

# An Interview with Todd Gordon

BY JUSTIN WOLFF

The American painter Todd Gordon moved from New York to Stockholm in December 2013. At first the Swedish winter spooked him. “As a landscape painter who works outdoors I wondered how I would be able to paint in a place where the sun rises so late and sets so early,” he told me recently. But Gordon persevered, eventually acclimating to the ambiance. “I started to see the light here,” he says.





*Temple* (Uggleviksreservoaren), 27" X 39", oil on linen, 2014



*Bushwick Backyards*, 31" X 48", oil on canvas, 2008

Gordon's dealer, George Billis Gallery in New York, recently exhibited more than 20 of his paintings in a six-week show that opened on December 16, 2014. Several of the works in the exhibition were made in Stockholm and feature the atmospheric effects of Scandinavian light. They include panoramic depictions of cityscapes: the Fortum biofuel plant in Värtan, a view from Lidingö, and Hammarby at night. Like Gordon's earlier paintings of New York neighborhoods, his Stockholm works are large-scale landscapes made "en plein air"; he paints exclusively outdoors and on-site, carefully observing and rendering the decay and regeneration of urban hinterlands.

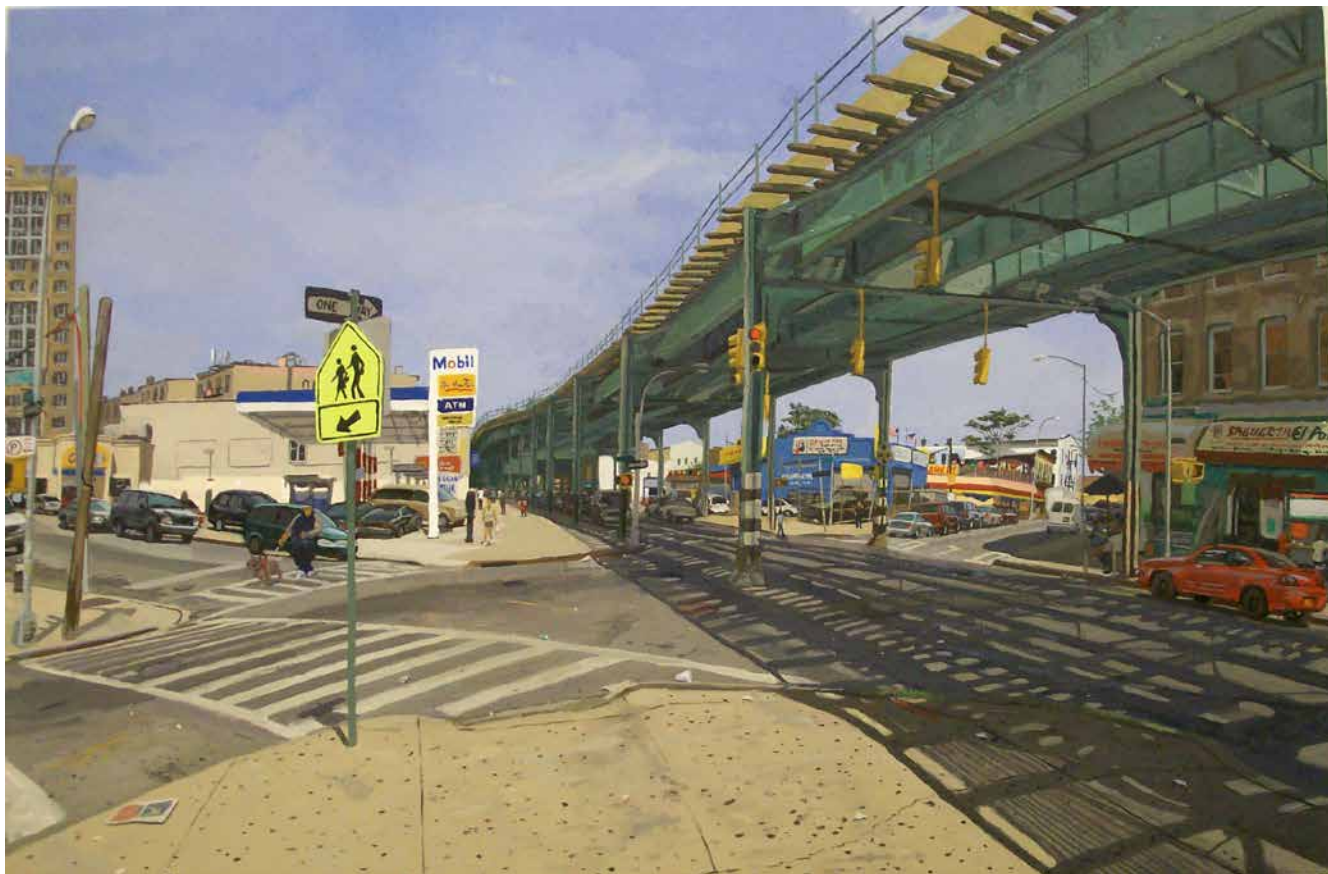
"I'm not interested in painting clichéd ideas about beautiful landscapes," Gordon explains, "but rather in spaces that are not considered beautiful: overlooked places, places you drive by without noticing, in-between spaces – the transitional or transitory, the ugly, the decrepit, the inchoate, the crossroads."

I have long been enchanted by Gordon's intense paintings. Though his empirical eye and expert technique are stunning, it's the philosophical dimensions of the paintings that hold my attention. For him painting is not merely a practice; it's a means for arbitrating experiences of space. When I look at Gordon's paintings I think

of Max Scheler's definitions of phenomenological philosophy as "a continual *desymbolization of the world*" and a chance to "look on the fundamentals of all existence with rinsed eyes." Moreover, because Gordon claims to be influenced by Minimalist art, and because he wonders about photography's effect on authenticity, his work reminds me as well of Susan Sontag, specifically her 1964 essay "Against Interpretation." "The world, our world," she writes, "is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have... In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."

It's important to note, though, that Gordon's paintings don't pretend that it's easy to see in philosophical ways. His deliberate marks and gestures demonstrate instead the sustained hard work required to transform sight into perception.

Born in July 1970 and raised in Ohio, Gordon studied art history at Northwestern University. He started figure drawing during a year abroad in Florence, Italy, and took classes with Ed Paschke at Northwestern, but didn't think of himself as a painter until enrolling in the prestigious graduate program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In the following interview, which took place



*Intersection of Myrtle, Irving and Grove, 24" X 36", 2011*

over several weeks in early 2015, Gordon discusses his experiences as an art student, his attitudes about modern and contemporary painting, and the challenges and rewards of disciplined artmaking.

**Justin Wolff:** *How do you describe your paintings?*

**Todd Gordon:** I describe them as “perceptual landscape paintings.” They are representational, based on direct observation, usually painted over extended periods of time. And they are traditional, insofar as they follow a lineage of perceptual painting not just in landscape but in still life and portraiture as well – Chardin, Corot, Impressionism, Cézanne. My paintings might be seen as “realistic” – or as illusionistic depictions of actual locations, neighborhoods, and buildings in naturalistic light – yet they are also contemporary in their scale, empiricism, perspective, and the processes through which they are conceived and executed.

**JW:** *Are there terms or concepts that you’re opposed to?*

**TG:** I am not interested in ironic painting, or painting that has a direct connection to Duchampian conceptual ideas, which I believe promote the destruction of traditional and modernist painting. I

feel that most work done in this vein is diametrically opposed to the kind of work that I do and the kind of work that I value – both from the past and today.

The role of the art market today as a seemingly unstoppable juggernaut of moneyed taste perversely driving criticism (the end of *The New Republic*, for example, and the subsequent resignation one of my favorite writers, Jed Perl), educational focus, and art careers across the board (from curators to the latest art school graduate painting “Zombie Formalist” abstractions) doesn’t relate at all to me or my work.

Although I work outside, entirely on location, I don’t associate my work with typical “plein air” painting today. For example, my work is not done premier coup: a typical painting takes weeks or months to complete. I’m not interested in “capturing a moment” but rather in conveying a much slower, more gradual building of time and space, and, ultimately, experience. The longer I stand in a space, the more I see and the more the space inevitably changes. Whether it’s the waning light during the day, the shift in seasons, or something mundane like a parked car that drives away, the landscape is always moving. It’s alive, no matter where or what I’m



*The Junction*, 20" X 96", oil on panel, 2011

painting. Getting this down on canvas is the perpetual, and maybe entirely futile, challenge.

I'm interested in the poetry of the everyday and what's overlooked. I don't set out to embellish – to make a place look more beautiful than it actually is – but to convey, as honestly and specifically as possible, the visual facts before me.

**JW:** *To mention “the poetry of the everyday,” especially in the context of plein air painting, invokes a familiar narrative from art history. Baudelaire famously associated spontaneity with modernity: to paint “en plein air” was to paint quickly – to paint as a “modern” painter – whereas to paint slowly was to paint as an “academic” painter. But you’re implying that painting slowly has current significance, right? How do you think about your work in the context of critical terms such as “academic,” “realist,” and “modern”?*

**TG:** I was recently listening to a podcast interview with Israel Hershberg, a painter I admire a great deal. He was talking about painters going outside to work not as some kind of primal need to “return to nature” but rather as a way to unburden themselves from iconography and narrative. He believes going outside to paint was the real sea change, in that it allowed painters to get back to pictorial language and the plasticity of painting – the flatness of the picture plane, abstraction, shallow space, reductive forms.

I agree with Hershberg. Does that make me a “modern” painter? I suppose one could argue that it does, though I'm more interested in being a “contemporary” painter, someone who makes work of *this time*. When I see much of the work coming out of today's atelier programs, work that I would call “academic” painting, it does not seem to be of this time. In these programs it's all

methodology, dogma. There is this understanding of modeling and rendering based on intense study and life drawing, but it's a very technical and ultimately narrow way not only of working but of seeing the world. A close friend of mine used to teach painting at one of these so-called atelier programs in New York and he constantly complained about the palette he was required to teach his students – all browns, umbers, earth tones, black and white. We used to call it the “dead palette.” That's one connotation “academic” painting has for me.

I never learned to paint this way. They didn't teach techniques like that at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), and, in fact, I can think only of one or two instructors who even knew how to teach this kind of painting. So, no, I don't consider myself to be an “academic” painter. I'm sure, however, that there are people who would look at my work and call it “academic,” but I suspect that has more to do with the fact that it is representational and not abstract. In terms of painting slowly or quickly, I'm not sure the old categories of “academic” and “modern” painting hold true in today's anything-goes climate.

My method of working slowly came about after years of feeling like I was making familiar plein air paintings when I worked premier coup. I consciously decided to slow down and spend more time on location, looking. The painter Stanley Lewis talks about reacting to something that one of his teachers, Leland Bell, stressed, which was that it's impossible to paint everything so you have to edit and paint only the essentials. Lewis decided that he was going to do the opposite of what Bell advised and instead try to paint everything he saw.

I arrived at a similar place with my own work after a few years of painting outside. I was capable of making competent, quick,



one-shot paintings, but I didn't feel like I was pushing them as far as they could go. I decided to really slow things down and get things right in my work. In doing so, I was trying to take myself out of my paintings – trying to forego gesture, or exaggerated hues – and paint more empirically.

In a sense, painting everything allowed me to restrain my personal expression, which felt more real. The experience is about physically being in a space and looking. Frankly, I'm not interested in interjecting my feelings in my paintings. I am already there in so many ways – in the decisions made leading up to the actual painting process itself – and I don't want to be “in” a painting any more than I already am. It's a way for me to avoid sentimentality.

I think that slowing down the process of painting is a reaction to the incredible speed with which technology has changed our world, specifically our visual world. Going to a museum or gallery to spend an hour looking at a static image seems like an antiquated, even quaint, activity today. Yet this is essential to painting, and to understanding painting: one needs to slow down – spend time with, look at, and think about painting. This is all part of the experience. And it's a physical experience. Paintings have presence – surface, scale, even smell – and you need to be with them, in the same room with them, to really experience them. They need to be experienced in time.

In answer to your earlier question, perhaps painting slowly today is a subversion of Baudelaire's idea about academic painting. Maybe slowing things down is a reaction to the frenetic pace of our digital world. Perhaps working this way is a search for something more tangible or authentic in the experience of looking.

Does that make my paintings modern? Contemporary? I hope so.

**JW:** *Can you elaborate on what you mean by “sentimentality”?*

**TG:** I associate sentimentality with saccharine paintings of conventionally beautiful places. Such paintings are genre scenes – antiseptic visual tropes instantly filed away in our collective visual memory alongside other similarly recognizable images. The idea of capturing a memory plays into that, I think – saving something, a snapshot, for posterity.

I want my paintings to be much more than that. Again, they should be experienced slowly, over time, in the same way that they are made. I want the viewer to feel the same kinds of visceral, tactile, physical, and sensorial things that I felt when I was standing on a trash-strewn corner in Bushwick. I'm painting what I see, not something I am embellishing or making up out of my head.

**JW:** *To push the point a little more – when you're painting, or when you're reflecting on your paintings, is art history something that you think about? Are there traditions or artists that you're particularly influenced by?*

**TG:** I think I'm more like artists such as Stanley Lewis, Rackstraw Downes, Andy Lenaghan, and Antonio Lopez Garcia – contemporary landscape painters who work primarily outside, from life. I identify with Lewis in that I also try to paint as much information as I can (“try to paint everything,” he says) and with Downes's emotional restraint and discipline. Downes has written about feeling a seemingly unlikely bond with Minimalist artists, such as Donald Judd, and I, too, feel that connection to the conceptual tenet of “what you see is what you get.” I'm not interested in forcing a metaphor or interjecting a political agenda into my work. I think the world is already interesting enough as it is. All I need to do is look – and look again.



*Leviathan*, 26" X 84", oil on canvas, 2007

So, yes, I am very aware of the art historical canon and the trajectory, or trajectories, of painting. I'm conscious that I'm a contemporary painter living in the twenty-first century who makes observationally-based landscape paintings, and I see myself as part of a lineage of artists going back centuries who shared similar ideas and excitement about the possibilities of painting from life – the London School, Fairfield Porter, Giacometti, Morandi, Cézanne, Van Gogh, the Impressionists, Corot, Turner, Chardin, Vermeer.

When asked whether he saw himself as a peer to Turner, Rembrandt, and other masters, Frank Auerbach, quoting Hemingway, said he was “in the ring with them.” I think that the longer I do this the more strongly I feel that affinity and the more I look back to others not only for answers, but for support. I hear voices that say, “This is possible.”

**JW:** *You studied painting as a university student and then at a prestigious MFA program during the 1990s. What was it like to be a*

*student of painting? And what was it like to study painting at a time when painting was supposedly dead?*

**TG:** I was a few years younger than most of my closest friends at SAIC – Art Polendo, Judale Carr, John Reed, Nuno de Campos, Gillian Wainwright. They had all studied painting, drawing, and printmaking for several years longer than me. I felt like I had a lot of catching up to do. I had no formal training, no understanding of classical techniques such as sight measuring, color mixing, linear perspective, and value scale, yet here I was in the highest ranked MFA program in the United States. Perhaps that answers your question in a way – as someone with no real formal training in painting, I felt overwhelmed.

And, yes, I knew that painting had supposedly “died” many times since 1839, with the invention of photography. And I noticed the kind of work my peers were making – work that was conceptual, often not painting at all. But this only drew us painters together more closely. SAIC had a reputation as a very “conceptual” program



*Hammarby Night*, 22" X 55", oil on linen, 2014



*National Grid Plant, Night, 15" X 48", oil on canvas, 2010*

that emphasized non-traditional, theory-based painting. I couldn't have cared less about that sort of work. It seemed profoundly hollow intellectually and left me cold emotionally.

I don't know whether there really was such a strong conflict within the program itself, or if my friends and I invented it, but imagined or not, it made for a useful tension. I believed in painting, and my friends were true believers as well. So we strengthened our resolve and supported each other. None of us believed that painting was dead, but the thought did give us a sense of urgency. When we saw shitty work in galleries or museums or studios, it only made us want to be better painters. For me, it deepened my pride in tradition and fortified my determination to engage with the past.

**JW:** *Your process is very disciplined. Would you say that you were "taught" to paint? Did you teach yourself?*

**TG:** I received a lot of information in graduate school and spent several years trying to process it. But one remarkable moment was the summer of 1997, when I took my first plein air painting class, with Dan Gustin at the SAIC summer program in Oxbow, Michigan. It was a pivotal time for me. I learned to see differently that summer. Dan opened my eyes to shapes, to color, and to their relations, and I started to understand composition, design, and movement in space – front to back and back to front, sideways, and *through*.

After getting my degree I continued to study by going to museums regularly, copying Old Master works, reading, seeking out contemporary art, and talking with other painters. When I moved to New York City one of my first jobs was working for EverGreene Architectural Arts, a restoration and mural-painting studio. I worked on large-scale murals alongside master painters from Russia and China. These guys had studied in academic programs in Europe and Asia, and they just blew me away. But almost none of them had painting careers outside of work. It was a humbling experience.

**JW:** *Let's talk about your process. In concrete terms, how do you select sites and, then, how do you render them? What about composition,*

*perspective, scale?*

**TG:** I spend days, sometimes weeks, exploring my local surroundings for views to paint. In New York this entailed driving around Brooklyn and Queens for hours, or traveling on elevated train lines – the JMZ, the F, the 7. I would see something interesting in the landscape and note it in a sketchbook as a place to return to in my truck or on foot. I also use satellite map applications, like Google Earth, to investigate the geography before heading out on foot.

Regarding what I'm looking for – it's really difficult to put into words. I look for things in the landscape that move me somehow. That can be anything – an interesting shape or color; a certain spatial configuration; relationships of contrasting forms or textures; the effects of light, symmetry, asymmetry, rhythm, and so on. These observations, ideas, or visual cues are often pure abstractions – visually and conceptually – and my process for finding them is intuitive.

Once I have a site selected I make a few quick thumbnail sketches of the space and then return to my studio and fabricate a surface. Lately I've been stretching linen around medium-density fibreboard, making the painting, and then restretching the completed painting on standard stretcher bars. This allows me to paint outside on a rigid support that is much easier in the wind.

In terms of the actual painting process, I work very quickly and directly at first, blocking in large, abstract shapes of color and value. I am essentially drawing with paint. I like to work on a colored ground when I start – usually a red-orange like burnt sienna. This helps me see value relationships more quickly without having to contend with a white ground. From there the shapes get smaller and smaller. I don't scumble or glaze or blend or work in highlights or any of that stuff. I see a color, I mix it with my palette knife as accurately as I can, and I put it down. It's very nuts-and-bolts stuff. I don't even use medium when I work – just paint and mineral spirits. My palette consists of the same 11 colors for each painting.

**JW:** *Considering that you work outdoors over long periods of time, I imagine that people often stop to ask about what you're up to. How*





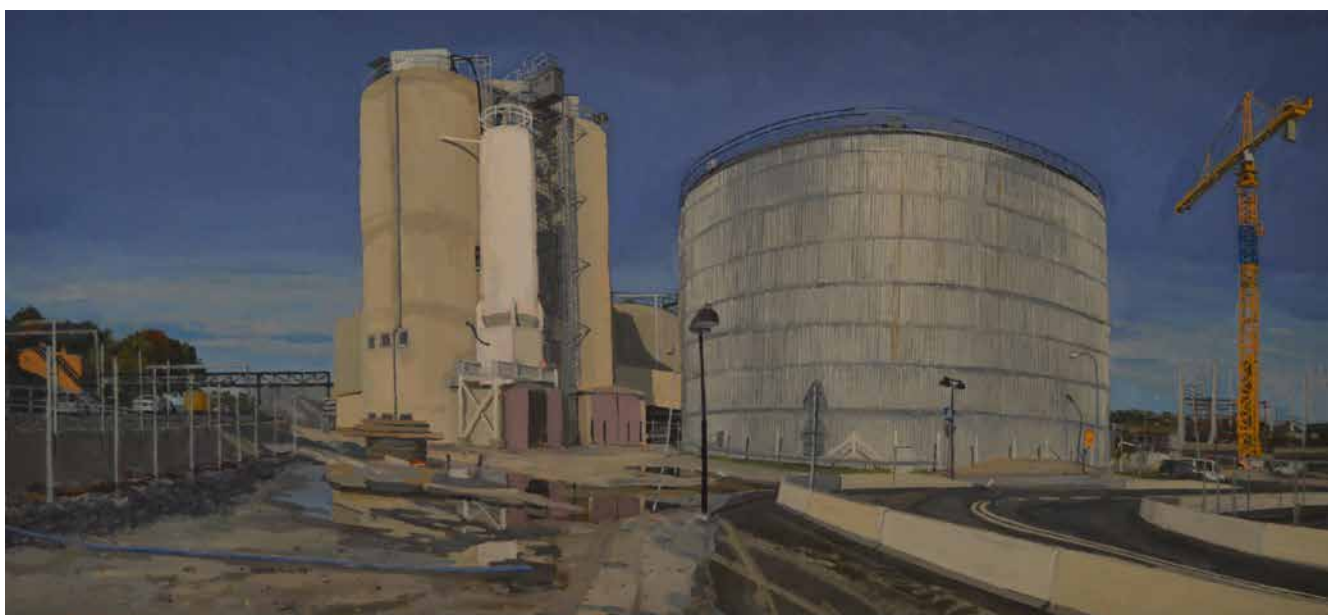
*The Green Barn, 24" X 48", oil on canvas, 2010*

*do people react to your work?*

**TG:** People are always very curious when they see me working on the street. Here in Stockholm they have been especially so – several individuals have told me that they’ve never seen anyone painting on the street before. People stop and take photos. Most are very respectful and don’t speak to me while I’m working; others ask me what I’m doing, or why I’m painting “this” or “that.” Once in New

York, a homeless guy chased me with a machete.

One common reaction that people have when they see my paintings on the street is to say that they look like photographs. People today equate visual reality with photography. Obviously, we, as a society, are constantly bombarded with photographic images that, on the simplest level, numb and desensitize our notions of authenticity. It has led to a cultural laziness or complacency in how we perceive



*The Blue Hose, 22" X 44", oil on canvas, 2014*



*Bron(tosaurus)*, 23" X 69", oil on canvas, 2014

the visual world. In the end, I don't think my paintings look like photographs anymore than photographs represent absolute visual truth.

Another interesting comment I hear from people is that my painting looks better than the subject or the landscape that I am painting. For years this comment frustrated me because I felt like somehow I had not done my job as a painter, that I had taken liberties with what I was painting and made the motif more beautiful and sentimental, or that I had put too much of myself in the work. So this supposed compliment from completely objective passers-by was a total affirmation of my abject failure as an artist.

In the end, though, I have realized that it isn't about me or my failures, but rather the transformational power of painting and art: the abstract distillation of all the infinite, confounding components of painting – the oozing, slippery material, the pieces of color that become light, space, mass, weight, harmony, whatever – all these relationships coming together as a living object, willed into creation as a response or reaction to the landscape. It makes sense that the painting “looks better” or “more beautiful” than the actual motif. This transformation is what makes good painting art.

**JW:** *You recently moved from Bushwick, in New York, to Stockholm. How has the move affected you and your paintings?*

**TG:** Overall I think the move to Sweden has had a positive impact on my work. The light here is very peculiar. During the winter it's silver, with a variety of chromatic grays. In spring and summer the days last until midnight, and there are periods of twilight lasting several hours. The sun remains low in the horizon and the effects – atmospherically and with perceived color – are surreal.

I have also been painting more at night. This has been interesting because it has forced me to see more clearly the edges between forms, negative spaces, and artificial lights. Not fully understanding what I am looking at in the dark is a liberating experience. This idea of really letting go and trying to paint exactly what I see, even if I cannot name it, forces me to paint shapes as pure abstraction. And for me, this is really what painting is all about – getting to

a place beyond, or as Dickinson would say, “forgetting what is known,” and searching for *how* instead of *what*. This is the real essence of painting.

More specifically, the industrial spaces in several of the Stockholm paintings – *Bron(tosaurus)*, *The Blue Hose*, *Green Barn*, *Hammarby Night* – are anonymous or non-specific enough that they could be in any city, really. And then there is the painting *Temple*, which to me feels like it comes out of someplace different altogether. To me that painting is dreamlike, historical, foreboding, perhaps existential – like a Romantic German painting. It's somehow both old and new.

**JW:** *Interesting that you say that your paintings are “anonymous” and “non-specific.” I know you mean that one can find industrial expanses in any city, but to call them that diminishes the sympathy they possess – a sympathy, it seems to me, for the consciousness of otherwise dead spaces.*

**TG:** You are correct – “anonymous” is not the right word. The spaces are kind of unnamable – hinterland regions. They may not be part of the typical city grid, but they are by no means “dead spaces.” They have a different scale from the residential or business areas in a city, and they are designed as the result of, or for the purpose of, different logistical or manufacturing objectives. Although these areas may seem unplanned, the spaces they generate are more the consequence of their functionality. This allows for different shapes, rhythms, and patterns, which interests me on a formal level in my painting.

**JW:** *You mention the painting Temple. The title suggests that you don't view it as representing an “anonymous” or “non-specific” space. Is it fair to say that it's a new kind of painting for you? Does it mark a new direction? Dare I ask whether it's a meaningful painting?*

**TG:** For me the title, *Temple*, is both descriptive and generic. Again, I don't want to interject overt meaning in my work, and I approach titling my paintings with caution, usually giving them very straightforward, even banal, titles. But some of my other paintings



*Fortum Biomass Steam Plant Construction Site, 28" X 51", oil on linen, 2014*

have more evocative titles – *Leviathan*, for instance – so I don't know if this painting marks a new direction. I think it's really just the mark of a visceral reaction to the finished painting. Maybe that's it – maybe it's that point when the painting is done and it becomes something else, something other than a mere facsimile of what I'm looking at. It becomes something living.

I am not saying this happens all the time, or that I think that paintings like *Temple* and *Leviathan* are better because they have these different, perhaps more mysterious titles. They are just different. I don't know why or how.

**JW:** *What are you working on now? Where are you headed as a painter?*

**TG:** I've been working on new paintings this winter. I'm currently painting on this strange island called Beckholmen, near the center of Stockholm. The island dates back to the 13th century; it originally housed several tar distilleries. It has a long association with the maritime history of the city and has three large dry docks for mending ships and offloading cargo. The scale of the docks as they relate to the surrounding landscape, the continual influx of boats, the ovoid shapes of the docks, the snow – all make this a fascinating motif. I guess the island is not as universal or unnamable as previous locations I have painted, but it's such an unusual and strange place that I feel obliged to paint it.

Beyond that, I don't know where I'm going as a painter. Honestly, I don't really want to know. ■

**Todd Gordon** lives in Stockholm. He is represented by George Billis Gallery in New York (<http://www.georgebillis.com>). For more information, or to contact Todd, see <http://toddjgordon.com>

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*View from Barnhusbron, 23.5" X 39.5", 2014*