

Frank, Peter, "Kern Spin," Brochure Essay, Contemporary Artists' Services, Santa Monica, CA 1989

John White achieved remarkable national, even international, renown as a performance artist, before his self-imposed retirement in the late 1980s. His performances were engaging combinations of humor and poetry, of autobiography and social commentary. His alchemical arrangements of visuals and narrative often had stunning impact.

Always, while working as a performer, White painted. His paintings were abstract studies of line and color. Thin, pale bars established a skeletal framework around which deep gestural swatches danced and cavorted. The central forms seemed both staid and restrained in their angular, almost architectonic configuration. They recalled building plans or electrical wiring charts or the elaborate webs of choreographic diagrams. The more loosely painted areas were saturated with dark handsome color and seemed organic, almost primeval. His work stood as metaphor for the precarious balance between the imposed geometry of man and the lush randomness of nature.

The order and control of White's previous paintings have been swept away by cyclonic energy. The erect backbone flanked by rigid, angling ribs which often bifurcated his compositions, has been replaced by the frantic spiral of a tornado. These calligraphic tornados, White refers to them as "Dust Devils," toss familiar objects into gravity-free havoc. His palette, once tasteful and comfortable, is now often unsettling, the juxtaposition of colors is often jarring. The colors evoke the dense threat of jungles and the surreptitious scurry of army camouflage, rather than the rational order of urban structures. White depicts emotional conflict and tension, rather than the gentle ranges of the objective mind.

The objects, lifted and thrown by White's painted storm, are the paraphernalia of youth. Toy guns, toy tanks, toy aircraft carrier do battle in the ambiguous space of a game board. These are teepees, tables, chairs, signposts, tents, stairs. These are the severed fragments of a fractured biography. They comprise the mosaic of images that scatter through a man's mind. Indeed, these are the same kind of personal souvenirs that White used in his performances. And they are presented to us in a dramatic format: the step-like platform that acts as base or foundation for many of White's new compositions can easily be interpreted as a stage; the harsh lighting can be read as theatrical.

The overall impact of White's new paintings is greatly enhanced by the autobiographical fragments, fragments that demand the viewer's participation. They insist that the viewer complete the implied narrative, that he compose a puzzle from all the dangling parts. The paintings are further charged by the intensely dramatic presentation.

In merging what were once two forms (performances and abstract painting) into one (autobiographical figurative painting). White has clearly achieved a vigorous and affecting form of expression.