

Brown, Betty Ann, "Winds of Change," Volume 19 No. 32, Artweek, Oct. 1, 1988, p. 4

Santa Monica/Betty Ann Brown

Hurricane Gilbert lashes at the Gulf Coast. I watch the television news, awed by footage of past hurricanes, troubled by scenes of domestic detritus scattered over miles of flat Texas highway. My father calls from Corpus Christi to tell me he is evacuating a house that holds remnants of my childhood. Which elements of my past are vulnerable to Gilbert's devastation? Will the couch I remember from my grandmother's house survive the disaster, and my books, the photograph albums? I realize that the news of Gilbert has particular resonance not only because it directly affects my father's home but also because I impute symbolic significance to the fierce, random destruction it may wreak; Gilbert could sweep away my memory-linked possessions. Life changes can devastate our carefully constructed personal systems of significant images and objects.

My reading of John White's Kern Spin artwork at Dorothy Goldeen Gallery is linked to the metaphoric impact of Hurricane Gilbert. (Doesn't the text always reflect the reader's reality?) As I survey the exhibition, White's painted tornadoes represent the frenzied twists of circumstance that cause/accompany/exacerbate major life changes; his images and objects suspended by cyclonic force depict the material correlatives of life's passages.

Some time ago, White traveled to Kern County and saw the ravages of a tornado there. He saw rivers rise to flood the land, sweeping cars and boats and homes before them. He saw objects broken and displaced, the earth becoming a tangled net of shattered memories. He saw others' lives unsettled by nature just as he was going through personal and professional change. He recorded his observations, then decided to put his sketches and notes away. The Kern Spin series did not emerge until years after his experience of the storm. Time and White's creative process converted the obvious parallel between natural destruction and the artist's internal crisis to images of universal impact. Kern Spin is more than a pictorially dramatized autobiography. It grapples with the ephemeral quality of memory, asserting that mental possessions – like material ones – are constantly in flux.

The series includes three related and sometimes intersecting bodies of work; large theatrical paintings; smaller pictographic images developed by cutting away the black surface of cardboard to reveal the mat brown beneath; and even smaller reliefs of rivers laden with miniature three-dimensional debris, their banks covered with shadowy silhouettes. The large paintings are pivotal. They place the viewer as an audience just beyond the proscenium of the canvas edge. Stage floors shoot back in disjunctive parallels, topped by stepped pyramidal platforms that are connected by electric blue zigzags and framed by curtains of black bars. The stages are set with fractured planes of color – earthy brown and umber, deep turquoise and khaki green, metallic bronze – colors that give them rich, variegated patinas. The painting surfaces become scintillating visual mosaics crossed by networks of painted and scratched wiry lines. These tense, stretched paths accelerate the visual reading to a hectic pace. Like a proton in perpetual motion, the viewer's eye ricochets over the mesh of forms, pauses briefly to take in an image, then rushes to the next. The Kern Spin paintings are psychological maps, charts of the intimate geography of memory.

Pictographs tumble through White's animated stage spaces. They represent the nostalgic material of male childhood – tepees, guns, sailboats, barbells, footballs, fish, shirts, chairs, airplanes. They are precisely the kinds of possessions Christian Boltanski has recreated in plasticine and mounted in vitrines – images of a life at once discrete and communal, the signposts of modern existence. As is true of the ancient eroded rock art of Kern County, the forms of White's pictographs are often obscured. Some are lost under layers of paint, others hidden behind smoky spirals. They evoke but do not explicate. Realizing that autobiography can only be partially shared, White represses individual specificity to allow for broader readings.

On White's stages, pools of blue light circle the unoccupied platforms like spotlights missing their prey. But – to contradict Foucault – the author is not dead. White's own presence is always implied; though absent, he still directs the performance. His compositions are often cut into vertically symmetrical zones, as if viewed through the eyes of an orchestrating conductor. Lines jut out from the central axis to balance the tumbling forms and keep them magically – but precariously – suspended. Dizzying cylinders of moving air dart through the artistic acrobatics, threatening the careful choreography. This magus juggles the objects of existence, but he constantly has to negotiate the tempestuous intercession of nature.