

*Jordan Kantor Born 1972, Westerly, Rhode Island; lives and works in San Francisco. A graduate of Stanford University (BA, 1995) and Harvard University (PhD, 2003), Kantor has had solo exhibitions at Artists Space, New York, and Ratio 3, San Francisco. His work has been featured in exhibitions at Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Lombard-Freid Projects, New York; and Christina Guerra Contemporary Art, Lisbon, and it will be shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2009. He is on the faculty of the California College of the Arts, San Francisco.*

## In conversation with Rachel Kushner

**Rachel Kushner:** Your series of paintings *Untitled* (film leader #1-4), all 2007, are renderings of the leader at the beginning of a film, but not just any film: they are frames of the color tests that precede Joe Kittinger's unbelievable 1960 jump from a helium balloon at the edge of the earth's atmosphere, the highest jump ever made.

**Jordan Kantor:** Kittinger was an air force test pilot involved in viability studies in the 1950s and 1960s as part of the advance work in the space race. One of the things these studies were attempting to determine was the highest altitude at which a human could eject from a space vehicle and safely return to earth. In a series of secret jumps, they developed protocols for when the astronauts would attempt to reach space with the whole world watching. About ten years ago—when I saw the film of Kittinger's test jump, which serves as the source material for my *Lens Flare* paintings—I was taken by the utter sublimity of it all. Once he started ascending in his balloon, there was no way home but to jump. No one could come get him. This idea terrified me and has stayed with me.

**RK:** There was obviously no "other" to witness this event. He had a camera with him?

**JK:** Yes. It's point-of-view footage that was recently scanned and digitized. I went through it frame by frame and came upon these images in which the camera momentarily points toward the sun, creating lens flare (reflections within the camera that make rings and hexagonal shapes appear in the image), which obstructs our view of deep space. This is only a split second in the footage, but I gravitated toward it because it seemed to provide a way to picture both the sublimity of the deep space image and the "interference" of the apparatus, which necessarily mediates the experience of the fall. I think of the lens flare reflections as functioning like quotation marks around the "romantic" landscape behind. At the painting's right edge you will also notice a black strip, which is the unexposed part of the film, perforated to fit into the sprocket mechanism.

**RK:** As I looked at these paintings and started thinking about film leader and its function, I realized that cropping these early still moments from a film reel is not unlike cropping the most salient aspects of an image out of the frame, and suddenly spatial cropping and time-based cropping seemed synonymous to me. Both produce secondary meanings.

**JK:** Yes, I like this idea very much, though I haven't thought about it explicitly before. Taking a frame out of a sequence is very much like taking a detail from a larger frame. They are both about setting something free from its original context—erasing the "before and after" or the "what's around" to create a free space of contemplation of a fleeting moment or a fragment.

**RK:** I recently came across this statement by John Baldessari: "Cropping can make the outcome of a struggle ambiguous." In reference to painting, it becomes almost a double entendre: the struggle is against the weight of a historical mantle.

**JK:** Cropping is one way of intervening in appropriated material that can redirect its original narrative, and I usually crop to make the image more ambiguous—to detach it from its initial function and open its possible meanings. Ironically perhaps, this process also creates some space for myself, however narrow, as cropping can function like drawing, in the sense that editing can be seen as "creating." I also appreciate the notion of struggle here. And maybe both the jump and the film leaders are metaphors for trying to get away from painterly baggage, to get a fresh start. The leaders can be understood in this light as relating to the myth of abstraction as a new beginning.

**RK:** The film leaders look like color-field paintings, specifically, Ellsworth Kelly's work. And yet their source material reframes them in time, as the preliminary coda to something grave and of the world, rather than a pure, esoteric reference to sixties-era hard-edge abstract painting.

**JK:** Obviously I had thought about the film leaders as related to abstract painting—and when you mention it, Kelly is a clear precedent. It's also interesting that these film leaders were themselves of the early sixties. Perhaps thus both Kelly and the leaders could be thought of as part of the same visual culture. Kelly's colors are so historically specific (the way Technicolor is). You can almost tell when any of his different monochromes were painted by the specific kind of, say, red he was using. The film leaders are similar. They seem so funkily analog, of another, predigital time.

**RK:** Do these coded and abstruse images—the film leaders—have much to do with what follows—i.e., are they part of Kittinger's lonely heroism? Can they evoke any encryption of what follows, or are they "purely" abstract?

**JK:** The leaders are related to what follows on several levels. First, I wanted to draw a very basic equivalence between them and the frames of the jump footage I was also using. That is, as stills taken from the same film, they are literally structurally equivalent, whether asking to be read as "abstract" or "representational." This equivalence further relates to my view of the Kittinger footage—and of images of sublime or traumatic events generally—which is that all such representations must necessarily be completely abstract. What, after all, can a picture communicate about almost breaking the speed of sound with your body in free fall? Not much. An "abstract" image might be more eloquent in that regard, actually. My work is partly about this slippage, the inadequacy of picturing any bodily experience, particularly an extreme one, and negotiating this loss through scale and painterly facture.

**RK:** This brings me to the degree of abstraction in your painting *Crew Cabin*: what's that red circle?

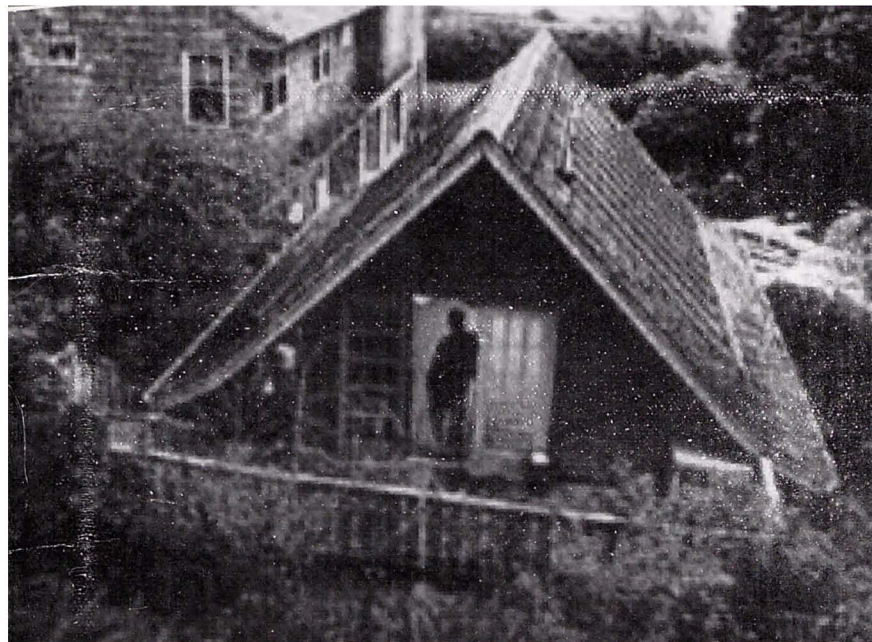
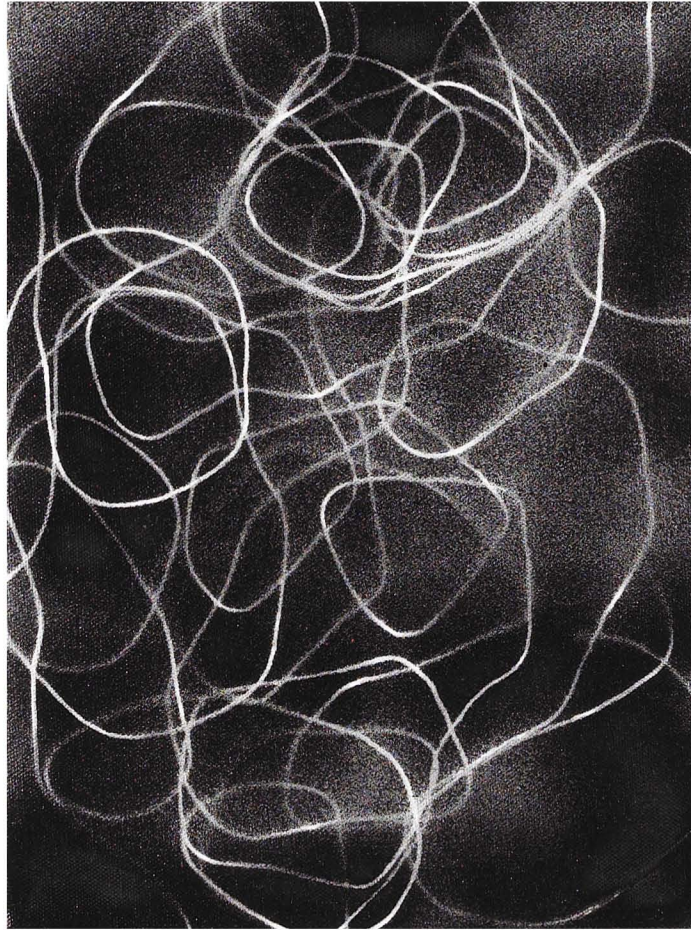
**JK:** *Crew Cabin* is based on an image of debris from the disintegration of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* in 1986. As part of the failure analysis of that mission, a commission tried to figure out the cause of death for the crew. The painting is from an image used in this analysis, which shows the detached crew cabin (represented by a smudge of paint) highlighted by a ring superimposed on the photograph.

*Untitled (Lens Flare)*, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 32 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Ratio 3, San Francisco

*Untitled (Baboon)*, 2004  
Oil on canvas  
38 x 68 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Ratio 3, San Francisco







Opposite:  
*Untitled (String Painting)*,  
 2007  
 Enamel on canvas  
 12 x 9 in.  
 Courtesy of the artist and  
 Ratio 3, San Francisco

*Untitled (Greenhouse)*, 2006  
 Cat. no. 35

*Untitled (film leader #1-4)*,  
 2007  
 Cat. no. 39



**RK:** The circle brings to mind something you wrote elsewhere about a painted mark that can have a diagrammatic quality yet still function illusionistically. It implies a dialectical relation between a diagrammatic symbol and illusionistic space.

**JK:** I'm interested in the disconnect between the abstract, indeterminate image in the background and the sharp sureness of the forensic circle applied later. Someone sees something important in that abstract mess, but what? There's an absurdity to this kind of meticulous analysis of an abstract horror. The calculation ultimately showed that the crew was *not* subject to lethal forces in the initial breakup, and the only definitively catastrophic force on the cabin came when it hit the ocean surface, after several minutes of free fall. This (and other evidence) led to speculation that the crew had survived the initial explosion. I see this as a kind of postscript to Kittinger's jump, which was in the service of learning how to get out of precisely such a jam.

**RK:** By the time we were born, and certainly by the time of *Challenger*, many of the key events in the space race were over, though in my own childhood at least, "space exploration" was a source of a lot of spectacular imagery and weird nostalgia.

**JK:** The original space race is a lost utopia, like a lot of sixties things, to which you and I both came late. Belatedness is an important concept here, and nostalgia, generally. Space seemed exciting to me as a child, but by the time I learned about it, my sense was that we had gone to the moon but weren't going to go back.