

DIANE WHITEHOUSE by Cliff Eyland

I met Diane Whitehouse for the first time when we served on a five person visual arts jury. (Details about such deliberations are kept secret, but I think I can make the following story public without betraying a confidence.) Because we were the only painters, our job was to undo the blank incomprehension in our colleagues' faces whenever a painting came up on the slide screen. Even inside the world of visual art, many people find it difficult to evaluate paintings.

There are innumerable technical ways to make art, and so perhaps a familiarity with painting can no longer be assumed even of highly educated artists. (Or maybe the non-painters deferred to us out of a Canadian sense of courtesy.) That experience convinced me that a more general discussion of painting than usual is required in catalogue essays such as this.

Firstly, Whitehouse's painting must be viewed directly, that is, it must be seen in the flesh so that its colour, scale and imagery are seen and felt in relation to one's body. That is how the work is made, and this is how the work should be viewed. (Some art may not seem to require a close engagement of the senses, but even *that* work, I would argue, must actually be seen before a judgment can be made. For example, should I trust an opinion about what an Andy Warhol Brillo Box really looks like without seeing one myself? Can I really know from a reproduction?)

Television flits video segments by almost too quickly to be seen, but a painting must be allowed to slowly unfold before a viewer. Forget video as you *slowly* take in a Whitehouse painting. Carefully run your eyes over the work. Judge its size in relation to your size. Try to read its imagery. Walk the length of it. Look at it from various angles. Trace your responses. Free associate.

Slow viewing used to be commonplace among art lovers, but now many (I'm guilty of this sometimes,

too) just scan a painting quickly, read a label, and move on. But a painting must not be looked through or around before it is looked directly at. If a viewer believes, to riff on a famous dictum, that before a painting is a war horse, a garden, or a scantily-clad woman, it just illustrates some trivial idea, then why look at all?

Looking at a painting in order to puzzle out its ambiguities--especially a painting that tends to abstraction--has been considered for years by some to be a waste of time. Since every painting style has been theoretically accepted this century, so one argument goes, what is the point of attempting to view new paintings as if they were indeed new? Jaded sensibilities, world-weary seen-it-all cynicism, and nay-saying for its own sake are common in the world of contemporary art, but thoughtful viewers forget all that for a while as they look hard at an ambitious painting.

In a typical Whitehouse painting, large areas appear to be one-off applications of paint--this can be misleading, since Whitehouse often paints over parts of a picture in white gesso so that they appear to be "blank" (if no ridges of paint are visible under the new paint, one can be fooled). Other areas of canvas are reworked and overpainted in various ways, but the final look is spontaneous, as if only one layer of paint exists. Drips of paint run vertically down canvasses as if to orient the viewer's body to proper viewing of the surface. The paintings are looked at frontally as one would stand before a real landscape. Charcoal and graphite marks run over and under paint, or float freely. Sometimes a contour is suggested by a graphite line and then immediately contradicted by a swath of colour which buries part of it.

Landscape, water and sky are common "defaults" of the eye when viewing an abstract painting, even if the surface has been geometrically ordered so as to exclude such references. Like other skilled painters, Whitehouse plays with these perceptual defaults. She uses close-value colour and whites that suggest the undulations of hills or clouds.

Her drawing will often sneak up, so to speak, on some recognizable form like a house or a pipe, and then just as suddenly veer off into a coagulated sluice of paint. A bit of collage in Rose Lake, for example, suggests a branch. The artist's mental processes are made concrete as a mark or a colour is considered for a moment and then changed as if in mid-application. Such intuitive decisions are traced by a viewer intuitively as s/he looks at the residue of artist's activity.

The white patches, the drips, and the sudden turns and twists of paint record the artist's improvised thoughts. This tradition is identified with Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, but goes back at least as far as Cezanne, and, in terms of preliminary drawings, it can be followed deep into art history. But, again, why improvise if every painting style since Cezanne has already been entered into the culture of painting? The answer is that such assertions are far too general, and that in believing such statements, you may not be looking carefully enough at a Whitehouse, or a Cezanne. (Let me ask you this, and I want you to answer honestly: have you ever seen a painting that looks like a Whitehouse painting? Be specific about which artist you believe paints like her--and I mean exactly like her.) In deliberations about the hopelessness of making a new paintings in a world of simulacra and repetition, viewers must consider the possibility that Whitehouse may not paint exactly like anyone else ever painted. In any case, a Whitehouse painting cannot be reduced to a dry exercise in the categorization or the genealogy of painting. One way out of this particular postmodern cul-de-sac is to examine things closely--materially and historically--as if they are what they often literally are, that is, new things in the world, or at least new things in a viewer's phenomenological world.

This essay, like all essays about art, elbows itself for a moment between the silent viewer and an the absent artist. A Diane Whitehouse work can be imagined as a record of a silent private performance, of stopping and starting, of looking and adjusting. A viewer scans the finished canvas to reconstruct the creative process, among other things. This non-verbal communion between viewer and work comprises what many believe to be the essential art experience

Or not.

A viewer can also look at a Whitehouse painting without stopping the internal chatter for a second: Why that slash of green there? What's the difference between a good Whitehouse and a bad Whitehouse? Did she paint this from life?

Wittgenstein suggested that if we cannot speak clearly about a thing we must pass over it in silence. That's Whitehouse's position, too, at least on the evidence of her one-sentence 1996 artist's statement for a 1996 Site Gallery exhibition with Mary Scott: "I don't have anything to say that's not in the paintings." In conversation she insists, and I would agree with her, that there are many things about painting that can't be spoken. (I have taught with Whitehouse at the University of Manitoba, where she urges her students at to see a lot of painting and to paint at least as much as they talk about it.)

Prairie artists such as Whitehouse (and, by the way, Winnipegger Don Reichert) were attracted early in their careers by the scale and ambition of American abstract expressionist painting. Both Reichert and Whitehouse, amongst others, owe something both to mid-century American abstract painting and the vastness of the prairie landscape.

Unlike most other prairie painters, however, Whitehouse grew up in England. She went to art school there at a time when the legacy of the cubists and Cezanne dominated the UK post-war scene. Although her all-over attack, her bold use of thick

paint, and her love of drawing is linked to the Abstract Expressionists, one shouldn't forget how a young working class British woman like Whitehouse would also have been affected by the peculiar (at least from a North American point of view) obsession the post-war British art world had for the cubists and Cezanne. Indeed, cubism is an essential influence in her work.

Whitehouse matured in England in the early 1960s as pop art emerged. However sociologically distant her American male abstract expressionist forbears from the 1940s may seem to us now (and how distant they also must have seemed to the young Whitehouse) it makes perfect sense that a serious artist of her generation might chose to make abstract paintings rather than Pop art, even if her drawing skills could just as easily have sent her in David Hockney's or R.B. Kitaj's Pop art direction thirty years ago. Abstract painting was simply judged the more challenging thing to do. It meant, and still can mean, seriousness. Too, Pop art was often derisively regarded as 'neo-dada' at the time, not an historically inevitable direction, but an anti-art revival that to many artists did not appear to be as promising as abstract painting.

Whitehouse developed a signature style in the 1980s. The following is Sigrid Dahle's 1989 description of Diane Whitehouse's painting:

Torrential arcs of thick impasto are made to rush across the canvas, alternating with rhythmic sweeps of thin paint. Irregular, choppy patches of colours hover, isolated and uncertain. Aqueous areas of wash gently drift and dribble down the canvas, gradually dissolving. Arching brushstrokes of paint spew and gush in all directions. Crumbling architectural structures are searched out with fine charcoal lines. Forms and lines, set in motion, are interrupted suddenly, forced to change direction by some unexpected

obstacle. The paintings' highly-textured surfaces slip and slide elusively.

- Sigrid Dahle, Diane Whitehouse Painting
(Brandon: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba,
1990 p.4-5)

The "architectural structures" are less pronounced in Whitehouse's recent works, and today a Whitehouse painting is less likely to suggest a river of shattered flotsam and smashed architecture, as does the late 1980s diptych Impeded River than, well, an unimpeded river, but Dahle's words still ring true. The lines of the room in 1986's Look at Me take their formal cues from the rectangular canvas. A more recent painting like 1999's The Winter The Light, even if its two rectangular side-by-side canvasses suggest architectural structure to some, is more about the "rhythmic sweeps of paint" than the blatantly cubist structures of the older work.

Landscape is still suggested by Whitehouse's abstract painting. Works like Rose Lake (1996) and Impeded River (1989) make the eye read impasto patches alternately as if they were only inches away (as they in fact are) or as distant watery surfaces. Yellow River (1994) and China Evening (1999) are each composed of two panels, one much bigger than the other. The paint handling and colour are similar in each panel, but they don't quite match up. Many of Whitehouse's two panel works read as if one panel were a detail, or perhaps a visual caption to its companion. There is a feeling of slight disjuncture in them, as if somehow the panels in each work ought to match more exactly. Words like "amorphous" "indeterminate" "all-over" and "formless" spring to mind in the presence of the newer works rather than compositional words like "structured," "cubistic," and "tight" evoked by the earlier stuff.

Sometimes I crudely imagine the procession of Diane Whitehouse's painting over the last twenty years as the slow-motion destruction of a house by a river: first the painting/house gets built using the canvas

first the painting/house gets built using the canvas edge as a guide, then the house breaks up into cubist chunks, and then the cubistic pieces begin to get carried away until they are completely disintegrated into water and light. Whitehouse second-guesses herself toward a new painting with a needling knowledge of a century of painting behind her. In doing so she has successively rejected certain compositional options and adopted others. The result is a certain "formless" quality in the mature work, what is left after all the other modernist compositional moves have been tried.

NOTE: a version of the first section of this text was published in 1996 to accompany a Site Gallery exhibition called Unravelling sponsored by Mentoring Artists for Women's Art and curated by Sigrid Dahle. For a look at the "formless" in modern art, please see Formless: A User's Guide by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997)