

Clothier, Peter, "A Structured Sense of Action," *Artweek*,
September 18, 1981, Volume 12, No. 31, p. 3, illus.

Los Angeles

A keen sense of action has always been at the heart of John White's work. Although it manifests itself most clearly in the performance work, which has won him a national reputation in recent years, it has also been a key element in his paintings and drawings. His current exhibition at the Jan Baum Gallery continues this area of investigation.

Many of the same elements which composed the earlier golf course series are evident again in these works, especially the energetic movement between structural control and expressive whimsy, abstract formalism and referential irony, hard line and delicate squiggle. It is "by indirection," to borrow Hamlet's notion, that we "find directions out." Reading the work becomes the adventure of charting a course among the multiple paths and obstacles it proposes.

In the works on paper selected for this exhibition from a current series, *Con Enrico*, we watch with interest as the element of landscape - already schematically implicit in the golf course series - takes a progressively more substantial and dramatic place in White's work. Early works in the series seem almost obsessively to curtain off this vision with row upon row of bars, or piles ranged vertically across the center of the picture plane: obstacles that leave the course unclear, impenetrable.

Yet as the series progress, this impediment to vision seems to split - again like a curtain, at the center - allowing a sudden perception of depth atypical of White's work to date. Shapes, massive as rocks or indefinable as clouds and water, begin to suggest distant landscapes struggling to emerge; they offer us the opportunity to chart a new course, now not only formally - at the surface of the picture - but also into its pictorial, referential space. Recent works in the series reveal a veritable explosion of the formal, compositional elements which favor a burgeoning fantasy and lyrical intensity.

Dramatizing still further the progression evident in the *Con Enrico* series, the exhibition includes two large acrylic-on-plexiglass paintings (*Klamath #3* and *4*) and an installation work which is a three-dimensional projection of these paintings. Baring their structural underpinnings like an open stage set, the paintings are organized around the massive central appearance of a rock - whose presence resounds with the obsessive familiarity of the mountain in *Close Encounters*, the *Lorelei*, or countless other mythic monoliths. It is the archetypal obstacle/attraction which draws us on with irresistible magnetic force, but which threatens to crush us if we fail to negotiate a passage around it.

Both paintings and installation combine an intellectual analysis of structure with an anti-romantic rejection of sentiment (made visually explicit in White's uncompromisingly unattractive color values) and a subtle lyricism and humor. In the installation, *Little Blossom Falls*, the access mentioned earlier is made literal and physical. We walk into the work among ungainly lumps of pipe and concrete, some gray, some touched in blue and white and suggesting the movement of water with almost the composure and precision of sumi-e brushwork. The linear tension of a cat's cradle of taut, black strings with geometric shapes recreates the interplay of formal elements in the paintings, and the implacably gray, central monolith, which is

painted on the rear wall, imposes menacingly upon our sense of both compositional propriety and the natural beauty of landscape.

The work is convincing evidence of a mature and integrated vision which allows for continuing, thoughtful development within a consistent theater of esthetic and thematic concerns. White's art is rare in its ability to activate a remarkable range of emotional responses from awe to irreverence, heaviness to humor. The exhibition also presents to southern Californians the opportunity to see an example of his three-dimensional "paintings," previously exhibited elsewhere, now shown for the first time in Los Angeles.