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JOHN WHITE

(Sylvia White Gallery, Santa Monica) The thing that always enthralled me about John White's performances (which is how I came to know of him) was the way he could poetically build a multi-layered fable from whatever he found in his immediate surroundings. A discarded piece of paper could be transmuted into an illuminated manuscript, a footstool could become a towering (and unstable) rope ladder, built-in bookshelves could be transformed into a modern day sarcophagus. The imaginative twists White gave to what he found around himself remained unfettered by reality but extremely convincing in their skewed, idiosyncratic version. He would take the ordinary to plumb imaginative depths so as to find a personal correspondence that somehow moved it out of the ordinary and into states of dream. And so this preface because something analogous occurs in the visual works he is now fashioning, in color, on two-dimensional surfaces.

In the new suite of works, Deep Sea Scapes, White relinquishes the ephemeral qualities and temporal limits of a time-based art form and settles down to the formal play of acrylic on paper. He takes brush in hand and weighs in against all constraint, delighting in the sensibility of an ever present painted surface. I call it 'ever present' because that is the historical legacy of abstraction. It is meant to change imperceptibly, so the viewer can go back again and again and appreciate that pained thing in its radical resilience to time.

White's work however, is embedded in a less dogmatic kind of a history. His paintings work contrary to the terms of the absolute perceptual object by placing his various 'scapes' in small ensembles of interrelated images that inevitably lead the viewer to infer some kind of a narrative structure. Even as he moves away from time as a constituent feature of his work towards the static, he imbues it with the flow of a story line. This insertion of narrative into the realm of formal abstraction is what gives these paintings their specificity and attraction. They rely on the viewer's active participation to build the tale being told, but in doing so they avoid the blandness of pictorial decoration.

This process is evident, for example, in the series of works identified with the sequence containing the letter H. In this deep sea fantasy, abstraction is artfully put into the service of nascent surreal psycho-biography. Primordial shapes develop next to one another from left to right like neighbors on the same floor of an apartment complex. Small aquarium worlds co-exist and their comic strip appearance drives the viewer to surmise the sort of tale being told. Pods swell, globes buoy, little swirls multiply and arcs expand while currents of color sweep gestural flotsam and jetsam to and fro.

The play is that of an emotional current being woven behind the dreamscape. The artist hides away the true biographical life of this undersea palace, affording only glimpses of it in the aftermath. Each image follows the ebb and flow of the forms reciprocal invasion and aversion. In doing so, they depart the realm of generic abstract form in favor of specific content. Whether the tale be fiction or fact is not important, but in the meantime the physicalization of the principles of uncertainty and enigma generate pleasure, both visual and narrative.

White is still busy eking wonder out of the prosaic. Only now he is just doing it with solid state components. In any case, his poetics remain as fluid as ever.