

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation / Thesis:        **WHITE PAINTINGS**

Matthew Peter Klos, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

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In my paintings, I strive for a delicate balance between the objects considered and the conspicuous mark. These paintings stir the imagination to encounter a physical space, yet defy complete illusionary abandon through the visceral surface of paint. The brushwork breathes life into the mechanical calculation of the work in process. A successful painting upon completion is a mimetic vision of the spaces via scraped, sprayed, broadly brushed, and tightly interwoven areas of paint.

I strive for a humble and honest representation, an essential vision that is defined by the choice of subject, palette, painted mark, and the history of human error as it attempts a calculated process. This essential vision translates tone, shape, and highlight. These paintings exhibit calculated craftsmanship, yet the decisions they embody speak of anti-heroic doubt that attempts to capture the ethereal beauty inherent in the visible.

WHITE PAINTINGS

By

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My thesis show, entitled “White Paintings” is an exploration of the complexity of the visual world and the representation of it through the use of paint on board. In this series, white is used as a symbol to embody the idea behind these paintings. In a culture in which we are overly exposed to visual stimuli, the white wall is overlooked. However, there is a visual interest inherent to simplicity. The white wall is infinitely complex in its subtle variations of both value and hue. I see the white wall as much more than a flat static surface. Perception and representation through the use of paint reveal the dynamic complexity in everyday environments. These environments initially appear to be static and mundane. I bring to attention quiet spaces that are often overlooked.

These paintings feature subject matter that appears at first glance to be banal. These realistic images depict cell phones, coffee makers, and soda bottles among more common studio clutter-- palettes, easels, cabinets, and messy shelves. In the painting *Lilac Still Life*, a cell phone sits on a table top, recharging, next to a lilac in a vase against the colorful backdrop of a dried paint palette. The juxtaposition of past and present creates an odd image although the contemporary elements hold the composition in balance. The florescent green cap on the spice bottle in *Interior Window* creates a powerful chromatic contrast with the red of the washcloth and balances the visual weight of the spice bottles within the spice rack. The contemporary object becomes the balancing component that holds the composition together, as if to justify its inclusion in such a traditionally constructed painting.

My process is both intuitive and traditional, based on the history of my craft. My initial reaction to the subjects of my paintings is always an intuitive one. A visually appealing stack of white and black shapes or the balance of a circular arrangement of objects are two examples of the initial inspiration for a work of art. After this initial quick reaction, the process of constructing the finished work is very methodical and calculated. Every detail is carefully studied and then those that are essential to the composition are worked out in paint.

The individual objects depicted in these paintings are always secondary to the overall structure of the composition. In the painting *Studio*, for instance, the coffee filters and various containers on the lower shelves are swallowed up by the surrounding color. Vagueness is something inherent to visual experience. To maintain an accurate representation of a scene, it is necessary to avoid over articulation of particular objects. As a result, I constantly assess and re-assess the holistic view of a painting in relation to its parts.

The act of seeing is constantly in flux and these paintings capture both the tangible and intangible qualities of objects described by light. Some objects dissolve in the light while others become more crisp and concrete. In the painting *Silent Figure*, the skeleton on the tabletop in the center of the composition is half invisible and half visible. The upper portion of the skeleton-- the ribs, arms, and collarbone-- call little attention to themselves because of the low contrast between their own tone and the tone of the white wall. The lower half of the skeleton is in strong contrast to the dark tone of the lockers and this creates a powerful visual

tension. The articulate depiction of the femur, patella, and crown of the tibia and fibula underscore the visual focus on the lower half of the skeleton.

There is something in these works that is like the rich surfaces and volume in the work of Antonio Lopez Garcia. The white chair in the painting *Gourmet with Gadgets* is one example. The seat of the chair is scrubbed with golden and lavender whites. The warm and cool tones play back and forth and are built up to a rich dense surface.

The concept of creating the illusion of three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional plane has fascinated and confounded painters for centuries. The difficulty of this endeavor plagued the artist Alberto Giacometti. Consider his conversation with James Lord;

“The painting is flat. One must do something which is like a relief on the canvas, even behind the canvas. It isn’t enough that it should seem to be in relief.”

“But it can’t really be in relief,” I objected.

“No. And yet it must be.”

These paintings do not create a seamless window into another world, a polished illusion of three-dimensional space. The paintings show a delicate balance between the objects considered and the conspicuous mark. The human mark pulls the viewer back to the surface and calls attention to the scraped, sprayed, broadly

brushed, and tightly interwoven areas of paint. The viewer teeters somewhere on the tightrope between tangible marks of paint and the mystery of illusion. These paintings create a realized space yet defy complete illusionary abandon through the visceral brushwork.

These works are painted in a studio environment that is constantly changing. Students come and go, leaving the environment in various states of order and disarray. The light changes constantly as well. Natural and artificial light energizes these spaces in dramatically different ways. Often a section of studio is seen without a second thought. A momentary lighting circumstance or the accidental placement of a brightly colored object can be striking and bring about a desire to paint a particular scene. As time is spent in these interiors, inspiration arises --in a flash-- from paradoxical situations or perceptions. I am interested in paradoxes of both representation and perception. The historical conventions of a traditional craft would call for the strongest chroma in the foreground of a work. Another example would be the compression of spatially separated elements by compositional structure. The great American painter, Edward Hopper, used this sort of spatial compression when he painted a landscape with two houses. One of the houses is in the middle ground of the painting and the other house is far in the distance atop a rolling hill. The foundation of the distant house lines up with the roof of the closer house and creates a strange tangency that makes the distant house almost appear to be the chimney of the middle ground house. My painting *Daylight Studio* compresses space in a similar manner. The seat of the chair and the rear right leg of the chair

line up with the junction of wall to floor and wall to wall. The chair is simultaneously seen in the foreground because of our understanding of spatial relationships and on the plane of the wall behind it because of the shared object lines. This apparent conflict reinforces and amplifies the tension between surface and illusion in my work.

The choice of subject, palette, and painted mark, as well as the history of human error, define these paintings. Human error can be seen in the scarred surface of these paintings-- scarred by the process of painting objects and then scraping them away only to repaint them again. There may not be perfection in the human act of creation but there lies beauty in the act of creation. Through striving, imperfection becomes more timeless, more honest, and in a sense, almost sacred. My ultimate inspiration lies in the fact that the ability to create beauty has been entrusted to the eyes and hands of a craftsman.

## Bibliography

Lord, James. A Giacometti Portrait. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1980.

## Image List

1. *Red Light, Green Light*, 2003, 36" x 40", oil on panel
2. *Studio*, 2003-04, 36" x 80", oil on panel
3. *Ivory Tower*, 2003, 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 19 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>", oil on panel
4. *Daylight Studio*, 2004, 28 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 36", oil on panel
5. *Silent Figure* 2003- 04, 30" x 23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>", oil on panel
6. *Artist's Cabinet and Interior Space*, 2003, 7 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>", oil on sintra
7. *Gourmet with Gadgets*, 2003-04, 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 20 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>", oil on panel
8. *Interior Window*, 2003, 5 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>", oil on sintra