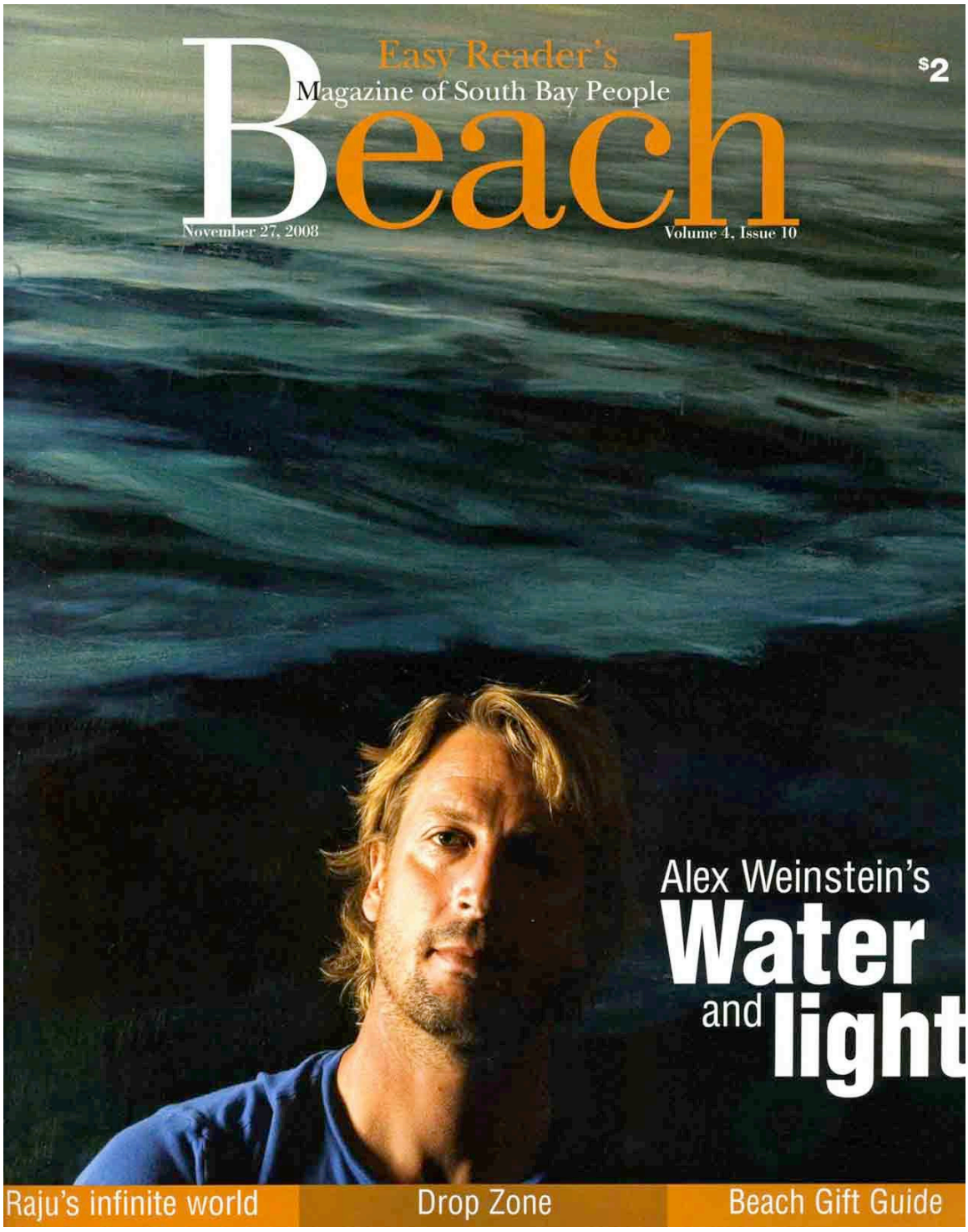

Easy Reader's
Magazine of South Bay People
Beach
$2
November 27, 2008
Volume 4, Issue 10
Alex Weinstein's
Water
and light
Raju's infinite world
Drop Zone
Beach Gift Guide

Beach Art

Photo by Tom Sanders
www.sandersphoto.com

Untitled, oil on canvas 64x84.

Kyle (The Hurricane), oil on canvas, 60x70 inches, 2008

Surf du Soleil

Artist and surfer **Alex Weinstein** is proof that oil and water do indeed mix

by Bondo Wyszpolski

Living near the coast in southern California, there are few landscape artists who do not sometimes paint seascapes as well, adding birds and boats or a rocky shoreline. The viewpoint is usually at some remove from the sea itself, and the result – consciously or otherwise – tends to be a postcard panorama. With Alex Weinstein, who gets his feet wet and then some, the viewer is conveyed beyond the shoreline, past the breakers, and into the tranquility and yet disquiet of the swells. This is where Weinstein's subject truly makes itself felt, and he has a way of rendering it so that the ocean is palpable, soothing and serene, but at any moment capable of waking with a roar. From under the surface and beyond the horizon, anything can happen.

A resident of Manhattan Beach with a view of the water from his balcony, Weinstein has just come off an impressive solo exhibition at William Turner Gallery in Santa Monica. He's a painter to the bone, and exceedingly articulate for one whose large pictures can evoke wordless contemplation.

Encouraging a dialogue

"The creative work that I do is the work that I do with satisfaction and pride," Weinstein says. "You put it out there and you go, 'This is something that I am; I am entirely responsible for it,' and I welcome that responsibility. I never had

Weinstein cont. on **page 32**

Untitled, oil on canvas, 60x70 inches.

Weinstein *cont. from* **page 31**

another job that I felt that way about."

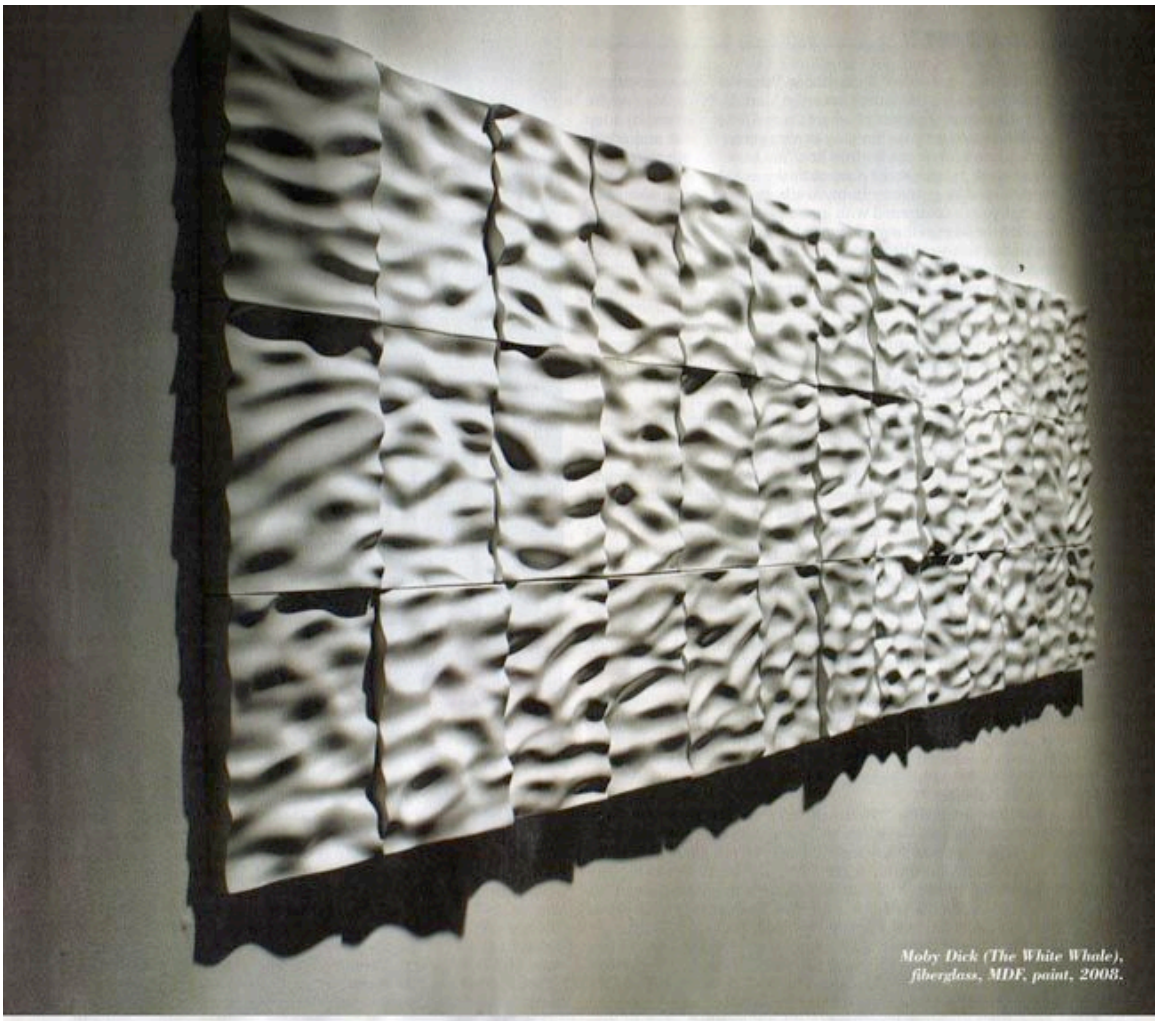
Weinstein's canvases don't try to confuse the viewer. They don't impose obstacles that prevent us from entering the picture or, if you like, the mood or the atmosphere or the tone of the picture. With some artists, and this isn't meant to be judgmental, we'll look at a painting and feel that something is pushing back at us as we try to find our way in. In your case, I tell Weinstein, the picture pulls us in right away.

"Well, I'm glad you feel that way," he replies with a laugh. "They're very Romantic paintings; I have no apologies about that. They are supposed to communicate an experience, or communicate an event or communicate a tone or a mood or an atmosphere, and so I don't want there to be excessive chatter to keep that idea from coming forward very quickly.

"That being said," he continues, "I think a painting needs to be kind of an emotive object; it needs to be able to sustain a long engagement with the viewer. So, if it opens itself to you or if you can read it very quickly, that's great; but you don't want the conversation to [be simply] 'hello' and 'goodbye.' You want to be able to draw people in and have a longer conversation. I want the painting to do something, but also I'm interested in how the painting is made. So I like little tears and little rips through the various veils of color; little tears that allow the picture to kind of unravel. It's holding together, but it's sort of a tenuous proposition."

Essentially, it's eliminating the chatter, but not that something else that holds us there. If it's a picture where you look at it, and you think, 'Oh, that's nice,' and you move on to the next one, then the picture hasn't done what it's supposed to do.

Weinstein agrees, but is quick to acknowledge that another artist may



Moby Dick (The White Whale), fiberglass, MDF, paint, 2008.

opt for a busier, more provocative effect.

How did you end up with this idea about pictures, because as you point out it *is* a Romantic approach to painting, but Romantic in a long northern European tradition that I wouldn't think would be popular in a beach culture, which I picture as being more vibrant. What you do is different than what I would expect.

Weinstein laughs. "I'm a surfer, and I like to be around the water; it's a big priority of my life. But we're talking about art history here; we're talking about other artists and I think a lot about those guys. I have hundreds of art books in this house. I look at them and I wonder about that stuff, too.

"What I have been trying to do as an artist is to incorporate the fundamentals, the passions of my life, and I'm at a point right now where I have a muse in the ocean, so to speak, but I also have a retrospective eye on [and] a longer dialogue with art history, with a continuum of a painting tradition. It's a good synthesis between what's right in front of me, physically, and where it is emotionally and conceptually. I think about other painters and about my place as a painter; and I'm also thinking that here is the subject that allows me to speak very clearly about what I'm interested in."

He pauses and continues. "The treatment of the color and the treatment of the material are coming from thinking about other artists and thinking about painting; they're not so much about painting Mother Ocean, you see what I mean? That is sort of how I posit myself."

Sublime encounters

Alex Weinstein has absorbed the work of many artists, but some of them have clearly had a larger impact.

Weinstein *cont. on* **page 34**

Weinstein *cont. from* **page 33**

"Rothko is the most immediate influence in the work," he says without hesitation, referring to the late American artist Mark Rothko. "My favorite paintings are those binary paintings where there'll be [for example] a top panel in black and a lower panel in gray or vice-versa, or blue and white, and you can't get away from the horizon line. You have this bifurcated canvas – you see two rectangles and it's an earth/sky, sea/sky, whatever – and I like using that kind of geometry in my work, because that's essentially, pictorially, what you're confronted with immediately when you start working: Where does the line go that divides the top from the bottom?

"You don't have to work that way, but I like working that way, and I like toying with that sense of horizon. Since so many of the paintings refer to the ocean and surfing in a very immediate way, there is a kind of conceptual link there because the horizon is always in motion and in flux when you're surfing; swells are coming in and you're going over them and you're rising and sinking and your head is bobbing around. So that fluctuation is repeated in the paintings."

Another influence is the 19th century German painter Caspar David Friedrich.

"Friedrich," says Weinstein, "is the sort of flint stone of a long tradition of paintings that some art historians" – and he specifically mentions Robert Rosenblum – "call the sublime. I think initially what it was about was foregoing obvious or biblical depictions of God or a higher power or a spiritual event, leaving that more traditional visual vocabulary of saints, angels, trumpets, parting clouds and so on, and getting into nature. The light passing over a landscape could be the presence of God without having the heavy-handedness of work that came in the 17th century or whatever. Friedrich, I think, was the first one to say that God or a spiritual or a sort of larger presence could be felt outside of religious depiction per se. So he makes these incredible landscape paintings and you see that idea from there forward – it's all over Monet, it's all over Rothko, it's all over the Hudson River Valley painters like Church, and I love to see myself in that current because I think that those are really satisfying paintings."

Rosenblum wrote his seminal book, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, in 1975 before Anselm Kiefer came to prominence. In another publication, *The New Romantics* (1988), Rosenblum writes that Kiefer has "some claim to being a living survivor of the endangered species of German Romantic painting. He sometimes seems to echo in the direction of Friedrich."

"I think Kiefer is irresistible," Weinstein says. "He's been hammering away at the same kind of work for 30 years, and it's fascinating. He makes those giant woodcuts. They look like they're the ghosts of Edvard Munch, they're really powerful, meaty; it's just super-German, very Northern European. I think he's fantastic. What's interesting about his work is that it doesn't look dated. It looks like it could be a year old or 150 years old. To me, it has really held up well and it's very self-assured."

Another contemporary German artist sometimes compared – and in one case paired – with Friedrich, in particular two years ago at the J. Paul Getty Museum, is Gerhard Richter. Weinstein says he saw the show, and loved it.

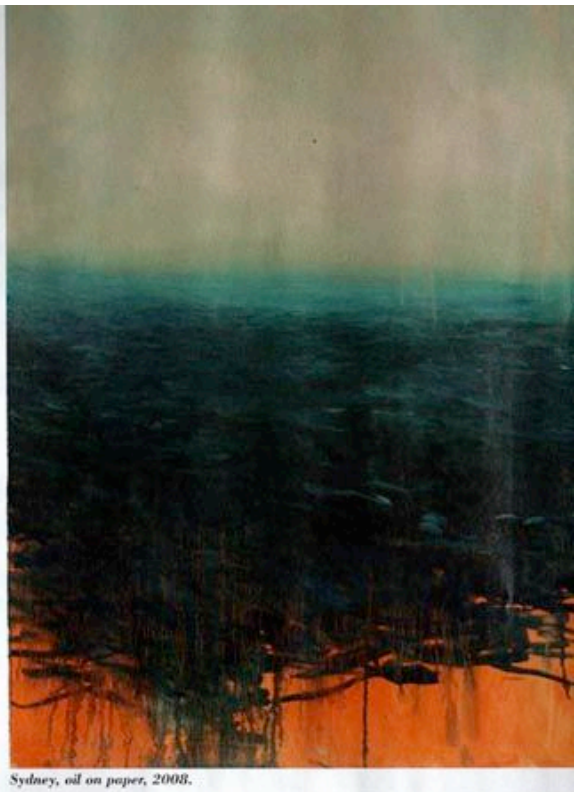
"From a conceptual point of view Richter's covered so much ground," he says. "He's kind of killed painting and he's brought it back to life; and he's made it about photography and about negating the hand, and then he's made it completely corporeal, all about material and about the hand. I love that about him because he can be unabashedly beautiful and he can be unabashedly wry and difficult and intellectual, and it doesn't seem to be an issue where he has to force himself to be one way or the other. Every body of work that comes out of his studio is fascinating and it's very committed and earnest."

Reflecting further on the Getty exhibition, he adds that "Any time you can get a chance to be around an artist's work that you admire you feel like you're in the presence of that personality. So, as a painter, I try to see the architecture in the picture and how the picture was made, try to see the history in the picture making."

Many of the artists we've been talking about have or had a northern European base, and here we are in a different clime altogether.

"That's for sure. But," and Weinstein is referring to painters of the sublime, "that way of approaching art is about a sort of non-specific spirituality or a presence, right? I'm not a religious person, but I think that is a key component to that work, that's why it's called the sublime. It celebrates the beauty of nature, it celebrates the power of environment and atmosphere and natural events as experienced by human beings.

"I'm completely in sync with that and I think all surfers, all ocean people are. They go in the water and they are overwhelmed by it, and they're stirred by it and frightened by it." It can bring both joy and uncertainty. "It's such an overwhelming experience to be dropped in the ocean or go out to the ocean, never mind going surfing or dealing with waves and currents and things like that." On the other hand, "a cataclysmic experience in a pasture or an overwhelming epiphany on a mountaintop, or going out into the ocean, are totally interchangeable. Being able to channel that northern European thing and bringing it to Hermosa Beach sounds weird, but, it's not; it's actually pretty easy."



Sydney, oil on paper, 2008.

French kissed

Born in 1970, Weinstein didn't actually grow up with the same sort of view from his window that he's enjoying today.

"I spent a lot of time living in Europe, my mom is a Swede and my dad teaches literature," he says. "I come from maybe a more conservative, academic tradition. So, growing up in the '70s in southern California was different from the '70s and '80s that I experienced back in New England, and in Sweden and France. I'm not a child of Cal Arts, for example, of [John] Baldessari and Chris Burden."

You've got a degree in art, but also in creative writing.

"I transferred from Bennington College in Vermont to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island; and I had accrued enough English credits at Bennington to have most of my English requirements stitched up." At Brown, those credits enabled him to nail down a degree

in English with a focus on creative writing.

"I couldn't decide if I wanted to be a fine artist or a writer or something in between," Weinstein continues. "I thought I would go into illustration. So, when I got out of school, I moved to New York and got a bit of work as an illustrator. Probably the most interesting work I ever did were illustrations for *Surfer* magazine.

"But, shortly after I graduated from college I moved to Brittany in northwestern France. That's where Paul Gauguin was painting, in Pont-Aven." This school or group of artists also included Emile Bernard, Maurice Denis, and Paul Sérusier. Their collective palette is subdued and yet saturated with deep, intense color.

"We were living just outside of Pont-Aven, and my family still has a house there," Weinstein says. "You have this gallery scene, there's this little museum; there's a heap of artists who have been working there since the 1880s, and I wound up starting a gallery and painting the landscape. I'd paint cows, I painted pictures of the rain, the sun coming up, all of this hokey stuff by late 20th century standards, but for me it was living in this other country and being part of this real art tradition, and you could see what Gauguin was looking at because it's kind of unmolested, a lot of that part of the country is not really developed at all. And the French don't forget anything, so there's Paul Gauguin postcards everywhere and his presence is still very much a part of that community. Living there was a wonderful experience."

Weinstein reflects on that past for a few moments.

"A lot of my family is living in France right now, my sister and her family's there, and my parents are going to join them just outside of Paris. I moved from Brittany to L.A.; that was in '97, and I haven't lived back there for more than three weeks since then." Ruefully, he adds, "You can't be in two places at once."

Rolling up his sleeves

Where do you paint?

"I got a studio in Gardena about seven months ago, and it has a big skylight," Weinstein replies. "That's the very first time I've ever had a proper studio to really stretch out and work in. I've worked in the houses that I've rented, in garages and stuff like that. I've always been in these little cave-like environments with artificial light and now I have a huge skylight and fluorescent light; that's kind of an unusual combination but I like it. I thought I'd be more affected by the change in the light source but I'm not at all.

"I work during the day, and my studio is far enough away from the house that I have to really commit to it – I would say anywhere from four to maybe 10 or 11 hours. From living in France for so long, the French seem to work to live, not the other way around; so, long lunches; and then they work a little bit into the evening, but the evening time is not for business calls, it's not for the internet, it's not for that kind of stuff, it's for sitting down, having a meal, drinking some wine, and I learned that really easily. I'll work well into the night if it's absolutely necessary, but I'm disciplined enough to keep a sort of normal pace. I go every day and I do my thing, and then I wash up and go home."

Do you paint from a photograph, or from sketches, or from memory?

"Most of the paintings don't have any reference material at all," Weinstein says. "A lot of them have many coats of gesso, and I'll sand in between the coats of gesso and kind of fill the tooth of the canvas. Sometimes that will influence what kind of painting I want to make on that support. If the support is really smooth then I usually want to make a painting that is very smooth and has a quiet surface to it, so that the surface becomes a keen part of the piece. Other times, if the canvas is a little bit toothier or grainier, I put a lot more paint on it and am not so concerned about the interruption or the clunkiness of the surface once it's finished.

"When I first started making paintings of the ocean I went out on my surfboard and took a lot of photographs of the surface of the ocean, just to get a sense of how to actually get the drawing right. I'm not a confident draftsman, and I don't particularly like drawing. So I thought I would need two cards to get it right, and the irony of course is that these paintings that I really languished on and labored over, where I was using source material, are no more realistic than the ones I could just make up. I just move the material around and somehow it starts to jell, and eventually it looks kind of what I'm after."

One can always over-prepare, that's true.

"I think the hardest part of the whole process of being creative," Weinstein says, "is here you are thinking that you're accruing skills and accruing experience which will guide you in the future to making interesting decisions and avoiding pitfalls, and it never seems to work out that way. You wind up getting into a place of incredible frustration, and many times out of that frustration something really satisfying happens. At least for me.

"You're looking at the problem that you just made that you've been working and working on, and it's gotten awful to unbelievably terrible... I have a short temper, I lose my patience and start throwing things around and one thing leads to another and you have a sort of physical and creative breakthrough.

"You ask yourself, 'How come I haven't learned anything from this?' That kind of breakthrough doesn't have to have this tantrum component to it, but the thing about creative work is that it's unpredictable and you have to invite accident and court disaster. Sometimes a disaster will occur and from that something magnificent will come in; sometimes disaster will *not* occur and something magnificent will happen. But if you're not courting it, you're just repeating yourself and you're not really growing."

If you aren't taunting the lion, I'm thinking, nothing will happen.

"They say that Hemingway was an unbelievably disciplined revisionist," Weinstein says. "When you read the prose it just drips off the page, it's so easy to tear right through it, and to think that somebody has very, very painstakingly revised this and cut fat and added fat and spiced it up and made it just so, with such discipline, is really beguiling. You realize just how aerodynamic it is, not by accident, but by discipline. That shouldn't necessarily be the driving principle behind creative work, but it's an interesting model. When you put it down you go, 'Wow, this is somebody who is really working on his craft.' I'm attracted to that kind of writing, I'm attracted to that kind of painting, painters who kind of battle."

Weinstein expresses satisfaction with how his show at Bergamot Station turned out, and seems to have relished the endeavor.

"I hope that each successive exhibition pushes the work harder and the work looks not easier or more self-assured, but just as ambitious or just as serious or just as focused as it ever did, but with new ideas and with new expectations or new objectives."

In the show, one of the highlights was a piece called "Moby Dick: The White Whale." It consists of 39 twelve-by-twelve-inch squares, white undulating panels that mimic the surface of the ocean and refer back to 1970s minimalist art.

Will you do more sculptural work?

"I've got ideas for sculpture, but it's only one component of what I'm up to, and it's not more important or less important than the paintings. They're all on the wall, so I'm still very much a two-dimensional kind of person." Weinstein has a good laugh. "I'm not thinking about space the way that someone like Calder is thinking about space, [rather] more about surfaces and the space that paintings occupy."

It's nice when the work sells, because then you can move on and explore other avenues. But a dedicated artist is going to do this regardless.

"Absolutely," Weinstein replies. "Some people really thrive on the expectation of the public, and it really allows them to develop and mature their ideas very quickly, and it just lends air to the flame of what they're working on. For other people it can be very suffocating, where they feel unsure about trying out new ideas if they know that older ideas from previous shows worked; they're scared of moving from the safe and narrow."

It's a common dilemma for successful musicians or artists. The public is fickle and may drop you if they feel betrayed or confused.

"It just seems that that's the way we operate as a society, in this country especially. I think we're very concerned about how to market things, and how to make things fit into the various categories and stratifying everything. It's all got to be very clear and concise, and God forbid you should fight against that! But I would hope things are changing, so that the person who's been typecast as one kind of producer can reappear down the line in a completely different manifestation. You never know. Great artists can work across genres and they can break out."

Before I forget, what made you want to become an artist?

"It just kind of occurred," Weinstein says after a few seconds. "I like pictures, I like stories... It was inevitable that I would get to this place that I'm in right now. I didn't have to say no to anything else: 'Oh, I really wanted to go to med school, but I didn't' or 'I really wanted to be a cop, but I'm not.' This is what I want to do; it's pretty easy to look myself in the mirror after I've been working in the studio all day." ***B***