PAUL MOGENSEN
KARMA, NEW YORK, 2018

Hans Ulrich Obrist with Paul Mogensen, June 26, 2018

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Let's begin at the beginning. I want to ask you how it all began.

PAUL MOGENSEN: Well, I had a math-science education and I grew up in Los Angeles in a technical part of the city, where all the aircraft factories were. Those businesses wanted the local schools to teach mathematics to the kids, so anybody who did that, that's where you got it. I got that for years and sometimes I joke about Sputnik because, when I was in high school, Sputnik went up, so anybody who could do math got a free education because America wanted to catch up. So, I had a free education.

HUO: Freeman Dyson once told me that, when he started, Russian science was leading.

PM: It still is; that didn't appear to change. I have friends who were students of advanced physics at Caltech, which is the top science school in the country. To get a PhD you had to be able to read Russian fluently, and I knew one guy who could never pass the Russian tests, so he never got his PhD—he just got a master's.

HUO: It's interesting that you came from science and math. The artist Bernar Venet told me about the equations he painted. What is an elegant solution?

PM: In mathematics? I don't think there is one in art. No, it's something that's very simple and obvious that answers all these questions, but it's considered mathematically elegant because it's so direct and simple and it's universal. I'm not interested in math; I use it, but after taking it so much, and it got me into school, I realized I really didn't want to do it anymore. I changed my major from math-science to liberal arts, which was literature, history, and, at the end, studio art.

HUO: Then?

PM: Then, at the end of that, I had to take a class in art appreciation and that was the first time I'd ever seen a painting.

HUO: Which painting was that?

PM: Well, it was a survey of painting. It was art and they showed slides of all these things. I ended up taking a class in the history of fourteenth-century Sienese painting. I had never seen art at all, so that was—that impressed me.

HUO: Which year was that?

PM: I think that was late '61, '62, somewhere in there.

HUO: I read also, in two sources, that the abstractions of Clyfford Still mesmerized you early on.

PM: They didn't mesmerize me; however, the University of Southern California, which is in Los Angeles where I went to school, is right next to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Still loaned three paintings to the museum which were there for years, so at lunch I would go over and look at them. I thought they were good, but when I was in school I saw *The Great Experiment in Russian Art*—I don't know if you read that book.

HUO: Which book is it?

PM: It was published in 1962, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922,* by Camilla Gray. She's British and it was the first reintroduction of that art from the teens, which had been forgotten for a long time. When that book came out, it created a huge interest in that work again. It was the first thing I saw that I really liked and—

HUO: What fascinated you about this movement?

PM: Well, not all of it, but I liked Rodchenko and Tatlin in particular. I read about it and the artists said they wanted to make art from basic principles, not coming from the human figure or landscape or something. I thought that was a good idea. I didn't have a background in art and I didn't go through abstract expressionism or any of that stuff—

HUO: Would you say this is where your catalogue raisonné begins? Because there's student work and then, at a certain moment, the actual work kicks in. I'm curious—what would be the first entry in your catalogue raisonné?

PM: There are questions out there. I took a painting class after I took a history class; they liked what I was doing, so I was nominated to go to the Yale summer school. I don't know if you know about that, but it's a nationwide program and they take one student from schools all over the country. It's one program and everybody there is a longtime art student—they've been in art for years—and I had just started. I thought it was interesting because they knew everything about studio skills, but they didn't know a lot about anything else particularly. I knew a bunch of other things, but not that. I spent my time listening and watching, it was very interesting—

HUO: That's where the work begins?

PM: No, no, that's school. There are many people who went to that program and became minimal artists, and people asked me, "Do you get that at Yale?" and you don't. There was none of that at Yale; the teaching was pretty conservative. Anyway, since so many people who went there did minimal art, people connected, but it's not—the students did that after they left.

HUO: Can you tell me about that? How was the Yale experience for you? Was minimalism discussed?

PM: That must have been later. I went there in 1962 and that term hadn't been coined. Barbara Rose saw some of this work years later, and she was Frank Stella's wife; he didn't

like it, and she hated it, so she called it minimal. That's why it was called that. There's a tradition of attacks by critics naming art movements.

HUO: This is actually a dismissive term, minimalism.

PM: Yes, like cubism. Impressionism is dismissive.

HUO: Interesting how they become movements.

PM: It clicked. Their insult clicked. My favorite is Léger because he was the last of the four cubists that were showing at Kahnweiler in Paris at the time. His show was attacked as being tubist.

HUO: Tubist?

PM: Yes, because his shapes were like tubes and all the artists were amused.

HUO: Can you tell me about the artists who were with you at Yale?

PM: There are two Yale programs—actually, there are more than two, but for art there's the Yale Summer School of Music and Art, which was where a lot of people went to school, and then there's Yale Department of Art, where people get their master's degrees. Brice Marden went to Yale summer school and then he went on to do a master's. A lot of the people got master's degrees there—Bob Mangold and people like that. David Novros went there in 1961 and encouraged me to go in 1962. Ron Davis was there at the same time as me.

HUO: Did you have artist friends that you would hang out with as a group, or was it more solitary?

PM: Well, Yale was intense. It wasn't a big program, just a few dozen people and everybody was in the same big barn studio. Some people wanted to be the best artist, the best student. I was just sort of watching it, but it's extremely competitive, which I thought was kind of interesting because I didn't care that much.

HUO: Do you have any contacts there? Were there any other artists with whom you exchanged in these early days?

PM: Well, after school, yes. Actually, Philip Guston came to Yale and talked.

HUO: How was that?

PM: I thought that was very interesting because he had just had a big show at the Guggenheim and he was dismissed as a small master, which was a disappointment for him. He was sort of self-effacing at that time. I spoke to other people who had him as a teacher later and they described him as being really mean.

HUO: What did he teach you?

PM: He didn't teach anything, just gave a lecture. He showed pictures of his paintings. Yale didn't teach. You were supposed to know what you wanted to do and then they had people giving lectures and so forth.

HUO: So your catalogue raisonné begins after school. What's the first work in it?

PM: Since I don't think of things that way, I have to figure it out. When I left school, I went back to USC and got a degree, and then I traveled internationally for eight months. I went to see all the things that I had learned about in art history class.

HUO: One of your first paintings is from '65.

PM: I did a handful of these things.

HUO: In the first group.
PM: YES. I don't do one and then another one, I just do a bunch of them.

HUO: You do them all together, right?

PM: Yes. When I finished my travels, I got drafted and went into the army, but I joined the National Guard so I wouldn't have to go for two years. So I spent six months in the army. When I got out I got a studio and started doing work and I had no plan for what I was going to do. I spent a lot of time thinking about what I should do and these came from me deciding that I wanted to leave out almost everything, which was I guess difficult, because people hated it. I mean, where's the picture? Where are the shapes? Where's all that stuff ? That's a little bit later, a year later. Anyway, the first things—I think, when I did one-color things, those were the first things I did.

HUO: One color.

PM: Yes.

HUO: That was a simple way to—

PM: That was very hard. I got a lot of opposition and a lot of arguing.

HUO: What were those shapes? Did they have meaning for you?

PM: It was geometry. I studied a lot of geometry.

HUO: You drew them, or did you make preparatory drawings?

PM: Never. It's so much work making preparatory drawings. I just make the thing.

HUO: Straight to the thing.

PM: Yes, and sometimes, if somebody wants a drawing, I make it after the painting.

HUO: Why do these early works have no titles?

PM: Almost everything has no title, continuing up to today. I find that the title interferes with how people look at it. Not only that, I only want to use one color, but I don't want any—literally—attachment to it, so I don't sign them, I don't date them, I don't give them titles. A few of them have titles, but almost none, because I found that people, what they do is, they read it and then that's what they know about it.

HUO: I read that you don't sign and date. Is that in order not to draw attention to the personal

development of the artist?

PM: That's not how I look at it. I'm not manipulating the audience. I just don't want anything besides what you're looking at and I know that, when you go to school, you learn how to hear about things. Like Aldous Huxley said, in early childhood one out of two people is a genius in the visual arts, and by the time you finish school it's one out of a million. I think that's true; they really pound it out of you. I guess twenty-five years ago the Metropolitan Museum, when they had a show, it evolved into these large explanations of each work of art, next to the work. There was a huge complaint from everybody. They said, "We don't want to hear, read the explanation; we want to see the work." Then they rolled back and they—there's this tug-of-war going on now. People don't want an explanation. They want to look at the thing.

HUO: At the same time, in France, there was this amazing literature group, the Oulipo, and they had all these rules of the game. I was interested in that because there are clearly rules of making you employ, because you remove the idea of intuition and these forms are mathematically generated. Also I understand that you reject mixed colors, that you reject the personal touch?

PM: It's not a rejection, it's just that because the colors are so good, why would you mix them? I accept them as they are.

HUO: These are just exact, always right out of the tube.

PM: Yes. I once read a comment by Rommel, the German general. He had been in a battle with the Americans in North Africa. The first battle he set up according to military theory, and he won; in the next battle, the Americans changed everything, and he lost. He wrote a letter to a friend in Germany saying that Americans have no regard for theory whatsoever. I think that's really true. When I look at European art, compared to American art, I think you probably get lost in these explanations, in these theories that are out there.

HUO: They're not rules in that sense, but do you eliminate invention of—

PM: What do you mean by invention?

HUO: If there is a rule of the game. For example, the paintings of François Morellet.

PM: I knew the work. Sol LeWitt did that article called "Conceptual Art" in the sixties. That was before conceptual art became what it is today. His idea was that these artists would decide what to do and then just carry it out until it was done, no matter what it looked like. It was based on human concept rather than filling them out. I knew artists who were using arithmetic, but if they didn't like how it looked, they changed it. I talked to Harris Rosenstein about it. He felt that I was making a moral judgment by letting it go the way it was going to go and not messing with it, which I thought was a funny way of looking at it, but true.

HUO: *Copperopolis* from 1966 is, according to Klaus Kertess, generated by a geometric progression originating with the small square at the lower right corner and then it's progressing vertically and horizontally with the space between the units equal to the heights. Can you talk about how that works?

PM: Geometric is a statement of the progression—as opposed to an arithmetic progression. An arithmetic progression increases by one, by n + 1, each one is one bigger than the other one, but a geometric progression increases by a multiple, like this one doubles each one. There's a limit to how small the smallest square should be.

HUO: They could exponentially grow more.

PM: Sure.

HUO: How do you decide—for these pieces, but also in general—when a painting is finished?

PM: You decide on the arithmetic and then you just make it, and it makes itself.
HUO: Here it says that the progression continues until they close in a square at the upper left column.

PM: That's just a way of expressing it. There's squares all the way through it, just because that's where the two progressions cross.

HUO: It becomes an overall spot, right?

PM: Yes, that's the whole idea.

HUO: This is beautiful.

PM: That was a problem when I did it, too, because everybody thought the shapes were dumb—it should be oblong or something.

I had a big discussion with Carl Andre about it.

HUO: About *Copperopolis*?

PM: Well, yes, he saw me making it. Some of his work at the time was laying bricks in a row. He came over to see me work, and I discussed it with him for a long time. I said, squares make perfect sense because then it's the same on both sides. I was trying to simplify everything.

HUO: That transition between the spiral to the progressions and the color is quite compelling, the contrast—

PM: I see them as the same thing.

HUO: One to one.

PM: They're both geometric.

HUO: The spiral?

PM: Yes, because it's not a scribble; it's very carefully laid out. It's geometry, you don't need to use numbers, but I find that people either like squares or circles, or spirals and squares—it's like you divide. David McKee said something to me once that I thought was pretty funny. He had seen my white painting of sixteen rectangles at the Museum of Modern Art. He knew that I'd done that and then, ten years later, I showed these bright colored spirals at the Bykert and he liked those and he knew that the last name was the same on both works but he asked me if that was my brother.

HUO: Do you have a brother?

PM: Well, I did, but that had nothing to do with it.

HUO: They just look so different, he thought that it might be your brother.

PM: Yes, it couldn't be the same person who did these two things. He thought that was amazing. When I had my show in Houston there were almost ninety paintings in the show—a couple of sculptures, but mostly paintings. I remember each big change I made between different groups, but when they're all together, they look like one guy did them all.

HUO: You know Bob Grosvenor?

PM: Yes, for fifty years. My dad painted the piece that was shown at Dwan Gallery [Untitled (yellow) (1966)]. He was a spray painter, that's what he did for a living; he painted big machines. I was talking to Mangold and his dad was also a spray painter, for Wurlitzer in Buffalo.

HUO: Do you see anything else besides the geometry of this? Like shape or emotion?

PM: Not emotion. I mean, I know it's there. I really like the geometry and I like the color. I wanted to get it down to just that and then I decide what to do, make it, and then I put it away. I don't look at it or anything.

HUO: You have a favorite color?

PM: When I was a little kid, it was purple, but I must have done a hundred blue paintings, I don't know.

HUO: It's a lot of blue.

PM: Yes.

HUO: Blue is maybe the most recurring color.

PM: I like them all. I had a lot of inorganic chemistry. Years later, when I took my art studio class, the first day, they handed out a list of all the pigments that you're supposed to know. It was completely familiar to me because they're chemicals. I actually made some of those in the lab, making experiments. I always liked how great they are. People spend their whole life developing pigments. Like the Lascaux paintings in France, 40,000 years old. Some of those pigments come from hundreds of miles away. Obviously, they wanted to get the right color.

HUO: I wanted to ask you about the mathematics of how these paintings are made. Harris Rosenstein wrote that you also make use of elementary mathematics. You work from antiquity, you work from the Renaissance. Does your interest in mathematics arise out of your engagement with painting? The decision to make work from a given formula is mentioned earlier, that you lay down rules for the paintings.

PM: I have two kids and they took a Russian icon painting class from a classical Russian orthodox icon painter here, Vladimir. He made the panel and adjusted it, and then painted with tempera and gold leaf. Those things are made with very strict rules. They tell you exactly to be aware of the colors, scale of it, and everything. They look completely different, which I like. If you go into a graduate student class anywhere in America, there are no rules. You do whatever you want, and everything feels the same way. I think it's another interesting thing, really.

HUO: Yes. Rosenstein also says that you're following an adoptive progression, that an adopted progression is that amount of following a rule. The following out of a rule means choosing how to follow it. As a rule is merely regulative, it's lacking in human agency to determine how it's to be followed.

PM: Well, obviously, there's arithmetic here, but my interest is the geometry, which doesn't need numbers. I'm interested in the geometry and the color. I wanted to limit as much as I could say, to make it just as basic as it could possibly be. This painting is sixteen stretched canvases separated and hung on the wall. When I first showed this, people thought it was an arrangement of paintings. I had to tell them that this was one painting.

HUO: This is a white painting.

PM: Yes. It's 8 feet overall. It's painted gloss acrylic lacquer, titanium white. The original one is on Dacron sailcloth. There's a second version, which MoMA has, which is in fiberglass. It's smooth and the other one has a very fine weave behind. It was fiberglass little boxes in the

shape of the stretched canvas. It was originally exhibited as the canvas version.

HUO: Why did you decide to cast the work in fiberglass?

PM: I wanted to try it because it's simpler than painting on canvas. It's casting but it's really laid up on a mold so that it's sprayed for the casting. I'm from LA and lots of things were made out of that, surf-boards and all kinds of things; it's a material that's in common use in California. The advantage was that I didn't need to give it several coats of paint, because it was really smooth. The color, wherever you spray it on, is what it looks like. It turned out that if you have other people do it, it gets complicated, because people make mistakes and so forth. Other people have what they want to do. The first one that was made, its sizes were all wrong, they didn't even measure it right. A guy who was a boat builder took it as a challenge, because when the resin cures, it shrinks, which allows you to come out of the mold. Let's say you're making something square, then it bends—it bends in. He thought he could defeat that, I was told, and he made these precise molds. As he sprayed in the polyester in the fiberglass, he filled it with a newly mixed rigid foam so it couldn't move in when it cured, which was his solution. I didn't see this. This was all done when I was in California. I was told a couple years later that they were checking on it in the Museum of Modern Art and it imploded because of stresses from the thing trying to shrink. Then I found another guy in Los Angeles who made all kinds of things out of fiberglass—David Novros gave me his name. He was a real expert; he said he could figure it out.

HUO: He did it?

PM: Yes, that's what the museum has. When I grew up in California I could walk to a General Motors factory, which was as big as SoHo. It was—cars were everything there. I studied this at school, actually. General Motors took over the public rail system in Los Angeles in the thirties, shut it down, and then sold off all the cars and all the rails and all the land, so it couldn't be built. Forced people to buy a car. They were indicted; the judge threw it out of court. Then a bunch of citizens brought a civil suit against General Motors, which they lost, but then they had to pay a $30,000 fine. That was it. That's why everybody has to have a car in Los Angeles. They worked with Chevron and Firestone tires.

HUO: I was wondering about the relationship between car colors and your monochrome color.

PM: I certainly wouldn't express it that way. I mean, I know people use color charts, commercial color charts, stuff like that. To me, those are made by other people for a different purpose and the colors are always tinted or modified and stuff like that.

HUO: I also want to bring up the viewer, because I've read that your multipanel works are about making the viewer feel that there's a hidden part of the painting behind him or her. Can you talk a little bit about the viewer?

PM: I never think about the viewer. I think about what I want to do and then I do it. Then I don't look at it and it's just done.

HUO: Who are your heroes or heroines? Who are the artists you really like, who inspire you?

PM: I liked the fourteenth-century Sienese painting. Still do today. Other things, I really like Rodchenko, and he did a bunch of photo-montage things with Mayakovsky the poet, and it's amazing how good those things are. I would never think of doing any of that stuff, his poetry. Great poet.

HUO: It's interesting we talk about that in connection to that book. Do you do other artist's books besides your print portfolio?

PM: No. I don't think of myself as a printmaker, but I realized I've done eighty prints.

HUO: Is one of your prints made with gold ink?

PM: Yes, gold. I did a show of four paintings on panels but sprayed gold colored, bronze powder, different golds that you can get. Each one was a different gold. Some of them are four units, some of them are sixteen and one of them is two. I never saw the show—

HUO: That was here in New York?

PM: It was at the Bykert, but I was in Asia.

HUO: This was the second show?

PM: Yes.

HUO: What did you do in Asia?

PM: I was traveling.

HUO: When?

PM: From ’67 to ’68. It was eight months. I sold a painting and I had a lump of money, so we took off without a plan and then we wanted to go to Istanbul. We did that, but then we kept hearing about really interesting things further east …

HUO: What did you see in Istanbul?

PM: I saw the great mosques, and I went to Bursa and Konya and Izmir, and all these Seljuk things—which were incredible—in Erzurum, in eastern Anatolia, which was the Seljuk center. The Seljuk were stern in their design, very harsh geometry. There’s a minaret there that’s red bricks, really beautiful red bricks with dark-blue glazed bricks in a geometric pattern.

HUO: Have you done wall paintings or public art projects here?

PM: No.

HUO: You never wanted to?

PM: I would do it if somebody wanted me to, but they haven’t.

HUO: Do you have unrealized projects? I always ask the artists some of my recurrent questions about unrealized projects. We know a great deal about architects’ unrealized projects because they publish them every week. But we know very little about artists’ unrealized projects. Do you have utopias or dreams or—

PM: Well, I’ve done a lot of things. I’ll probably do some more. I did a painting that was four walls of a room. It was years in gestation. I got a grant, so I made it years after I planned to do it.

HUO: Can you tell me about that piece?

PM: It’s eleven canvases that go all the way around the room.

HUO: Like a chapel.

PM: If you’re Christian, I guess that would be. It could be a secular chapel.

HUO: It’s a portal!

PM: Yes, for all religions and no religion. I was reading about Lenin, and he was often in jail. He was a famous atheist. He spent so much time in prison that he—I understood that he believed in exercise, so he wouldn't lose everything because he was sitting in a jail cell. There's this thing where he would go down and then jump up again like this. He would make a joke about it, saying that the guards probably thought he'd found religion.

HUO: Can you tell me about the genesis of this work? How was it realized for the first time, this room?

PM: I finished it in '76 because I got a grant [the work was installed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 1977–78]. I bought a mountain of cobalt blue that's really expensive, then I just painted this giant painting, which is over 100 feet long and in eleven panels.

HUO: Is there a progression between the different panels?

PM: Yes. It's just like this, except that it goes around the room.

HUO: That's beautiful.

PM: Yes, the progression works out so good. It stops there so that you can walk in.

HUO: There are also some other categories of your paintings, such as this dot-dash painting. What prompted you to do the dot-dash paintings?

PM: Well, it's a different system of arithmetic. This is the same as the white one, except that the proportion is different, because the golden sections aren't square. I was figuring out what to do with all these different systems. Some of these systems were used in ancient art and then in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and in Rome and in Persia. There's actually three series in each one of these things, with two subdivisions in each one. You multiply 2:3 times 2:3, and you get 4:6:9.

HUO: So there are actually always three sections?

PM: In this particular kind, yes. The big ones I did, there were three series of different relationships. Two to three, three to four, and then 3:6:8, which is something that's used in the Renaissance. I just put them there because they were preexisting ratios, and I thought that was a good way of starting. But then people were complaining about so many parts on the wall, so I put everything on one canvas.

HUO: Is there a connection to music? Do you listen to music when you paint? Dan Graham says we can only understand an artist if we know what music he or she listens to.

PM: I wouldn't make a statement like that, but I know a lot about music. My mother was from Copenhagen and she wanted me to play classical piano, which I did for five years. I learned how to read music.

HUO: What kind of music do you listen to when you work?

PM: Whatever's on the radio.

HUO: Do you have favorite composers?

PM: Once I was in Maine and there was a baby grand piano. Nothing was going on, I went and opened up the bench, and I found some sheet music there. I found "Rondeau" by Rameau, which I really like, so I played it. Then I put it away and I haven't touched it since. It was good that I learned that, because the University of Southern California was a haven for German immigrants during the thirties and forties.

HUO: Schoenberg came there.

PM: Yes. Schoenberg and Thomas Mann. There were thousands of Germans there. The university helped them, worked for them. So they gave gifts later on to the university, of things they had brought from Europe. Schoenberg's entire studio was at the university when I was there, after he died. I could go in there as a student and just read all those sheets, play the records he recorded himself, and all kinds of things. Which I did. I got a lot by reading what he had written—not about him, but looking in his library. Things don't come from one place.

HUO: Besides music, you also have a strong connection to literature. The first thing I saw is this wall of books. What's the role of literature?

PM: When I was a kid, you have to realize, in my home, no one ever read a book. Never. When I got to university, they put me in a class studying literature. I thought it was exciting, that it was great, because these things are good. I've been reading ever since.

HUO: What are your favorite authors?

PM: I like Melville and, of course, there's Mark Twain.

HUO: What's the role of reading, writing—do you write also?

PM: I wrote one thing once, because a friend of mine who died was having a show, and there was a body of work that the people who were doing the show didn't know anything about. I told them I would explain it to them, so I wrote it down—

HUO: Who was that?

PM: Bill Bollinger. It was published in his exhibition catalog. They wanted to know about this particular work. I said I had talked to him about this work. I wrote down what he said in our conversation and I sent it to them. They said, "This is good, can we use it?" I said, "All right, yes." Then they sent it back edited, and I didn't know who had written it, because it wasn't what I had said. They went back and forth, and I said, "Look, if you don't want to use it, you don't have to, but you can't change it. So just drop it, don't print it." Then they said, "OK, we'll print it the way it was." Which they did.

HUO: He was a friend of yours?

PM: Yes. I knew him for years. Actually, he had a little baby when my girlfriend and I had a baby. He was showing in Europe, so he asked us to come and stay with his kid and his wife in Hillsdale, upstate. We've lived together for several months; he let me use his studio—that's when I did those multicolored dot-dash paintings.

HUO: Yes. This one looks different, this one relates more to the spiral. The spiral offers the possibility of another form of progression.

PM: It is a progression. When I showed the white things with all the progressions, I did a spiral at the same time, because you'd make the spiral with the progression. I always saw them as the same thing, but everybody else, it's either square or round. This is one of my paintings that has a title; it's called *Lester Moore*. We were in a traveler's hotel in Istanbul, and there was an American magazine in the lobby. It had a photo article on tombstones in Arizona. One of the pictures was of a tombstone on which it said, "Here lies Lester Moore, four shots from a forty-four, no less no more."

HUO: That was a real gravestone?

PM: Yes. There's a photograph of the tombstone.

HUO: Who's Lester Moore?

PM: He's just some guy who got murdered, who has a tombstone.

HUO: Is that one of the only paintings with a title?

PM: *Copperopolis* had a title. That's because I took a trip to the moth-erload in California, where all the gold mines were. In the southern part of the motherload, they didn't find gold, but they found copper, so they named this little town Copperopolis. That was pretty good.

HUO: The spiral also appears in some of your more recent art. One painting of yours in the Secession catalog also has a title, *Black Widow.* Can you tell us about *Black Widow*?

PM: Yes. I named it that because of the spider that was in the yard when I was a kid. You have black widow spiders? They're all over California. We were kids, we grew up with them. We'd know those bad ones, so you don't let that one bite you. They live under the house and the garage. We knew that if we wanted to mess with them, we just took a stick and moved them. They're beautiful, they're really glossy black. When you flip them over, they have a perfect bright-red hourglass on their belly, on the abdomen.

HUO: It's a great painting.

PM: The title has nothing to do with the painting.

HUO: Is that a series also? With the countdown?

PM: Yes, there's a—like a dozen or so.

HUO: You always work in series?

PM: Well, often, no. I have a friend who told me he sometimes makes a series of one.

HUO: Are all of these spirals? You grow from relatively simple spirals to pieces like *Black Widow.*

PM: I'll tell you how I arrived at that. I wanted to do an array of circles like that, but I didn't want to figure out what to do, in terms of painting on all the circles. So I think the best thing—you just leave them out, right? So it was just an absence of something that I decided not to do.

HUO: What are you working on right now? Can you tell us about this one?

PM: The way I pick the colors, I go to an art supply store and open up a tube and then look at it to see what it looks like. When I get a good one, I just use that. This painting is a progression like my other recent paintings, except that the progression goes on the edges. It goes around on the edges, and then goes again. The blue is flat, not glossy, and the red is very glossy. I did that for my first show, at the back, where I showed this white gloss sixteen rectangles next to a completely flat black. I didn't know it would do this but I was looking at them in there, the gloss and the flat was really—did a whole thing I never anticipated. I've been doing it ever since.

HUO: Then there's this series here, where there's a circle in the middle, and they also could be parallels.

PM: Those are radiating lines. People call them spirals, but they're not.

HUO: Are these small paintings you're doing now? Are they studies?

PM: No, I don't make studies. Sometimes, if I have a piece of canvas left over, I make a little

one. I give them to my kids or something.

HUO: One last question is, I'm very interested in this Rainer Maria Rilke text in which he gives advice to a young poet. What's your advice to a young artist in 2018?

PM: I like Rilke but I don't like that question. I don't have any advice.

HUO: None?

PM: No.

HUO: No advice to a young artist?

PM: No. It makes me think of my kids. They would visit their grandfather, who was a colonel in the army. As we were leaving, each time he would say to them, "Vote the straight Republican line." Anyway, I thought it was funny.

HUO: Gerhard Richter says, "Art is the highest form of hope." Do you have a definition of art?

PM: No. I'll tell you about art, because I grew up in a Protestant part of Los Angeles. There were twelve different Protestant churches, and no one was supposed to be fancy about anything. The only artist's name I ever heard was Rembrandt, and that was an insult. If you made something that was a little bit fancy, people would say, "Hey, Rembrandt, we don't do that. Tone it back." I guess you could say minimalism is a Protestant art. There's a thing called horror vacui, you know, the fear of emptiness? Making everything really fill up the whole thing, instead of letting it be (minimal art is not religious).

Published on the occasion of

Paul Mogensen
September 27-November 4, 2018

Karma
188 East 2nd Street
New York, NY 10009

Edition of 1,000
Special edition of 50