

Pae White

a grotto, some nightfish, and a second city

On first encounter with the string and paper mobiles of Pae White, I had the sensation that I was missing something. I was drawn in by the appearance of the work, by the luxurious softness of color and the dexterous play with shape and space. But there was something I wasn't getting. The work could have been merely pretty, its conventionalized beauty played out in muted pastels; it could have been merely pleasant, its delicate forms rendered with taste and discretion. But it was somehow too light, too synthetic, and in that way disturbing, for it nevertheless called forth associations and memories. I had the impression of a geologic core sample, but with the usual orderly strata liberated from the customary patterns of place and time. How this was accomplished by such seemingly slight means began to nag at me.

I must state that, of the three works in the exhibition, I have actually seen only an earlier version of one, **Second City**, and photographs of a second, **Nightfish**. The third work, **Grotto**, is in production as I write. Each of the works is composed of multiple, shaped pieces of colored paper strung on individual threads and hung from the ceiling in suggestive spatial arrangements. Despite their imagistic titles, they are highly abstracted. The artist refers to these works as "color fields" and alludes to them in cinematic terms as "stills" and "dissolves." ¹ Each suggests a particular, contained environment. **Second City**, for instance (like its fore-runner **Neapolitan City**), is a cityscape of vanilla, chocolate and strawberry, a sort of "ice-cream rain" ². accented with blues and greens to evoke the Mediterranean setting of that jauntiest of Italian cities. Or **Nightfish**, "a school of fish, underwater, at night, with the lights on," as the artist describes it. All in one take, one is reminded of the graceful paper cut-outs of Matisse, and funky fabric designs of the 1950s, and cinematic special effects.

As a context for these works we must take into account White's production as a designer, of which this brochure is a convenient example, and her positioning of that as an integral part of her artistic practice. This requires us to look at an expanded field of reference for these images, to account for the operations of fashion and publicity, architecture and frozen desserts, and how all these realms of commercial and social experience converge in the ways that the work acts upon us.

White's simple paper fragments present a "field" composed of numerous simultaneous moments, uprooted from historical or narrative flow and suspended as icons, where image and product converge, to produce a weirdly erotic imbalance between visual experience and state of mind. What one slowly comes to realize, what had been nagging at me, is that this very intimate perception is a highly stylized and deeply socialized experience. With the freedom to pick and choose from styles and tropes across history and disciplines, a freedom that many artists take for granted in the current cultural environment, Pae White's work demonstrates that all strategies of abstraction have been thoroughly acculturated; they have become an all-purpose code without essence. What makes this so different, so appealing, in White's case is that such "essences" are happily forfeited to the viewer's own tastes and desires. The complex interplay between art historical judgments and the formation of taste and stylistic categories becomes, in these works, the occasion for an inducement to play. This innately social gesture doesn't take itself too seriously but nevertheless invites attention to the transformative potential of art. Things that are presumed to be superficial or degraded may prove to be the best measure of this moment, shimmering at the brink of dissolution, but with sufficient recursive force to allow a new situation to come into being.

Christina Ritchie

Notes

1. from email correspondence with the artist, March 2002.

2. Terry R. Myers, review, *Arttext* No. 69, p. 85.

Pae White was born in 1963 in Pasadena, California. She studied art at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine, and at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. She currently lives in Los Angeles. Recent solo exhibitions have been presented at China Art Objects Gallery and 1301 PE in Los Angeles; neugerriemschneider gallery, Berlin; Metro Pictures, New York; and greengrassi, London. Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions including **Abstract Painting, Once Removed** at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, Texas; **OldNewTown** at Casey Kaplan, New York, NY; **What If** at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. Pae White's design projects are an integral part of her artistic practice and have included a number of exhibition catalogues, magazine advertisements, packaging and interiors.

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