

# INTERVIEW WITH GLENN THOMAS

Published on [www.hotelstgeorgepress.com](http://www.hotelstgeorgepress.com) (Summer 2008)

A conversation between Mark Batty Publisher managing Editor Buzz Poole and artist Glenn Thomas about his forthcoming book, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*, a collaboration with Paul Auster, which will be available in late September from Mark Batty.



**Buzz Poole:** *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* is your second collaboration with Paul Auster (the first was a printed linen portfolio titled “My Mouth is Tired Now: The Peter Stillman Monologue” from *City Glass*). For this project, Auster chose the text for you to respond to visually. Do you know why he chose this portion of his novel *The Book of Illusions*?

**Glenn Thomas:** He seems to really like it as a story in itself, considering the fact that he made a film of it. I personally cannot separate it from the rest of the book and that’s why I insisted on starting the text where I did. I wanted it to be in the context of the entire book. He often puts stories within stories, something which I also do in my work, painting within a painting, drawing within a drawing, etc. This often makes for a positive tension–dissonance that keeps the reader/viewer on their toes and prevents the work from becoming commonplace, hopefully.

**BP:** Have you seen the film? How do you think it fits into the *Inner Life of Martin Frost* puzzle?

**GT:** I have not yet seen the film. Perhaps Auster is influenced by the visual aspects of film. His books call up very clear images for me. I am personally more interested in contemporary music than the visual arts, and feel very influenced by it—kind of the reverse of the composer Morton Feldman, who spoke more about the visual arts and their influence on him than he did about music. Maybe Auster is a filmmaker that writes books. I sometimes think I’m a composer who paints.

**BP:** What about music inspires your work and elicits that feeling of being a “composer that paints”? Does it have to do with the ephemeral aspect of music in that it is only there (for the ear) when it is played, and something else all together when simply read off a score?

**GT:** The Greek composer Iannis Xenakis worked first as an architect (with Le Corbusier, I believe) and said that it was simple to change over to being a composer. I think he also experienced music as three-dimensional, a kind of invisible temporary object in space. I can feel very influenced by a certain piece of music and can virtually steal an idea for a visual work, and no one would ever know or understand. So it’s a kind of literal translation of combinations of sounds and structures and layers. Hard to put into words actually. Of course certain aspects of music are so different than visual phenomena; creating a climax, for instance, seems to be impossible in a static object.

**BP:** For you, is there any relationship between composing music and the idea of a sculptor working a raw chunk of stone [toward a] form that had been waiting to be discovered?

**GT:** Not really. I start with a form for a painting. They are seldom squares or rectangles and when I cut it out and hang it on the wall, I just start working on it, kind of like a writer might just start with the first sentence of a book not knowing where it’s going but moving from one moment to another and at one point the painting makes itself—if it goes well!— and it’s all a big surprise when it’s over. The element of time only exists in painting while it’s being made, while it’s constantly changing, where as music only exists in time, and is never static. Although Morton Feldman did his best to try and make music stand still and I’m constantly trying to make things move in my work.

**BP:** What musicians inspire you? Are they more Classical/New Music types or do you relate your art to jazz and rock?

**GT:** Mostly Classical/New Music for really influencing the way I work. I sometimes listen to jazz or blues or rock music but only for entertainment. With the advent of music on the computer it’s possible to discover new composers and hear new pieces, which I do a lot. When I look at my CDs I see a lot of Ligeti, Stefan Wolpe, early Stockhausen, Robert Ashley, Elliott Carter, Galina Ustvolskaya, Sofia Gubaidulina, Gerard Grisey, Schoenberg and Feldman, but there are so many more.

**BP:** Who are the visual artists that inspire you?

**GT:** A true favorite is de Kooning. I have spent the last year and seven months on a series of paintings on paper called: “33 Views of Bill’s Hangover,” which I started after reading an excellent biography about him. I liked the ‘70s conceptual artists a lot, especially Joseph Beuys, and Peter Hutchinson. Robert Rauschenberg was a favorite, certainly the early works of the ‘60s. Still like looking at the old masters a lot.

**BP:** What other writers do you read?

**GT:** Living in Europe and having shows in different countries gave me the chance to discover writers I might not have discovered in the States. I like the Swede Stig Dagerman, the Swiss writers Max Frisch and Robert Walser. I’m now reading the Belgium writer Louis Paul Boon.

There is a good English translation of *Chapel Road and Summer in Termuren*. Two books that I have read more than once are *Moby Dick* and Kenneth Patchen's *Journal of Albion Moonlight*. I also like to read poems, very partial to the French poets in the 19th as well as the 20th centuries. William Burroughs is special and Lawrence Ferlinghetti was an early discovery and holds up a lot better than most of the other Beats.

**BP:** That brings us back to *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*: the essence of the story, in my mind, is about creation and the complex relationship between the creator and the creation. Do you feel that your work exists apart from you, or is it always connected to you?

**GT:** Pretty interesting question—my first reaction is to say that it is always connected to me, a mirror image of what's going on inside. But then again, if I see a work at a collector's house that I have not seen in a long time, I'm often surprised that it has its own existence, and wonder, How did I do it? I think we never know completely just what is going on inside, and it changes, of course, from day to day, hour to hour. Perhaps Auster felt that way about the story inside the story, How did I do it?

**BP:** Both the book's typography and illustrations possess a dizzying quality. Was this the effect that the story had on you?

**GT:** I think life has a dizzying effect on me. I love the way Auster puts his books together. I want art to put me off balance, cause me to puzzle over it... a state of consternation ... at its best to shock, like seeing Gruenwald's altarpiece for the first time in the flesh. I find this story very poetic, kind of... misty.