



Peter Sacks: Recent Paintings at Wade Wilson Art

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(dateline – Houston, October 2010; source: Juice Consulting LLC) – Wade Wilson Art is pleased to announce a special exhibit of new paintings by internationally-renowned artist Peter Sacks. The exhibit opens with a reception for the artist from **6 to 8 p.m. on Friday, October 29, 2010** and will remain on view through **December 10, 2010**. Wade Wilson Art is located at 4411 Montrose Blvd., Suite 200, Houston, Texas, 77006. To find out more, please visit www.wadewilsonart.com.

In its wall-of-paint aspect, a Sacks is a luminous object. The recent paintings are, sometimes spectacularly (and with the right lighting), color bombs. Some of them read as predominantly monochromatic — cumulus-cloud or onion-skin white, cardinal or blood red, nitrous or ocean-water blue. More usually, the pieces are mostly white overall with black and gray, or mostly blue overall with black and white, though there are often dirty red, orange, yellow, or brown accents. And they take up a lot of wall. Some works are triptychs; many are in iron frames.

As a colorist, Sacks is closer to Still than to Rothko. His palette has beautified somewhat, but it remains on the edge of garishness, as the scale of the work is somewhere on the edge of forbidding. The colors are not ugly, but it is important that they are not afraid to be ugly. A Sacks does not want to seduce you with blandishments. For although the paintings themselves are not violent, a sort of violence was involved in their making, and violence is one of their preoccupations.

The paint in a Sacks painting is not transparent. Like the canvas and the frame, paint is both part of the surface and one of the materials from which the object is constructed, as skin is both a surface of the body and one of the organs of which the body is composed. The impasto is heavy. It projects, even at a distance, an impression of roughness, layering, and texture. That impression compels you to move closer to the canvas, and as you do

so, the surface changes its aspect. It begins to reveal itself to be topographically dense and uneven, as though there were something underneath, as though a painting were trying to push its way out through the paint. This sense that there is something “in there” is part of the effect, and it cuts against the all-at-once character of the initial reading. You need time to work these works out. You can’t take them in all at once. The paintings are like doors — some actually are configured like doorways, with the shadow of an applied arch and a rough illusion of interior spaces—and they are not merely decorative. They are large doors that open onto very large rooms.

At a normal viewing range for painting, two or three feet, you are inside the room. The original apprehension of something brute and monolithic is replaced by an apprehension of variety and profusion and even delicacy— of colors, of textures, and of materials. It is like looking at the bark on a tree. The canvas has been treated as a board for mounting matter— corrugated cardboard, rope, found objects, and, most notably, fabric. There are remnants of lace and cloth; there is scorched clothing; there is fabric that has had words typed onto it. The materials cash out the architectural allusions: you have entered a place of human fabrication. You are looking at clothes that people have worn and at words that people have written.

The objects are not paintings with stuff stuck onto them. They are paintings first and last. Everything applied to the surface has then been painted over. Sometimes, in the case of the texts especially, the paint almost obliterates every trace of the attached material. The palimpsest sometimes goes opaque. The intricacy of the close-up surface is, consequently, intense, a Petri dish of shapes. Formally, the lace, the folds of the cloth, the printed words, and the layers of paint and visible brushstrokes produce multiple local effects. A Pollock drip painting has the same macro integrity and micro higgledy-piggledy. It is like putting a drop of water under a microscope, or zooming down to street level on Google Earth. There is life on these surfaces.

Shapes have their own kind of legibility, and, in any case, Sacks’s are not purely abstract. (Perhaps no shapes are.) They adumbrate, besides doorways, human bodies, totemic figures, continents. But the texts and the textures have another sort of content. Why these fabrics? Why these texts? That stuff is part of the idiolect of the work, and it is not a purely formal language. The materials remind you that this is a painting by someone, and so it is good to know something about who that someone is.

Sacks is an expatriate. He was born, in 1950, in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and grew up in Durban. Educated at Princeton, Oxford, and Yale, he has taught at Johns Hopkins and at Harvard. He is the author of the standard critical study of the elegy and of five books of poems. And he has traveled extensively. The South African

background helps to explain some of the characteristics of the art. The somewhat overpowering qualities of scale and color are, on some level, painterly recollections of the Indian Ocean, the African jungle, and the Drakensberg Mountains, places near where he grew up. The political situation in South Africa when Sacks lived there and his expatriation help to explain motifs of loss, damage, and violence recognizable in many of the paintings, as well as the prevalence of black and white. The South African influences are much more explicit in Sacks's earlier work, though—as the titles suggest for pieces such as Cell Block and Truth and Reconciliation, and in series with figures of elephants (Botswana 1, Botswana 2) or outlines of the African continent (Childhood, Animal Kingdom). The more recent work is less Africa-referenced, and the titles are more abstract, though the thematic interests are consistent.

Sacks studied at Oxford, as well as in the United States, at Princeton and Yale (where he wrote, partly as his thesis, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*). All through this time, which included the study of art and the history of painting – from the rock-art of Southern Africa to the frescoes of the early Renaissance, from the funerary portraiture of Egypt to the entangled figurative and abstract heritages of Modernism – Sacks also spent years of travel, often times on foot. Walks across various parts of South and North America, Africa, Europe and Asia, comprised much of his development on a formal as well as cultural level. In addition, the shifting confluences of poetry and painting (Sacks is also the author of five volumes of poetry) – elements of narrative, music, metaphor or symbol, as well as those of envisioning and evoking rather than depicting – arrive at visual concerns at once bodily, topographical and architectural. One senses the presence of battlegrounds or construction sites of ancient yet contemporary history. A procession of figures moves through some purgatorial region, caught between birth and catastrophe, between despair and survival. His recent paintings challenge our assumptions of what might or might not be human, whether in ourselves, or in the marks we make upon the spaces we inhabit, construct, deform or save.

Peter Sacks divides his time between Normandy, France and Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he teaches at Harvard University. His work may be seen in collections across the globe most recently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY and the Boston Museum of Art, Boston, MA.

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