Whitney McVeigh in conversation with Henry Broome and Alexander Caspari

Introduction by Henry Broome

‘My practice has become a form of cultivation: through writing, painting, collecting and making’, says artist Whitney McVeigh. She is currently building a studio space in Southern France dedicated to archiving the objects found on her extensive travels. In the conversation, she quotes from a book she found in South Africa: ‘It is possible to gather gold, where it may be had, with moonlight.’ McVeigh collects fragmentary words and images, objects imbued with history, reforming and recontextualising them in her painting and writing, and creating new meaning through association.

To mark the release of her book, *Paths Converge: Infinite Strange Shapes* (Sylph Editions, 2025) and her solo exhibition of the same title at Encounter, the artist sat down with writer and art critic Henry Broome, and gallerist Alexander Caspari to speak about writing as a way to think through art, the overlaps in their creative approaches and the productive relationship between visual art and literature.

Alexander founded Encounter in London in 2014, and in 2022 established a space in Lisbon. While Henry, normally based in London, was staying in Lisbon on a three-month writing residency with the bookshop Well Read, who hosted the evening’s conversation. Thank you to everyone who came and offered their contributions in the Q&A.

Alexander and Henry first met ten years ago studying a Master’s in History of Art and together came up with the idea for the discussion when they discovered a shared interest in artists who write as part of their practice. While Alexander has been working with Whitney for many years at Encounter, having first discovered her work in London in 2016.

McVeigh, who is known for her visual practice, has always written, starting in her teens. As well as quotes from a range of historical writers and philosophers, the book contains thirty years of the artist’s prose and poetry writing, presented in dialogue with a selection of her drawings and photographs.

The opening poem begins, ‘A bird-like form, its wings are clipped, they appear like stunted arms.’ Continuing, the speaker asks with trepidation, ‘Who are you? A nemesis or fall, your weathered state reflecting the immensity of your

journey', lines reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* as the 'Angel of History', moving forwards into the future while looking back into the ruins of the past. On the previous double spread, on foxed, mottled paper, there is a delicate ink drawing of a human form, perhaps a pregnant woman. In McVeigh's painting and writing, she feels her way across time and space, communicating with the past, holding something of an uncertain future, producing forms which appear to have existed before they were created, as if conceived through a process McVeigh likens to 'an act of faith'.

Whitney McVeigh (b. New York, 1968) is a contemporary artist who has been writing as part of her practice for the last thirty years. Her library installation *Divine Rules* was displayed at the Getty Villa in Los Angeles in 2018 and she has exhibited at Kettle's Yard (Cambridge), the Nirox Foundation (South Africa) and Eykyn Maclean (New York). Her film *Birth Origins at the End of Life* was screened at the Royal Academy of Arts (London).

Paths Converge: Infinite Strange Shapes, Whitney McVeigh's exhibition at Encounter in Lisbon ran from 23rd May until 5th September 2026.

The conversation has been lightly edited for publication. We have not included audience Q&A.

ALEXANDER CASPARI: Whitney, to start, how did your book come about? I know that writing has always been very important to you.

WHITNEY MCVEIGH: I remember beginning to write at fourteen, in my school library composing letters to an imagined person as a way of giving form to something I couldn't express directly. Over the years, while raising my children, I continued to write poetry – documenting events, recording moments and putting my voice down on the page. At art college in Edinburgh in the 90s, I spent one day each week in the fine art library, reading the letters and interviews of artists and writers. I began collecting passages from these texts, transcribing them by hand into notebooks.

Years later, when I began working on the book, I returned to my notebooks and gathered the material I had accumulated over time. During Covid, I made a conscious decision to stop and think about where I was in my life – which, Henry, I know you've written about. I wanted to bring together both the writings

I had collected and my own work, to find my voice as a woman and as someone who has travelled.

I approached the book as I would any other piece of work: intuitively. Creating something minimal took time, and it has been the same with my paintings over the years. The book came out of a period where I was reorganising my life. I used that time to move studios, edit bodies of work and to compile the first draft.

AC: I find the way the book is constituted and composed really engaging, almost as an assemblage of poems, texts, images and literary as well as philosophical references (from Virginia Wolf to Czeslaw Milosz and Carl Jung).

Henry, you recently mentioned that you had become interested in artists' writing both conceptually but also in their voice and positionality. I wondered if you could talk more about your thoughts on this, especially in terms of your work as both an art critic and writer.

HENRY BROOME: The essay you were talking about Whitney is called 'Track Star', which is about the way ambition changes across different stages of life, turning thirty and my search for my own writing voice. Quite young, I decided I wanted to write but it took me a while to get at myself in writing. I refer to this passage from *I Love Dick* by the writer Chris Krauss. She has this moment where she's sat in traffic on the highway and she suddenly thinks she's moving, but she's actually stationary and it's the cars around her that are moving. She's been an art critic and this is a moment when she suddenly gets perspective, that she's been writing about artists but she's been writing 'ciphers' for herself for fifteen years. I had a similar moment where I really wanted to stop writing criticism, speaking in the third person through works of other artists, and I decided to finally try to write for myself.

AC: Whitney, I feel like there are strong resonances with these ideas in your book?

WM: Yes, in that the work as a whole looks at identity and tracks some of the changes in my own life. There is a book in my studio, a religious text called *Gold by Moonlight*, which I found in a second-hand shop in Krugersdorp, South Africa. Inside was a note from a man to a woman about the spiritual qualities of nature alongside photographs of trees, and she had gone out and found leaves

from the same trees and placed them inside. The preface of the book reads, ‘It is possible to gather gold, where it may be had, with moonlight. This book is written to any who are walking in difficult places and who care to gather that gold.’ The work is a window into a woman’s life; it was published in the UK in 1937 and yet somehow made the journey to South Africa. It speaks of the ordinary intimate spaces we create in order to remember.

When I found the book, it seemed to give meaning to everything I had been thinking about, adding another dimension to the objects collected over the years. I have always formed collections and assemblages, and this book began to speak to my own life in a similarly intimate way.

At the time, I was thinking deeply about landscape and memory in my own work. It was the first moment when I became fully conscious of the traces we leave behind, and how objects carry human history, acquiring meaning through association. This felt particularly connected to ideas of faith and belief, and to my own practice – not only the way I cultivate spaces through painting and writing, but also the possibility that an object, removed from its original context, can become meaningful in its own right.

AC: When I was curating the show I went and spent three days with Whitney in her studio in France. It is an evocative space, almost devoted to memory, and contains arrangements of found objects collected and assembled over the years. All these objects carry certain resonances and associations, alongside your drawings and paintings which are often made on found paper or in book pages. I was interested in what draws you to these everyday or domestic items which carry certain imprints and traces of not only individuals, but also speak to our collective history?

WM: Over time, I began to see that I was forming collections in the work, whether collections of texts, drawings or objects. Drawings have been interwoven into the assemblages over the years. The collecting of objects has been a kind of passion, being drawn to that which truly speaks to me. When these assemblages start to form in my studio, they become autobiographical, yet they carry the voices of history – ordinary collective histories – it’s a kind of quest for meaning. Everything is about how to access truth through the imagination, whether it’s through writing, painting or collecting – and a way to feel more anchored in my life.

AC: The pages of the books you have intervened in have this incredible patina, the objects you have found seem to carry a history of touch, and suggest all the hands or bodies that have imprinted on them in a certain haptic way. In a sense, there is also an autobiographical aspect, because Whitney you are selecting and bringing the objects to light. There is something intriguing about this process of taking books or extracts that exist on the margins and resurfacing them in a new form. Henry, we have previously spoken about the idea of marginalia. Perhaps we could explore a little further the idea of inscriptions in the margins especially in relation to different forms of writing? Marginalia is interesting because it's as much about reading as writing. In a sense, what we inscribe, mark or take note of in books guides reading…

HB: Completely. You can understand a writer by the way they read. I have been looking at marginalia as an expression of desire. When you're writing marginalia, you might simply be performing a close analysis of the text – noting use of language, themes that immediately jump out. You're examining the writer's intentions. But you might also be making your own associations, identifying with characters, writing people's names you know, absorbing events happening around you as you read. Marginalia can be a kind of writing of a parallel self. Susan Howe wrote a book of poetry titled *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, which contains a poem called 'Melville's Marginalia'. The poem starts with a prose preface inspired by a book of the same title by Wilson Walker Cowen, where he transcribed all the annotations Herman Melville left in his personal collection of books.

This is Howe: 'Melville read with a pencil in his hand. Marks he made in the margins of his books are often a conversation with the dead. Margins speak of fringes, of consciousness'. She continues: 'I thought one way to write about a loved author would be to follow what trails he follows through the words of others. What if these pencil scorings have come to find you too? Here again.' She's creating this conversation which spans across history, between herself and Melville and her reader, now in the present. For me, marginalia can speak beyond the text, but it's also a way to speak outside yourself.

AC: Howe's reflection on 'the fringes of consciousness' immediately made me think of Whitney's work, which also speaks to landscapes of memory or the territory of the mind as at once a knowable but also foreign terrain. Whitney, I know you've been exploring these subjects for a very long time. In a way,

although you are both interested in the marginal, is it actually more a preoccupation with uncovering the fragmentary or unseen? Is there something generative in the process of reading, re-centring or reconstituting that which operates in a marginal space?

WM: I hadn't previously thought about marginalia in the context of my own work; it's been interesting to discuss it with you. There is a great deal in my studio that now seems relevant – the different ways voices emerge through the books themselves, for instance. Or the engraving of text on a found object. This idea of the 'fringes of consciousness', and how we might access liminal spaces, is something that interests me.

While building the library over ten years, I was also reading philosophy. I became interested in Plato's idea of knowledge as a form of remembering, and in Jung's belief that certain images exist within us before we are born and become conscious of them. Both seemed to suggest that, through our encounters with the tangible world, we are able to recover or recognise something already present within us.

I see something of this in my own life. My practice has become a form of cultivation: through writing, painting, collecting and making, I push myself to evolve as a person and to expand my inner world. There have been times when I have woken in the night with an image in my mind, only for it to appear in the work the following day. The moment I start to believe this, it happens more, like an act of faith.

HB: You mentioned to me that the landscapes you visit and spend time in almost unconsciously seep into the paintings, in the ink works on paper.

WM: In South Africa, I made a body of work called *Archaeology of Memory*, and it was only in the final few days that I realised the creases in the stones of the landscape had found their way into the monochrome heads I was making. I hadn't been conscious of it while working.

The same thing happened as I was flying out of China. I could see so much of what was happening in the paintings I had made there – the fissures in the landscape. Something seems to enter the work through the landscapes I have inhabited, creating a deeper psychological connection. Plato writes about sensory imagination and the way languages are not made but grow over time. I

think that the more one engages with these ideas, the more something begins to shift within the work.

I worked under the poet CA Conrad at Faber, and practiced their technique of creating ritual spaces. I do something similar in preparation for my paintings, though less consciously with my writing, introducing an object or place that might set the work in motion. The process has to remain open; otherwise, the work becomes too conscious of itself.

HB: I feel the same. I've been trying to resist fixing meaning in writing. Back at university, I was really inspired by Georg Lukács, a Marxist literary theorist who wrote an essay called 'Narrate or Describe'. He praises Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* because the narrator is an active participant within the story, not an observer. By contrast, Lukács says the 'description novel' is full of detail, with no sense of causality. Bad things happen to characters and there's no condemnation from the narrator. Whereas with the 'narrative novel', there's a strong sense of morality and there's a hero.

This was compelling. I thought this is how you could determine a good work of art from a bad one, whether the artist expresses a clear viewpoint, whether the work has a defined political utility. But the approach became restrictive and I started thinking about the possibilities of leaving gaps in my writing.

Lukács uses Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as an example of a narrative novel, but then Tolstoy wasn't really trying to fix meaning in the way that Lukács was suggesting. Two years before he wrote *Anna Karenina*, he sent a letter to his friend Nikolai Strakov in 1876, saying, 'In almost everything I've written, each idea expressed separately in words loses its meaning when removed from the network around it. This network itself is not made up of ideas, but of something else. And it is absolutely impossible to express the substance of this network directly in words. It can only be done indirectly by using words to describe characters, acts and situations.' Tolstoy leaves the reader grasping at this underlying structure, which creates this sense of longing in the reader. I'm still torn between Lukács and Tolstoy, finding a use for art and literature versus leaving meaning open.

AC: In painting, I'm more and more interested in this idea of resonant gaps and productive spaces between… I've been reflecting on this idea of painting as a 'wordless intelligence', a spatial organisation of ideas, or an intuitive space

where what is unsaid is sometimes as important as what's said or spoken. As an example, one of Whitney's works from the show, which is called *Light of the Body*, certainly in its form speaks to the notion that we carry images within us, that we hold history in our bodies. It's a drawing of an archetypal body made with a singular line, a sort of contained gesture, which at once becomes a container of ideas, but also an open vessel that speaks to the potentiality of space and time. I think about that often.

WM: It was also made on a page from a 150-year-old Chinese medical text, which I deconstructed and de-threaded. When the book is taken apart, the individual pages become unusual shapes that reflect its history. This fragile paper has survived for so long. I think of working with it as a meeting with history – of how I bring myself to that encounter whilst respecting the time and place of its production, and find the balance that allows a dialogue to take place. It is an intuitive and delicate process.

HB: Alexander, does your curatorial approach relate to these kinds of ideas?

AC: Well, I often inaccurately quote an essay from Rosalind Krauss 'Grids' (1979), which was about the idea of the ambivalent modernist grid in painting and how that grid as visual anchor is carried through 20th century painting and acts like a woven net pulling diverse histories and approaches to making with it. I'm not so interested in the 'grids' but really this image of a conceptual net trawling through time – what it contains but also what slips through it – becomes an interesting metaphor for some of the themes that we've been talking about in relation to Whitney's work. We have spoken about what is psychologically or unconsciously carried with us and what's lost or buried and how certain works can reflect on that. I'm not sure I can speak to my approach to curating in general but I can discuss our show Whitney. I was very struck by the book's structure which is somewhat echoed in the exhibition…the gallery space functions almost as an assemblage of different resonant fragments. By placing existing objects intuitively together or building layers of reference, new associations or forms are produced and rise to the surface. I'm especially interested in what happens when Whitney combines action and object to open up new contemplative spaces and I hope the exhibition reflects this.

WM: I noticed when you came to my studio that you work intuitively and find your way through the pieces – I do think we achieved this, particularly having discussed these themes over the years.

AC: It's exactly as you say. It's instinctive. It's not dissimilar in the way that you work. I'm drawn to particular forms because they have a certain internal force or aura.

HB: The theme of motherhood is so present in the book and the idea of the body as a vessel. In the book, Whitney you quote John Berger's notion of the 'continent of the physical'. The knowledge or the meaning you're drawing from seems to be coming out of the body as well as the sacrifices of motherhood?

WM: When my children were young, I moved my bed into the kitchen so I could make work there and use the bedroom as a space to paint. Being a mother has been a large part of my life, yet it's something that goes unrecognised for many women, the giving of many different parts of oneself.

I made the film *Birth Origins at the End of Life*, in which I interviewed women in hospice care, asking them what it means to bring life into the world [an edited version of the film was featured in *The Guardian*]. The body enters all of my work because I understand it in many different dimensions. The experience of carrying a child and giving birth also involves a separation, which carries into the work. And yes, this idea of the 'continent of the physical', and a kind of mapping of the body, both as a vessel and vehicle for memory.

In my work, I take things out of context and give them a new life. I am interested in how an object can stand on its own once separated from everything around it, what meaning it conveys and how that interpretation can shift when brought into dialogue with something else. The same is true of language, when words or lines are taken out of context. These are questions I return to in the work.