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DAVENPORT, REBECCA READ. White Soul Paintings. (1973)
Directed by: Walter Barker. Pp. 4.

The exhibit consists of seven oil paintings.

This thesis was exhibited in the Weatherspoon Art Gallery,
University of North Carolina at Greensboro from January 8 through
January 14, 1973.

A 35mm color transparency of each work is on file at the
Walter C. Jackson Library of the University of North Carolina at
Greensboro.

WHITE SOUL PAINTINGS

by

Rebecca Read Davenport

A Thesis submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1973

Approved by

Walter Baskes
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CATALOGUE

TITLE	DIMENSIONS*	MEDIUM
1. Fat Man	72" x 60"	Oil
2. Arkansas Madonna	60" x 66"	Oil
3. Father and Child	66" x 54"	Oil
4. Daughter-in-Law	66" x 52"	Oil
5. Tent	60" x 120"	Oil
6. Self Portrait	12" x 18"	Oil
7. Sofa	66" x 72"	Oil

*Height precedes width.

I call my paintings pictures of "white soul." I do this in order to draw upon the associations familiar in the term "black soul;" a sense of pride in self and race, qualities of vigor and endurance, the rich, ironic mixtures of the sensual and spiritual in human experience, the timid or vigorous assertion of self which is mixed with its incomplete defeat. "Jellyroll" Morton said you should never forget the weeping along with all the joy in his music. Nor should the viewers of my portraits. I know the poor white rural people of northern Virginia and I see in their faces and surroundings the features of the human condition as I also have experienced it with its ambiguous mix of good and evil, its fair possibilities and wrinkled limitations, its humble or extravagant hopes and capacity to endure beyond vanities. I try to portray my subjects' ugliness and their beauty, their honesty and their self-deceptions through my knowledge of them and through an exploration of myself. I think that I relate to my subjects as that more impersonal portrayer of humanity did when he said of his heroine: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi."

I examine my subjects as part of mankind and project them as part of myself. "Examination," with its suggestions of analysis, objectivity and precise factual rendering, results in what, for convenience' sake, we call realistic technique. "Projection," with its suggestions of feeling, subjectivity and intuitive connections, results in the distortion of fact, in evaluation and interpretation of fact. All artists are somehow engaged in this business, but the efforts of

some seem alien to me: Pearlstein remarks that his "work is an exercise in how to see precisely with no comment intended." I take joy in "comment" which transforms my objects into relational subjects. I am not interested in the cool examination of a person or thing that exempts me from the humor, respect and compassion which transforms them into my subject. I think both Pearlstein and Cottingham exempt themselves from these feelings in their antiseptic representations, and consequently, I relate to them in a most limited way. They relate more to the minimal painters like Judd, Flavin and Stella than to traditional realists like Ingres, Balthus or Hopper. I would claim a closer association with these traditional realists.

I do not wish to flatter but to reveal and expose my subject in all its formal integrity and tattered pretensions. My subjects are all front and center, formally presenting themselves in direct relation to the viewer, as in an introduction or in a letter to the editor--simultaneously intimate and ceremonious. The images confront the viewer, in disquieting directness and "frontality," exposing the familiar imperfections of their, and our, condition: the humorous, flashy and frightening vulnerabilities all flesh and hopes are heir to, and which the painting contains and reveals. Because of this "frontality" of image, a viewer should not long remain a mere observer, as of a casual snapshot, but should easily become an uneasy participant in the world of my painting.

My interest in the image is distributed in the details of my paintings as well as in the central impact. I paint the details accurately and with as much deliberation as the subjects themselves

might have expended in choosing them. The ring, the watch and the manicured hands of "The Fat Man" speak of that elegance of spirit he hopes for and cares for. His cigar and corpulence compete almost successfully for the undoing of the suspenders and that elegance. We reveal ourselves and the ideas of ourselves in the choices of our coverings as well as in the histories our flesh and bones refuse to hide. The bright pattern in a dress, the tatter in a couch or wall chatters loudly to me of human desire and limitation in the forms I can understand and capture in paint.

I work from a photograph, a black and white, two-dimensional tableau which I edit and then transfer to canvas as a three-dimensional, color representation. I use the photograph like a working drawing or sketch. I prefer photographs to live models because it allows me greater freedom in my working habits and simplifies some of the problems of the figurative painter: obviously, the photograph never changes; it is also there when I want it, and for as long as I want it; it costs less. I am not attempting to reproduce a photograph, like Chuck Close or Malcolm Morley, but rather to interpret it, to breathe my dream of life into it.

In preparation for each painting, the photograph is cropped and gridded at which point it becomes a working drawing. After being stretched on the appropriate size frame, the cotton duck canvas is prepared first with a rabbit skin glue solution for sizing and then with a coat of white lead paint for priming. The canvas is aged for at least a week at which point a corresponding grid is put on it and the drawing is transferred. A tinted ground of oil pigment, copal glaze medium and turpentine is then sponged over the surface. When

this dries, the first layer of oil paint is applied. In this first layer, only turpentine is used as a medium. From two to ten layers of paint are then continuously applied with sable brushes in a glaze technique using a glaze medium until the desired results are achieved, at which point the painting is completed.