

Bill White: Empathy and Engagement

by Jennifer Samet

But I always think that the best way to know God is to love many things. Love a friend, a wife, something – whatever you like.... But one must love with a lofty and serious intimate sympathy, with strength, with intelligence; and one must always try to know deeper, better, and more. (Vincent Van Gogh, letter 133)

Bill White recalls, as a child, seeing a Van Gogh exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art as one of his earliest essential visual experiences. “It took my breath away. The lush paintings of strong color, their vigor and enthusiasm, compared to more traditional paintings, charged me up.”¹ This excitement and visceral pleasure in the seeing and painting process – and the sharing of these enthusiasms – marks the work and life of White.

Van Gogh’s quotation above speaks to both a way of life and a perceptual / aesthetic process of identification and empathy, a search for knowledge that can always be enriched and is never satisfied. This is the same dictum that characterizes White’s approach: keep looking, searching for those visual patterns that strengthen the work formally. Do not be satisfied by stylization imposed *a priori* onto the work. In addition, share the knowledge, with love, with others (in White’s case this has been nearly forty years of students), and always, give back to the community. He lives near Roanoke, Virginia, where he is Professor Emeritus at Hollins University.

White’s *oeuvre* consists of interiors, sometimes with still lives and figures, landscapes, and more recently, urban rooftop landscapes of Paris and Roanoke, Virginia. White situates himself in terms of a “family tree” of art historical heroes that includes Corot, Vuillard, Porter, Nell Blaine and Gretna Campbell.

White’s experiences as an art student were the foundation of a life’s work that involves a perceptual process but acknowledges the search for meaningful form as the primary concern. He remembers conversations with his teacher Karl Sherman, a German émigré, at the Philadelphia College of Art, in a pre-college summer session, about how to make a mark on the paper that had structural importance, as opposed to pure illusion. Similarly, he was exposed to the idea that abstraction and representation were a false dichotomy. Later, he studied with Sidney Goodman and recalls that Goodman’s gift was recognizing the central problem in a student’s work. Often, this was a predetermined stylization that the student had imposed onto the work. Goodman would ask him to rub that out, and to look again, closely, at the subject.

White also studied with Edna Andrade, a hard-edged abstractionist who taught color theory. Andrade remained a life-long friend to White, and the essence of her teaching was not so much knowledge of color itself, but how one used it expressively. Larry Day would additionally make a huge impression on White. Day shared his discovery, made

¹ Bill White, interview by author, digital voice recording, 12 March 2011, Roanoke, VA.

while transcribing a de Hooch painting, that a fold in the cloth could be both a paint stroke and a fold: the mark could function as both pure paint and illusion. This realization allowed White to understand the importance of a “duality,” rather than an either/or way of thinking about painting and representation. Under Day’s influence, White first worked in a more linear style, but gradually found that a painterly approach was more liberating, energized the work, and prevented emotional restraint.

White’s paintings are exuberant and expansive in their color, light, and abundance of form and life. However, they have a naturalism and softness that comes from the resistance to stylize or rigidly define form. He refuses the easy route – which would be to generalize or allow a “signature style” to dominate. Instead, the emphasis is on the translation of perceptual experience and the commitment to see and know the subject more deeply. As White states:

I need to wrestle with an experience outside of myself. As soon as I am looking at something and confronting that visual pattern, I feel so alive that the whole engagement and the painting process seem so meaningful. Immediate experience is the key. It comes from the engagement with the outside and inside experience....²

White also explains the importance of connecting to the visual experience and how the painting’s unity and depth comes from this:

I am looking for a unity, especially around the issue of the light. Does it feel like the light is authentic? If it doesn’t, I’ll abandon the painting, take it back out, do something on top of it. It is intuitive and felt, and it is about *empathy*, characteristic of Hofmann. If I don’t feel the connection, then I’m making the painting based on knowledge and experience. I really want it to be something that reveals my presence and the representation of that experience. When those two things intersect, then it is finished and I’ll stop.³

Hans Hofmann used the term “empathy” in his teaching and writing, defining it as a process of identification, and also “the intuitive faculty to sense qualities of formal and spatial relations, or tensions, and to discover the plastic and psychological qualities of form and color.”⁴ Empathy, for Hofmann, implied the ability to find the “art”—the “painterly qualities”—in nature. He also wrote, “The process of seeing is invariably accompanied by feeling projection... a psycho-spiritual picture of the world develops within us that becomes the pictorial basis for creation.”⁵

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hofmann, “Terms,” in *The Search for the Real and Other Essays*, Bartlett Hayes and Sara T. Weeks, eds., (Exh. cat., Andover, Mass: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1948; reprint, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983). 77.

⁵ Hans Hofmann, *The Painter’s Primer: Form and Color in the Creative Process (IIIrd German Version)*, (97-page typescript, Archives of American Art, New York and Washington, D.C. Trans. Georgina Huck, 1948). n.p.

Matisse had described a similar process – an empathetic identification with the subject, that was responsible for creating “likeness” in a portrait:

I am surprised to see appear on the paper little by little, a more or less precise likeness of the person I am with. The image becomes visible to me as if each line in charcoal was clearing mist from a mirror, mist that up to that point had prevented me from seeing the person... At the same time, something is born of an interpenetration of feelings that makes us feel the warmth of the other's heart, and this ends in the conclusion of the painted portrait.⁶

As if reflecting a life-long process of eliminating stylization, White's more recent paintings are more direct and less reliant on the compositional devices he used earlier in his career. His *Princess* paintings, and his *Yellow Table III and IV* paintings employ the indoor-outdoor / open-window interiors that are found throughout his *oeuvre*, but he narrows the focus, closing in on the subject and loosening his touch.

Although they have a richness of form and visual patterning, the paintings are often about what White excludes. He frequently fragments and crops his views. The absence of something creates the empathic sense of a one-time presence. *Princess II* puts the organic, curvilinear forms of the plant leaves and the cat, curled up asleep on a chair, against the rectangles of light reflected on the floor. These reflections force us to feel that looking-down sensation as the compactness of the space creates an unfulfilled desire in us - to look up and out. Similarly, in the *Yellow Table* paintings, the subject becomes the cup and open book left out – who was reading and drinking? We identify with the artist, because there is a sense that he too, discovered this recently neglected scene. In *Morning Snow*, as well, White closes in on a small group of trees, the snowy ground, and the cast shadows. We are given the vista just beyond but not the treetops above, and it is for this reason we sense that momentary, fleeting connection with one specific spot – as opposed to the indifferent eternal. It also becomes a simple but rich abstract pattern, with the four main trees acting as dark vertical volumes set against the white ground with its quickly scumbled tracks, bluish shadows, and the umber patches of uncovered earth.

In the *Rooftop* paintings, on the other hand, we see only the tops of buildings and skies. White began making rooftop paintings on a fellowship in Paris in 2010, and continued the practice when he returned to Roanoke. They have a grand orchestration of color and light, and a unity achieved with a touch is never heavy-handed. In motif and style, they reflect a love of French painting from Corot to Guillaumin to Cézanne. In the large diptych *Paris Rooftops from the Cité* (2010), we feel atmosphere as much as grandeur: the passage of the sky from grayish-pink fog in the distance to the deeper blues at right, attacked with a more painterly touch. The volumes of rooftops, including Notre Dame off in the distance, are positioned in constant rhythmic intervals, becoming clearer and more direct as they are closer – as if bringing us right into White's visual and painting experience. The gentle yet vigorous touch White employs is reminiscent of Seymour Remenick, a Hofmann student who lived and painted landscapes and cityscapes around

⁶ Henri Matisse, *Portraits* (Monte-Carlo: Andre Sauret, 1954). 15-16.

Philadelphia, and who White later came to admire. Similarly, although White recognizes the importance of symbolic color, he never pushes his own palette as far as Van Gogh or Nell Blaine, another Hofmann student whose work is a model for White's. Instead White treads that line, relying on the painterly to create meaning and energy. *Winter Snow*, 2008, has a spontaneity where we especially feel White's hand; it unifies the elements of tree branches, clouds, snow and water. All are marked by a kind of excited line that communicates the discovery of harmonies of textures and colors in the landscape.

Louis Finkelstein, the painter and writer, defined the goals of many of his peers in the essay "Painterly Representation." He wrote about how the painterly aspects reflect the presence and experience of the artist – in fact, an empathetic response to subject:

That kind of representation we call painterly comes into being precisely because of this process sense of things. The time which is transfixed is not the outward time of day or even the process of laying on the paint so as to produce virtuosic marks of the process, but rather the flowing of consciousness in interaction with first the resistances and challenges which the world of appearances presents to our grasp, and secondly with the ways pictorial language itself generates metaphors of the meanings of things and of state of mind.⁷

Finkelstein believed visual art could capture a synthesis of time: past, present, and future, within one image, and felt that painterly elements specifically call attention to this possibility. White's paintings, indeed, achieve their power and meaning this way: the emotional and visual engagement with the subject, the scope and limitations of the vistas, the presences and absences, and the temperate touch, which is open yet never preconceived.

⁷ Finkelstein, "Painterly Representation," in *Painterly Representation*. (Exh. cat., New York: Ingber Gallery, 1975).