it conveys. What I like about these Leica lenses is that I’m back to having a depth of field, which means that I can go out of focus.

JF: I like the size of the monitors you show your work on. How do you choose the scale?

pc: Since I’ve been back working in video, I’ve been against doing anything projected. In 2009, when I started showing this work, some pieces were projected and some pieces were not. The ones that were on monitors looked so much better. I can convey better tones. When an image is projected onto a screen, you’re losing all kinds of tones and intensity of tones, even with a really great projector. Ad Reinhardt said a work shouldn’t be bigger than your outstretched hands, and there is something modest about this size that I like. I like the idea of people spending time with my work, like they would with a painting, and that means making something small enough to fit in someone’s home.

JF: Do you have a favorite color?

pc: My favorite color is Yves Klein blue, but this vibrant red really keeps coming back to me. I’m unhappy unless it’s in one of my pictures.

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8 Milton Avery (1885–1965), American. Painter known for his use of simplified forms and an expressive palette.
9 Ad Reinhardt (1913–67), American. Leading abstract painter known for his late works, black-on-black geometric paintings.
10 International Klein Blue is a deep-blue hue in the ultramarine family developed by French artist Yves Klein.
JF: Are there items you keep in your studio that have significant meaning to you?

pc: This house means so much to me. When I left New York in 1951, that apartment was the last home I had until this house in 1999. Nothing ever felt like a home. This place feels like a home to me. The art that I have around really means a lot to me. I like this cup. I just love it as an object. It reminds me of what I love about art. It’s very modest, it’s handmade, it makes no pains to hide its construction, and it has a very simple glaze. It’s making some connection to the earth that I really admire.

JF: I’m going to make a broad statement and say your work really is contemporary painting. Your eye is like a painter’s; you’re deconstructing the image but then reconstructing it. And it’s so painterly, but yet it still refers to video or the evolution of picture making.

pc: The energy is video. I’m getting down to the pixel level. Before I went back to video I got to a point where I said I really wanted to paint again, but I was afraid to and I wish I had. Painting will never be out of style. Ever.

JF: How do you come up with titles?

pc: It’s really hard. I’m against the idea of Unitled as a title. I like this one—it’s called Barge, Tug, Rig. It just somehow came to me. It’s like everything else: I let it evolve, and sometimes it’s okay, and sometimes I get impatient and just let it go. Titles are so hard. One favorite is a video piece from 1972 about looking at yourself: a reflective image and a video image and how they go together. I called that piece Interface, and I thought that title was so good; it probably is what made the piece successful.

JF: Did you ever work for another artist, and, if so, did that have any effect on the way you work?

pc: In the late sixties I apprenticed myself to Chuck Ross. I helped him with films he was making. I didn’t get paid. I was just trying to learn from him and I learned quite a bit.

JF: Do you have a motto or creed as an artist you live by?

pc: I have some mottoes. One is about modesty versus grandiosity. I think one should be somewhere in between the two. It’s not great as a professional artist to be too modest, because you’ll be left in the dust, but I don’t think it’s great for one’s own psyche to be too grandiose. It’s not so great for the art, either.

The real motto I have comes from Ananda Coomaraswamy, who was a curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the 1920s and ’30s; he was responsible for their Far Eastern collection. He has a book called The Transformation of Nature.

12 Charles Ross (b. 1937), American. Sculptor and earthwork artist known for large-scale prisms using starlight and sunlight.
in Art. In it he talks about the sculpture *The Dance of Shiva.* He said that art should have four equal components: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, and I believe in that. I don’t know that I succeed in it, but I believe in it. Finding a balance in one’s own work is very difficult, and I keep saying over and over: How does my work do with those four attributes? Does it hit all of them? We tend to be pretty good with the physical and mental, but we often forget about the spiritual and emotional in this day and age.

People don’t want to stand in front of an artwork and feel embarrassed. I don’t think it’s such a bad thing to feel some excess of emotion when you’re standing in front of, say, a painting like El Greco’s *View of Toledo.* What should it embarrass me to really love that painting? And also the *View of Toledo* is beautiful spiritually, too.

JF: What advice would you give to a young artist that is just starting out?

pc: Be careful. There’s so many pitfalls out there: pitfalls of getting too attached to a gallerist and believing what they’re telling you. Or supposing you’re successful in your work and being afraid to try something new. I wouldn’t ever be afraid to fail, because it’s not going to last forever. Go out in some direction and fail as much as you want to—for years if that’s what it takes. You’re going in that direction for a reason, and you better pursue it.

Being successful in the art world is overwhelming, and it can take you over. There’s one artist I know, who I won’t name, who became very successful, and he started doing copies of his own work. You know, he was making his “name” work instead of actually going out there and making art. That’s a trap that you can fall into.

I think the main thing that I would advise is to just really care about what you’re doing. You’ve just got to love it. If you don’t love it, you might as well be a stockbroker. You might as well be doing something that you can make a good living at. If you love it, it doesn’t matter.

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