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A Performance Artist Forsakes the Spotlight for the Painter's Studio

In 1968 John White first set foot on the national art scene as a performance artist. For the next twenty years he would appear in a wide range of venues, from the obscure (the Bronson Canyon Dirt Event in Los Angeles) to the high-toned (the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York). But three years ago White retired from this genre forever to devote himself to a more traditional form of art – painting. Unlike his performances, which could only be experienced at a specific time and place, white says his paintings function "like long and involved epic novels," which can be savored, digested, and then returned to at one's leisure. For him the perfect viewer is "someone who picks out a 'paragraph' and comes back another day."

That love of the evolutionary quality of art speaks volumes about White himself. He came to art relatively late, after flirting with the notion of a career as a golf pro and working ten years in his family's brewing business in San Francisco. Fortuitously, a job offer arrived – "a glamour job," he recalls cheerfully, with "lots of money and travel," selling brewery hardware and designing installations. The catch was that it required line-drawing skills, so white headed confidently for the portals of the Patri School of Art Fundamentals to acquire them. One life-drawing class, he confesses, and he was hooked: "I fell in love with drawing. I began to live it, breathe it, seven days a week."

Abandoning a golden future in beer, he came south to Los Angeles in the late sixties to enroll at the Otis Art Institute, sprouted the long locks and facial hair of the day, and with prompting from Joan Hugo – then the librarian at the institute – he came upon performance art. After college, he recalls hustling "retired admirals and the like" with his unexpected skills on a pitch-and-putt nine-hole golf course in Santa Monica.

"My major source material for the early performances," he remembers, "was the action on the golf course." To this, however, he soon added another, more troubling content – his experience, working daily in a psychiatric hospital, where "the aberrant behavior on the part of patients became a part of the curiosity of the pieces. Before a performance, I made lists of odd things that happened to me in everyday life. My work was a performance artist's answer to realism in painting." Audiences found in his work a blend of deadpan humor, pathos, and sympathetic irony that allowed them to reflect on the quiddities of life while deepening their sense of their own humanity.

White never abandoned two-dimensional work, however, and in the days when he pursued both, the two forms of expression fed each other naturally: "I'd have all these performance scenarios in my head after painting," he says, "then I'd go out on the road, do some performances, and get ideas for new paintings." His decision to leave the performance area came in part as a result of changes in that genre: "Performance," he says simply, "had gone uptown. Besides, I'd been doing it for nearly twenty years. I'd stated enough, and I wanted to paint more."

Fatherhood, too, played a part in the decision – as it did in White's more recent decision to move from Venice. With his wife, Sylvia Haimoff White, a career management consultant for visual artists, and six-year-old daughter, Rachel, White

is now enjoying a quieter life in a 1950s wood-frame house ("the smallest house in Brentwood," he jokes) tucked into a shady hillside far from the sound of traffic. There he has converted the garage and breezeway into a small but serviceable studio.

It is in this studio, where he is currently working on two large paintings, that White reflects somewhat critically on California art today. "I don't see too many difficult images around," he says. "Los Angeles seems to generate beautiful colors and art that doesn't give you the blues." As for himself, he adds, "I like to make the audience work. There's something about art that can make you search."

In his new work, as always, search is a paramount property. The paintings' surfaces are littered with an increasingly complex maze of objects and materials – odds and ends of cardboard, wood and wire. Enigmatic glimpses of images are offered along the way like clues, and color is sparing, often intentionally drab. Black functions as a directional, moving the eye onward.

Performance survives in the form of a recurring proscenium structure and the scenarist's or the choreographer's notation. And the paintings remain autobiographical. Like his performances, they are a concentrated attempt "to go really inward" and recall "the dark side, the back wards of the psychiatric hospital," says White.

The intensity of this search is surprising, perhaps, for a man who offers such a jovial face to the world. But White is serious about where his work can lead him: "It's put me in touch with a lot of anger," he says. "And when you're able to let out the demons, it makes you a better person."