
Diane Whitehouse

P A I N T I N G S

Rooms and Other Walled Places

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We, as fortunate viewers, are privileged to enter a state of creative reverie if we give ourselves entirely to the visual experience that the paintings in this exhibition create for us. From the outset, Diane Whitehouse's works have never dealt with pure abstraction; there has always been a visual subject reference. And beginning with the series titled "The Passing of an Emperor" at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1982, and continuing through "Rooms, Journeys, Paintings" at Plug-In Gallery, Winnipeg, 1984, we see a slight shift to the more apparent approach to subject which is evidenced in this recent body of work.

But much is lost if we seek to preserve our rational expectations by pinning these paintings to literal readings. Verbal equivalents, precise in the way that words are precise, are not possible or adequate for these primarily visual statements in paint. If we go as far as we may, meeting with words the figurative suggestions of these paintings, we may say that they deal in broad terms with the interiors of rooms and with shadowy hints of a human presence. An illusionistic light, not previously evident in the "Emperor" or "Journey" series, is one element that helps to describe the rooms. In "Rain" for example, from a central puddle shape we seem to look into a lighted room from an outdoor vantage point. Grey-greens predominate, with a limited use of charcoal line drawing to selectively emphasize edges. In one of the most descriptive pieces, "The Pool", a densely painted green pool forms the central element, its existence in the room space emphasized by the strongly stated perspective of the receding floor. A dark maroon ceiling contributes to the spatial illusion and provides disturbing contrast to the green serenity of the pool.

The situations, however, are not limited to specific moments in time or to specific places, but rather, seek to be more inclusive of multiple life experiences. The presence that has-been or is-about-to-be, and the rooms that contain the changing narratives seem to pose questions instead of

presenting declamatory statements. They reveal to us the cycle of constant change as the substance of life; nothing is fixed. We are asked to interpret our responses according to our personal perspectives on life, and the process of painting presents itself in this way as the perfect metaphor for life experience. Whitehouse paints rooms and shadows that form and reform to make another reality, a painting world parallel to life. She does not seek to describe a secular narrative of the world around us.

What narrative content there is remains at most suggestive, and comes largely from the ambiguous human-shaped shadows that intrude or invest the rooms with a sense of physical presence. The shadows always occur as visual doubles, not symmetrical, but nevertheless repetitive in a pattern-like way. The shadow shape may represent the self in terms of the artist's sense of self in the painting. The doubling may perhaps be a presence and its shadow. The shadow becomes visually most complex in "From One Room to Another", particularly in terms of the drawing. The shadow is repeated in overlapping layers with the canvas divided into two rectangles, the left dark green and at right, a play on greyed pinks. This diptych-like division relates to many earlier works by Whitehouse such as "Two Travelers with Green Dog and Cloud", an actual diptych, or "Tree Painted on a Wall and Two Trees in a Mirror" in which a drawn, vertical line describes the corner of a room and simultaneously divides the single canvas into double rectangles.

When discussing the subject of form, Whitehouse makes it clear that she fully accepts painting as a language. "I love painting. I feel that painting works as an historically developed language. With painting I can say what I want to say." She feels that structure and image are both psychologically determined in a personal way. This attitude may be compared to C. G. Jung's comments regarding his life's work of recording "the knowledge I have gained from my scientific endeavors...My life has been in a sense the quintessence

of what I have written, not the other way around. The way I am and the way I write are a unity. All my ideas and all my endeavors are myself." Whitehouse's works make a plea for the contemplative as a valuable aspect of the arts and of life, and also for the more meditative awareness required by traditional painting. This plea requires emphasis at the present time, when painters must deal with an audience more used to the immediacy of journalism and pop culture. Instant apprehension and response are not always possible with good painting, and if we appropriate the carnal terms so dear to our society, we may say that the metaphor for painting is the long-term relationship rather than the one-night stand. When asked about particular painterly influences, Whitehouse replies, "Vermeer, Velasquez, Turner especially when I was younger, Roman frescoes, the sensuous still quality of Japanese scroll painters, and certainly the painting of the twentieth century,—but direct influence? I don't know, you take your own history with you."

In these room images, how much is intuitive and how much is due to conscious, rational mental processes? Both are operative, although conscious deliberation beforehand is not so important as finding the image and structure through the process of painting it. Intuitive decisions are monitored by the conscious faculties, and as Whitehouse sees it, her conscious and rational knowledge of painting provides a cool distancing that permits the orchestrating of all the parts so that they work together. This requires trial and error, adjusting and re-adjusting colours, shapes, relative visual weights. Conscious choice also dictates to a large extent the choice of medium. Whitehouse uses both oil and acrylic paints on these canvases, with a deliberate approach to the different surface "feel" of the two media. "Oil areas have a very different surface weight from acrylics in terms of colour, and this is important to me." Carefully balanced areas, contrasting matte and glossy, watery washes and thick impasto are responsible for tremendous subtleties of colour. One of the

most beautiful in its range of expressive colour is "Mirror," the room a pale violet pink with the clearly defined central mirror, pale yellow-green and peach. This seems a variation on the theme of "The Pool," the reflecting rectangle cool and reclining as pool, or warm and erect as mirror.

In addition to the six large canvases the exhibition includes eight small unstretched canvases framed in grey wooden box frames. These use shadows, beach and water imagery, and suggested boat shapes, evoked with the same spirit of abstraction approaching figuration. Three-dimensional space is somewhat flattened in these small works, more reminiscent of the earlier "Emperor" series. In colour too, they are more severe than the larger "Room" paintings, and bereft of the human shadow which so enlivens the "Rooms." But in their totality, the small beach shadow paintings make the same demands on the viewer as do the larger "Room" paintings. Sequential word ordering must be set aside to allow wider ranging, visual associations to be imagined on many levels simultaneously. Paintings by Diane Whitehouse act as beautiful reminders that the very definition of painting is dependent upon the active sensual involvement of the eye.

Sheila Butler

B I O G R A P H Y

Diane Whitehouse was born in Birmingham, England and became a Canadian citizen in 1972. She studied at Birmingham College of Art, Birmingham, England, and did post graduate work at Bergen Kunsthåndverkskole, Bergen, Norway. Diane has exhibited in Canada, England and Norway where her works are in both private and public collections. She has taught at The University of Alberta, Banff Centre, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and is presently teaching painting at The School of Art, University of Manitoba.



Mirror, Acrylic/Oil, 84" x 68", 1985



The Pool, Acrylic/Oil, 84" x 68", 1985



From One Room to Another, Acrylic/Oil, 90" x 60", 1985



Rain, Acrylic/Oil 90" x 60", 1985



From the Night, Acrylic/Oil, 90" x 60", 1985



Meeting Place, Acrylic/Oil, 84" x 68", 1985

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

1. Mirror, Acrylic/Oil, 84" x 68", 1985
2. The Pool, Acrylic/Oil, 84" x 68", 1985
3. From One Room to Another, Acrylic/Oil, 90" x 60", 1985
4. Rain, Acrylic/Oil, 90" x 60", 1985
5. From the Night, Acrylic/Oil, 90" x 60", 1985
6. Meeting Place, Acrylic/Oil, 84" x 68", 1985

Shadow of a Boat, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1985

Shadow, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1984

Shadow of a Pole, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1984

Two Shadows, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1985

Shadow at the Edge, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1984

Shadow by the Water, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1985

Shadow with a Rope, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1985

Shadow of a Curved Pole, Acrylic, 23" x 19", 1985

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C R E D I T S

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Catalogue Essay: Sheila Butler

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