

Danieli, Fidel, "John White: A Most Complete Artist," Volume 14, Artweek (May 14, 1983)

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One of the new programs inaugurated at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery by director Josine Ianco Starrels has been the midcareer retrospective. It seems that most older masters in southern California have received their due homage in full-scale retrospectives and that the commercial galleries and other institutions are properly featuring newer and younger talents. Now attention is being directed toward artists who are in their forties and early fifties and in that peculiar lacuna of usually having their work seen in an annual gallery solo, if they are part of a gallery stable, and then being largely ignored except for inclusion in occasional group theme shows. The midcareer examination serves to call attention to an artist's staying power and strengths of visual contribution, and it is a pause that allows us to assess the artist's aim and directions. It provides an opportunity to assemble work seen over the span of one-to-two decades and reexamine impressions of it, and an opportunity to catch up on a rather complete sampling of an oeuvre to which we may not have paid proper attention.

The fifteen-year survey of John White's career is a multidirectional event. It includes dozens of large drawings, eight large paintings, several temporary wall constructions, a roomful of performance are documentation and a selection of recent work.

The core of White's work is found in his passionate enthusiasm for mixed media graphics, and it is instructive to follow his stylistic changes from series to series over the last decade and a half. The drawings from the late 1960s are bold diagrams of information, analysis of forms and sculptural profiles, arrayed in gridlike zones as if they were scores for sound or performance, or construction plans. Clearly defined but abstract shapes have been worked into and layered with color additions, and further amplified with unreadable or barely decipherable labels and explanations. The forms burst with an energy of broad line and pattern that carries over into the vigor of the written directions.

The views are often partial, as if the drawing were an exploded view of an object that might be constructed, or might differ in appearance if seen from another angle. They may just as readily present various renditions of experience translated into artistic shape. Cross-sectional views also appear. Frequently the objects are repeated, as if to permit examination of several variants of one species. Essential to this mode of thinking about a drawing as being a plan is a switch of implied viewer position, so that at times we look directly into space at a sectional plan, and at others, we look down from overhead at a flat floor plan. White continually works back and forth between illusory spatial depth and the two-dimensional design approach. About 1975 his drawings lock these together into a resolution which allows reading of both depth and flatness.

Works in the Landscape/Christmas series, beginning in 1971, are visually almost the exact opposites of those discussed above. The drawings are fragmentary, even nervous. The arks are agitated clusters and visually buzz and dance like bees about a hive, producing a curious pointillist effect: or the marks hum like shorted-out circuits or stitch only partial contours. Clear forms give way to incompletely outline ones; sequential layout is replaced by basic geometric shapes such as triangles,

circles and interconnected rays. The high levels of energy and involvement remain, but White now breaks up form in new ways laying out new overlaps and transparencies and aligning shapes in new configurations in a diverted or skittish manner.

The Therapy/Group Interaction and Vancouver Landscape series (1973) are more factual floor-plan layouts, based on the symmetry of the circle within a rectangle. Points represent people; they are named and their activities labeled. These are scripts, recorded documents of emotional exchanges. They are also narratives in the sense that stages in the unfolding sequences of events are numbered and the interrelationships between elements are ordered and connected. Cause and effect can only be guessed at, however, for we are faced with the final accumulation, the total accretion of steps or stages that produce the appearance of an abstract allover, all-at-once field of marks.

Begun in 1974, the theme of the next series, Gold and Sand Trap, continues to be explored with minor variations for the next six years. These drawings are remarkably delicate and tonal. Executed in pencil with pale color washes or sequences of thin-color cross-hatchings, they are surprisingly realistic in rendering landscape symbols as fairway planes, rocky mounds, hazardous traps, etc. By 1975 a basic geometric figure controls the overall composition with either a strong central axis, a dominant triangle or a large X configuration of crossed diagonals. All three permit both a flat and deep reading of the vista of space.

In all of his work since 1975, White's drawings and paintings can be read in zones of left, center, then right; and simultaneously can be seen as arranged on each side of a central column or cone that directs the vision up, or deep into infinity and down to the foreground. Rub-on letters, numbers and arrows accompany the multiple marks and describe the hitting of the golf ball with all the possible hazards duly noted.

These drawings underscore another of White's major concerns (in addition to the previously described diagram style and the narrative style) – a situational style where the frame encloses elements of action. Reading them rather as if this were a chart, we examine the results as if they recorded an actin or the proceedings of a game. There are a variety of moves, actions, interactions and reactions, but there is always the understanding that these all occur in the controlling context of a game system or a sports field. Goals, limits and penalties are all exerting their forces on the outcome of the event, as well as conditioning the look of the finished drawing.

The most purely abstract drawings and those that make the clearest color statement are the recent ones titled "Con Errico" (1980 on) and the newest Los Angeles series (which is being shown this month at Jan Baum Gallery). In these, vertical struts or pickets are splayed in a horizontal rhythm – like a curtain or a gateway – and are held in place by tangential angular frames. In the Con Errico series, the bands are outlined; tints of ink color permeate the patterns and provide the possibilities of multiple readings of the narrow but ambiguous space. In the larger-format Los Angeles group, color is provided by acrylic paint and fully saturates the picture plane; it is worked on both the face and back of each drawing in a truly painterly process.

White's contribution to the art of drawing may well be his consideration of the page or sheet as a "time trap" or repository of diverse accumulated thoughts, experiences and moves. His paintings, on the other hand, seems to be "space traps" in which he

assembles, from all about him, a fund of painterly responses that lead him to create a palpable surface of agitated strokes.

It would be easy to read the eight paintings as pendants of the graphics. Easy, but a mistake. The two early works set the format mode that White still prefers for his paintings – the horizontal, its height half or less of its width. Originally, the shape related directly to a left-to-right scan of floor plans and paintings are overlaid, collage like areas of contrasting line patterns and values. White's entire repertoire of graphic symbols for performance moves and his score for a body or bodies dealing with environmental situations can be found in these panels. When he returned to painting during the period of the Golf series, the horizontal shape lent itself naturally to the tradition of landscape painting. In the two Westchester acrylics (1977), the golf-course diagram is buried under a surprising painterly concern for qualities of overcast light and turbulence of atmosphere.

The exhibit is filled out by two wall constructions – a form that held White's attention in the early seventies and to which he has recently returned. Early in his career, he was represented in two major younger-artist group shows – Los Angeles Country Museum of Art (LACMA) and Pasadena Museum of Art – by similar spontaneous temporary assemblages of ordinary materials projecting from the wall surface. One, at Barnsdall Park, is a combination of elements retrieved from photographs of several studio constructions done some years ago for LACMA's New Talent exhibition selection committee. The other is a new work, based on the vertical gar elements on a black ground in a large 1980 Con Errico painting.

An entire small room has been set aside to concentrate attention of a major aspect of White's endeavors; his pioneering and continuous role in performance art. All too easily overlooked in a survey of static forms, a selection of plans, Xeroxes, collages and photographs documenting some of the ninety performances he has produced, directed and starred in since his graduate-student days is presented here.

The exhibit brings us full circle. White translates direct experience into drawings, paints from the theses developed, extends the dimensions of his paintings out into wall reliefs, and then develops a variety of semi-theatrical moves to represent his experiences to a larger audience in one-man performances. We are, fortunately, able to examine each amply represented segment in the circle of activities of this most complete artist.