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Vincent Grenier, *Here* (2002)
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

HERE AND THERE AN INTERVIEW WITH VINCENT GRENIER FOR AN EXHIBITION IN CHINA

The films and videos of Vincent Grenier have been at the forefront of the American avant-garde for over three decades. His main focus is on color and light, which he uses to create a rich and nuanced visual poetry of the everyday. In the following interview, he discusses his approach to color in relation to its associative content, and also the materiality of the cinematic image. Along the way, he talks about his wide-ranging influences, from French experimental theater to early Chinese painting.

This interview took place in the summer of 2008, when Vincent traveled from his home in upstate New York to Manhattan, where I hosted him for a weekend. We did the interview in conjunction with a solo show that Vincent was having at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Shanghai, China. At the time, I was programming every other screening for *I2+*, their monthly film/video series. MoCA Shanghai is a major museum located in People's Square at the center of the city. They publicize each show with a large light box display, facing the park, which is viewed by thousands of people. Their screening room generally fills to capacity, but what really gave the *I2+* series its reach was the fact that it was sponsored by *Yishu Shijie* (Art World Magazine). Art World was China's leading art magazine, and for each show, they published an in-depth interview with the artist, which they also featured on their website.

I was programming for MoCA Shanghai because I had been collaborating on various curatorial projects with the Shanghai-based film/video curator, Denis Zhu. Zhu started *I2+*, which was innovative because there is nothing else like it in China. There are no regular avant-garde screening series, and film/video art is mostly shown in galleries on an ad hoc basis. Zhu and I began curating together just after he exhibited my films there in 2005. In 2008, I programmed four shows for MoCA Shanghai. In 2009, the magazine's editorial board changed, and the *I2+* series came to an end.

I chose Grenier's work for Chinese audiences because it carries forward traditions that are central to American experimental film, while also offering a nuanced critique of many of its basic premises. In China, there is widespread interest in independent film, but when it comes to experimental work, people have only heard of Warhol and Brakhage, at best.

Warhol and Brakhage exemplify two major tendencies in the American avant-garde: improvised performance and lyrical abstraction. Both tendencies are rooted in the values of Abstract Expressionism, with its insistence on gesture, spontaneity, and an outsized artistic persona. Grenier's attitude is more reflective; he explores notions of visual beauty, while also questioning their romantic underpinnings. In contrast to Warhol's film *Chelsea Girls* (1966), where the actors were divas and the improvisations highly staged, Grenier's video

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Les Chaises (2008) features two rusty chairs staidly placed in a landscape, which the artist came upon, almost by accident. From there, he decodes a whole scene of discreet charm, of protocol and people avoiding each other. It is as if, for Grenier, theater is a kind of readymade, which the light imbues with a cinematic presence. Like Brakhage, he keeps a sense of wonder, and his exploration of gesture in film begins with the hand-held camera. But then he goes on to bring into view evidence of movement he finds all around him. Gesture is embodied in the found object, and is something that the artist notices rather than performs. These and many other ideas came up during our talk for the interview that follows.

Katy Martin is a visual artist whose work combines painting, film, photography and performance. This fall, she has a solo exhibition at Drawer 758, a gallery in Manhattan, and in 2009, she had a solo show of large-scale prints and video at #1 Live Art Space in Shanghai, China. She is currently co-curating an exhibition of Chinese video to open in November at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York.

Katy Martin: Let's talk about your most recent video, *Les Chaises* (2008). The title is in French, and it's a fairly abstract film. Two chairs on an overgrown lawn are seen, mostly in close-up.

Vincent Greenien: One idea was to focus on these chairs as I found them, on this natural stage, next to this elegant house, which had once seen better days. The chairs seem out of place. Even though they're rusted, they have a little bit of pretense about them because of the golden, oval frame on the backs and seats, and the bright scarlet color. They were just standing there, in the middle of nowhere, outside and subject to the weather. They seemed absurd, and it seemed appropriate to use a French word to describe them. The other idea was to use a title that referred to something that already existed, that already had its own story. In this case, it's the French playwright, Eugene Ionesco, and his play by the same name. So the word is not just a reference to an object, but also a reference to theater. Since I thought of the rest of the film as a collage essentially, the title becomes important too. It was very exciting to add that layer. However, my film does not focus so much on Ionesco's existential dilemmas. I'm much more concerned with humorous, down-to-earth, prosaic juxtapositions. When I shot the video, people were sleeping in the yard. It was just a day like any other, and yet all these things in the video want to speak through these chairs.

KM: They all have their cultural background.

VG: Yes, in a sense, I'm interested in enlarging the discussion of the existential. I find some depth in this idea of dealing with the prosaic and also the sublime: in what I do with the color; what's happening with these chairs and what's happening with the environment. In *Les Chaises*, you have time to sit back and reconsider the place, and you also can reconsider the cinematic image as something other than just a strict narrative.

KM: OK, so you have the chairs as you found them, and like Ionesco, you've got the narrative of the chairs as empty and having been placed somewhere, in relation to some real conversation that once took place.

VG: Well, the thing about these chairs is that they're not really in a conversation. They're far away from each other. If two people were sitting there, they would not be on speaking terms. *(laughs)*

KM: And anyway, that conversation seems long forgotten. The chairs seem to be invisible because nobody notices them anymore. There are real people in the lawn...

VG: But they don't care about the chairs.

KM: In that sense, there is something existential about them. They suggest an absence and something forgotten or ignored. There is a theater going on.

VG: There was something wonderful about the incongruousness of the space because the yard actually looked like a stage. It also sloped down so there was a view. It was on a promontory, looking out. The chairs were really placed there as sitting posts and an occasion to see out, not in. So they contained these two possibilities of reading, and I was intrigued by those juxtapositions and tensions. And actually what was really going on was more about the way the wind was shaping the sunlight. It was not at all about the chairs. There were many things in that yard that were oblivious to the drama of the chairs, and that really interested me. It opens up our imagination when we watch these things.

KM: So for you, the chairs became the focal point.

VG: Yes. I couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe that they were there. I was, like, wow, what are you doing there in that yard, that space! There was definitely a sense



Vincent Grenier, *Les Chaises* (2008) FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

that they had a function of some kind. They both seemed to fit perfectly and fulfill that function, and yet at the same time, they didn't at all because they just wouldn't survive the winter there. They belong, but at the same time, they are vulnerable.

KM: You use the chairs as a focal point and also like a movie screen. Since when you shoot them in close-up, they essentially disappear.

VG: Yes, except for the sunlight and shadows that play across them. The screen would not exist without the existence of the trees and the leaves and the sunlight.

KM: You have two kinds of photographic spaces. You have the illusionistic space of the yard, and you have this flat space, in close-up, using the red seats as a color field. It seems to me that is how you introduced them, as this kind of red mystery, right?

VG: Yes. I wanted to connect this idea of the constructed world, the cultural world, as against this other dimension, which is the geometry of the natural. There's a long dissolve that introduces two contrasting surfaces, one natural and one fake.

KM: This gray sandstone, in close-up, morphs to red vinyl.

VG: Yes, so it becomes this discussion about how culture rehabilitates nature.

KM: A lot of time in this video, and in your work as a whole, is spent in this realm of the close-up, which becomes a field.

VG: It's a paradox, because the color field takes over the whole screen, but it's also a small part of what is visible in the landscape. I'm intrigued by the idea that this small part contains something that's much bigger.

KM: So that gets back to the philosophy of the film, and where one chooses to look.

VG: Yes, it's not necessarily the drama of the chairs as existential metaphors, but the chairs as things that have a peculiarity of their own, that can be humorous or poetic beyond those types of metaphors. In other words, I'm paying attention to the object and the materiality of things, as something that can be very eloquent, as a parallel reality.

KM: Let's talk more about your use of color. If *Les Chaises* is a study in red, then your video *Here* (2002) is a study in yellow.

VG: *Here* starts off with a close-up of a yellow plastic pool which contains these

floating toy soldiers. I'm already dealing with the color a little differently than I am in *Les Chaises* where, other than thinking about red as something flamboyant that might carry a fake idea of grandeur, we forget about it. It becomes much more sensorial, and it's harder to think about it in terms of its psychological implications. In *Here*, I became interested in the psychological implications of the colors. For example, at the end, you see red through sand (it's actually keyed in digitally), but you don't quite know what is going on. These toy soldiers are buried, and the red suggests embers or burning. My son is playing, and as he drops these red leaves, he says, "Fire! Fire!" He's imagining bombing and shooting on the soldiers, but what we see are beautiful red leaves falling. That's nothing like real war, in terms of what comes to mind. It's autumn, and the leaves are an especially brilliant red, and they are so light and fluffy and so unlike fire. It's a much more exciting event than something you would think about in terms of death, or something dark. It is also true that these leaves were red because they were dying, but this only adds to the complexity of all these emotions.



Vincent Grenier,
Here (2002)

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In terms of the yellow, you have that toy pool, yellow leaves, and water. The water, I colored yellow digitally which echoes my son's imaginary manipulations and fabrications, in contrast to how things are found in the everyday world. And then also you have the toy soldier, stuck in the yellow sand, participating in my son Etienne's fantasy. I wanted to go back and forth so that one could engage with color in a variety of ways. Earlier in the video, yellow was very safe. It was part of a toy swimming pool. You recognize it as a recreational kind of color, nothing else. In digitally manipulating the color of the water, I was echoing that but in an altered way. I've always been interested in the meanings of colors and how we read them, and also in the assumptions we make about color and undercutting those assumptions.

KM: Your use of color is very playful and inventive. But your use of narrative is very understated and restrained. Even so, I experience *Here* as a very emotional film. This film was made in 2002.

VG: Right before the war.

KM: And the sand brings to mind the Middle East. Yellow at the time was a highly

politicized color, since if you wore a yellow ribbon, you supported the troops. So here's an image of a soldier in the sand, with this image of fire that is not fire at all. Likewise the pending war was being sold as something surgical and clean, something other than death and horror. So there is a lot of very real pathos to the child's play.

VG: Absolutely. I made *Here* when we weren't at war yet, but we all knew it was going to happen. I was so upset. All the reasons for war that turned out to be untrue, we already knew that they were just lies. So I was particularly upset at how this was happening, and there is definitely an echo of that in this film. Even so, how can you blame a child playing war? Every kid does this, they love poking and firing. My son was just playing out his fantasy. There's an innocence to that. And he will always tell me, "I know the difference between fantasy and reality."

KM: Yes, and actually, he's a role model for using color in an imaginative way. That's a thread too that goes through all of your work.

VG: Yes. I teach, and there's something I realized, showing Brakhage's film, *Window Water Baby Moving* to students, which is that, even though the film is about childbirth, which is something wonderful, the students are always so impressed by the red, by the blood, and they're horrified. That always intrigued me, and might be part of my own discourse about color. One reason I'm interested in using color is that I'm aware that different people interact with different colors in different ways. I'm interested in letting that sit for a little while so you can absorb the idea that, actually, there are many different ways to look at each color.

KM: In *Here*, the emotional impact seems to come from how you compose with color over time.

VG: I see color as a material thing and each material has its own peculiar identities. One is psychological, so you can interpret color differently depending on the context. That's why I would use a particular color for a certain length of time, and then start juxtaposing it with other contexts, so as to introduce different readings. Another is emotional, and that too changes with the context. I edit and re-edit, and I spend a lot of time in the editing stage thinking about how things respond to each other. I think of colors as meanings that interact with other colors to form larger sets of ideas. More than just being interested in color, I'm interested in how different aspects of color participate in the overall impact of the whole, and in the overall structure or composition.

Color is pretty; it's emotional; it has all these great qualities, but you can overdo it so easily. The more abilities you have, the more dangerous it becomes to do something that is merely decorative and not terribly significant or resonant.

I should probably also say that I first thought of myself as a painter. When I went to art school, I painted, and at some point, my work had these fields of color. So that's something that has probably never left me completely. Also, in movies, it's very hard to find naturally occurring pure colors. In nature, it's also rare. On the other hand, a lot of manufactured objects will have pure colors, maybe so they can sell. Pure colors are emotionally charged. This is just as background to my own thinking about color.

I've always been interested in this idea that, in film and video, I am creating a spectacle that essentially always goes back to the flat screen. Part of the method of image making is that there are colors in it, so how do you focus on that except then by highlighting color? In *Interior Exterior* (1978), I removed a lot of space in order to talk about space, to access something that was purely about space. So in some ways, I'm returning to that way of thinking about color as a pure phenomenon, and the only way to address that is to find ways to remove the rest in order to focus on color.

KM: Let's talk about *North Satherly* (2005), which is perhaps your most minimal work.

VG: It's quite abstract. It looks pretty similar throughout, except the color changes. It's a shot of a dried reed in a garden, blowing in the wind.

KM: So again, we have the garden and a sense of past glory.

VG: Yes. It was shot through a window that had vapor condensing, and again, it's a conversation with the flat space and the screen. One could probably say it's my most painterly film. I had a software that could change the way edges looked, and could effect just the edges and move them from one thing to another. Actually I had a number of softwares so at one point the color almost disappears, certain colors are privileged over others, and it becomes gray against an ochre background. Some spaces are flatter than others, some spaces are much darker or three-dimensional. Some of it looks very gestural, and some of it looks very photographic, and so it goes back and forth between these made-up elements.

KM: So there's the theme of nature and abstraction again.

VG: Yes. It's interesting to think about this piece in relation to *Les Chaises* or *Color Study* (2000), because in both those films you're constantly reminded of the cultural dimension. You see cars, chairs, a run down garden. Whereas in this film, *North Southerly*, you can get lost in the image.

I could say also that this idea of edges is an old fascination among visual artists. What is an edge and what is an actual shape? This started with thirteenth-century Chinese painters, and continued through the impressionists and so on. So that's an idea that I became interested in exploring visually in time.

KM: Tell me more about early Chinese painters.

VG: There was a period of my life when I was fascinated by the paintings of the Southern Song Dynasty. There was a movement of painters in an area of China that has all these very peculiar mountains. There were a number of painters who developed a very distinct style of drawing, and their paintings were full of these ambiguous lines. Of course, the landscapes lent themselves to this style because of the fog and mountains emerging from the mist. But also, for the artists, just painting the mountain, or the trees and other objects in it, lead to thinking about a whole range of issues, more than just the mountain emerging out of nowhere. Is the line a gesture, an outline? Or is it the actual thing? A whole philosophical debate took place, and the painters developed different styles in making marks. There was a whole thing about the gesture and your body making it. It also became clear that there was an emotional character to how these marks were applied, so it wasn't necessarily how realistic the painting was.

KM: It was how expressive it was.

VG: Yes. There were also some painters who were not interested in flourish, but were interested in very rudimentary things. It got to the point where they painted very simple things, little huts with unassuming surroundings. One artist even spoke of the importance of boredom in order to access higher states of insights, and his paintings were trying to reflect that. I was very intrigued by that.

KM: So in *North Southerly*, there's a kind of creative boredom to just taking one image, taking out the realistic references, and making the action very minimal. The wind in a reed becomes quite fascinating. This leads us to the soundtrack, which is a piece by John Cage. We all know he was influenced by *I Ching* and Chinese philosophy.

VG: Right, he was very interested in chance operations.

KM: So why did that soundtrack go with these images?

VG: I made the image first, and after I finished it, I was a little taken aback by just how extraordinarily beautiful it was. I became worried about it.

KM: That it was too beautiful? Oh, what Puritans we are! We just can't let ourselves go there!

VG: (Laughs) Yes, so I felt I had to find some other ways of thinking about that. When I teach, I do spend some time trying to interest my students in the history of the sublime and

different ideas about it. Part of my concern comes from this, because I think sometimes cinema, in particular right now, seems to be going back to the days of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840, a German romantic painter) and a notion of the sublime as sunsets, natural beauty, and overwhelming sights like big waterfalls. It's not that there's no imagination in that. There's lots of imagination in creating these spaces and some of Friedrich's work is very interesting. Myself, I am more interested in the prosaic. There are different poles and many things have happened since Friedrich.

KM: So, for example, you go back to the Ionesco or Beckett.

VG: Or the Dadaists, or even Cézanne who started looking at space in a very different way. One thing that interested me about the John Cage piece is that it's written specifically to use music from different times. It goes from very romantic music to any music you can think of, including popular music.

KM: So the Cage piece is basically instructions for using music fragments? It's a script?

VG: Yes, for the use of collage of different kinds of music. I think it's more like suggestions of things. Some of it could come from the radio, some of it could come from recordings, but it has to go through a range of found music including very romantic pieces. Cage generally was interested in recording through speakers as opposed to recording sound directly. So in my piece, the sound quality is almost too good! It's supposed to be artificial. The other thing about Cage is he was not interested in tonality as much as he was in tempo. He was interested in using fragments from these famous pieces of music as rhythmical elements. All that interested me. And he was choosing for his collage all these pieces that had different relationships to the history of the sublime. So that's why I was interested in it. That became a way of creating my piece, and giving a sense of history. At the end, you have this raucous popular music, but at the beginning you have this Tchaikovsky piece, which you'd think of as romantic and glorious.

KM: So it's an approach to the sublime that's inside it and outside it.

VG: Right. There are long periods of silence between each fragment. So these sounds introduce a way of thinking about the image that gives it a little more distance and then there's all these spaces in between, which are pretty long actually, where you can really get completely involved in the image without that filter. So there are these different pulls in that work.

KM: I think you carried these ideas forward into the next video, *This, and This* (2006). It's basically about mist, clouds and atmosphere.

VG: In this particular piece, I was interested in this idea of the belvedere.

KM: What's a belvedere?

VG: We were talking about that in *Les Chaises*, that these chairs were put there for the view. A belvedere is this idea of "the view." You go on top of a mountain; there's a spot where you can see a good view, and that's a belvedere. It's a vantage point, but in a certain cultural sense. It's a constructed thing. You walk all the way up there because you want to see the view. In Québec, there are hotels named "The Belvedere" because people want to go to "the spot."

This, and This has to do with this idea that you go someplace and you video the waterfalls. My footage is a combination of Ithaca Falls, near where I live, and Montmorency Falls near Québec City, where I'm from. I wanted to play with the idea that everybody brings their camera, everybody takes pictures of certain places and certain kinds of things. I mean, a video camera will always project that amateur quality and there's something cheesy about that that I'm interested in.

KM: Well, I'm sorry but the falls are really beautiful!

VG: No, no, they're gorgeous! I'm not necessarily saying that there's anything wrong with this. In fact, this is what I'm doing. I'm trying to come to terms with all this. I live in Ithaca, New York, and it's gorgeous! So ok, so I'm never going to film this because it's so beautiful!! No,

I have to film it! I have to deal with it. It's my "coming out" with all this spectacular nature.

KM: So *This, and This* is an exploration of video and what we choose to see?

VG: Right. How the video's being used, for what reason. It is also about water and vapor.

KM: But what about the close-ups of puddles on a pavement? Those are hardly typical tourist shots!

VG: Yes, well, on the one hand, it's that I'm interested in the spectacle of the belvedere or view. But on the other, I'm also transforming it by sticking to the subject of watery imagery that follows. Because the water on the road is reflective, it's abstract until you see the car tires splashing by. That's also spectacular, in a prosaic sense, and the cars remind you where you are.

KM: This goes back to what you were saying before, that you're really interested in everyday scenes and events. Maybe that's all those Chinese painters speaking to you, that there's something fascinating about the banal.

VG: But I don't think I'm unique in being interested in the banal and boredom. It's an inspiring force behind John Cage, all the structuralist filmmakers – in the 1970s, everybody was interested in time, especially extreme uses of time, and meditation. Michael Snow's film *Wavelength* is a good example. It's a boring film that's also exciting. It becomes very creative.

KM: So you come out of a genre of filmmaking where that's been thoroughly explored. Compared to that earlier work, your videos are like a study in contrasts, bringing into the mix certain stereotypes of the exciting image.

VG: Yes, but juxtaposing them with another way of thinking.

KM: For me, even though this is a study in contrasts, the drama is in how equivalent the waterfalls and a piece of wet pavement can be, in terms of visual pleasure.

VG: There are many different kinds of imagery. There's water throughout. The first shot opens on a foggy lake and there are kids bouncing on a dock, making waves. When they do that, they are like big fantasy giants playing god. They're creating the world, and they're doing so with glee. Then there are the falls, which in some sense are overwhelming. They are bigger than we are. But the juxtaposition of images suggests that there are other, more playful ways of thinking about the pre-circumscribed world we live in.

There are also shots of the vapor trails left by planes in a beautiful, blue sky. When you see the jet streams, you keep hearing machine saws on the soundtrack. The irony is that there really were saws buzzing every time I shot, and I had to take some of those sounds away!

KM: Actually, there's been a lot of critique of these privileged points of view, especially in relation to colonialism, that've been very influential in the arts. I think much of it comes from the French philosopher Michel Foucault and his writing on panopticism. Some of that relates to photography and its one point perspective.

VG: Yes. Usually it's about power.

KM: Yes. So when you pretend to be a giant, and you do all these scale changes, and you scramble the sound cues, that all relates to this critique.

VG: I've read some Foucault, but I think the film has more to do with me than that history, because I'm coming in and filming things that exist. They're just there. It's about how I find them and how they affect my world, my own presence, my existence. Of course, this is a metaphor for the act of creating. The filmmaker is always behind the camera. You're always a giant, and the images that you create interact with you. So if the kids in the movie are jumping around, I'm doing the same thing in my editing. I'm creating my own world by assembling all these things.

But let's get back to the cars and the saws. The cars break the spell because with the close-ups of the pavement, at first you don't expect the cars, and then you hear them roaring by. It



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breaks the spell of that tranquil, wonderful, rarified image. When the sawing coincides with the jet streams, it suggests that the vapor left by the airplanes is the mark left by a cut in the sky.

You can think about trails and vapor in very different ways. The road has been carved in a certain way because so many big trucks have passed by, and that's why the puddle is shaped that way. In the same way, the airplane has created that jet stream. It's a far cry from the vapor that rises up over the lake or the vapor that comes from the waterfall. In a sense, then, at the end, finding yourself inside the airplane is great because it completes the circle. You're inside the airplane looking at the clouds, which are vapors, another form of water. It completes that transformation.

KM: The airplane and the saw leave a trace. Let's relate that to the gesture. I'm getting back to your thirteenth-century painters and the ambiguity of the mark.

VG: I am interested in this notion of the gesture. I tend not to be building my films with the idea that there is a beginning and an end. I am drawn by the idea of a section, that one is part of this little segment in a continuum – an unyielding continuum perhaps but one that rings true to the larger realities of our lives.

These thoughts may not be completely contained within *This, and This*, this idea that I just expressed. Maybe it has to do with my own thinking, approaching these works, that may or may not be transparent in the works themselves. It's this idea that there's a continuum inside, of which you're just a part; so in some sense, things are extremely important, and in some sense, they're not important at all.

KM: So it's just about the space where you happen to be? And that's why you said it's maybe about death, because that space happens to be life?

VG: Yes. It's about life. It's an expression of both. Things are very present and at the same time, there is absence. You're both in and out. You need to be outside in order to appreciate that, so in every one of my films, I try to find ways to create distanciation.

KM: That's what I was calling your restraint.

VG: Yes. I do seek that restraint, where viewers can look at what they've just seen and rethink how they saw it. That is very important to me. There's something very profound about that, about being able to maintain that possibility in experiencing something from a distance and also being within the moment.