

Chatting with Eric White About Painting Filmscapes

BY SF WEEKLY STAFF
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Down In Front: No Other Dream
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From the wide open spaces of Westerns to the urban grit of film noir, Eric White's unconscious mind is saturated with the vocabulary of movies. In the paintings on display at a new exhibit of his work at the **Serge Sorokko Gallery**, White splices together what he's seen on screen with what the mind (mis)remembers, and then inverts the narrative further with the logic of dreams. He creates a cinematic screen grab in oils the way that images actually run together in the brain. They overlap and merge — hybrid scenes of pop art and surrealism. Actors become thwarted, demented versions of themselves, stripped of their original glamour, the allure of celebrity difference slowly eroding across each canvas. We had a chance to ask White about his painter's progress and found a major film buff with a deep admiration for Robert Altman films and an appreciation of Elizabeth Taylor's risk-taking roles in the late 1960s.

[jump] **When did the movies start to burrow inside your mind?**

I was nine when *Star Wars* first came out, and that film just basically shattered my reality. In a certain respect, it probably had a negative impact because it just wiped my imagination clean. I walked out of that film and was in a state of shock for about three weeks. It was all I could think about, the images were just flashing through my mind. And I started doing drawings that were basically ripping it off. There had never really been anything like it, and just the creation of this world that felt legitimate — it had such a grounded reality to it. Something about it fit so perfectly into my brain.

***Star Wars* posited a plausible alternative world.**

A lot of my work is about perception, and about the idea of our perception being extremely limited, although we don't think of it that way. We think of the way we perceive the world as the way the world is, but it's actually our perception of it. I think there could be things that are so beyond what our senses can perceive, and that idea fascinates me. If you think of someone who is colorblind, or a dog that can only see black and white, they couldn't ever conceive of what color would be. What is the equivalent for us? There's that H.P. Lovecraft story, "From Beyond," about things flying around that we can't perceive. The idea that this reality that we consider to be as real as it gets, what if it's some kind of delusion or projection of consciousness, or it's actually all a dream, and there's a greater reality that we're unaware of? I don't know that my paintings really get at that, that they communicate this idea to the viewer, but for me, that's running through it.

When did your work evolve from simply drawing a scene or characters in a movie into its current mode of surreal distortions?

I have a very clear memory of the first time that it happened in a significant way, where it was a striking moment. I remember exactly where I was, what direction I was facing, where the TV was in the room. When I lived in San Francisco, I was watching *A Place in the Sun*, with Liz Taylor and Montgomery Clift. It's an incredible film, really dark, but this was the first time I had seen it. I was 22 or 23, and as I'm watching that scene where they're staring at each other and the painting in the book, I was looking at her face, and I saw Taylor's beauty mark. As I'm watching, I see this diagram extrapolating out from her beauty mark. That scene just visually is beautiful, the scene of her staring up at him. Maybe it was that I wanted to capture that, but it immediately followed that I would build this diagram over it, and somehow deconstructing her beauty mark.

You were developing your practice at that point?

I studied illustration, and I was doing that. I was practicing drawing a painting every single day, but it started to feel very throwaway. I never had any intention of doing straight caricature work, but because I could do it, I just happened to come out of school at a time when there was a big demand for it. Magazines were thriving. Magazines always cycled in and out of using illustration and photography, but it happened to be a time when there was this

little Renaissance in illustration. There was an incredible range of things being published. You look in any magazine of the time, and it's just filled with beautiful artwork. I started getting work right away, and I was really thrilled about it. I'm really glad it's not out there now, because it was fine for what it was, but it doesn't relate to what I do now, except for the fact that I was drawing a human face, which ends up in most of my work.

Your paintings have the precision of an illustrator's hand.

I've always worked that way. Even as a little kid, I was very meticulous. I would try to see how small I could get. I would get a mechanical pencil and sharpen it down to a little pinpoint, and see how small I could write words. There's something very satisfying about it to me. I'm also a control freak. When I first started doing my personal work when I was moving away from illustration, I would draw the whole thing out in pencil. Then I would paint it layers and layers and layers. I would still work flat, and then I said, "What the hell am I doing? I'm getting myself an easel." I worked upright, and started to draw with paint instead of doing pencil line first.

One of my most distinct memories is listening to the the Beatles' *White Album*, and drawing in a completely dark room. The whole downstairs actually had all the lights out. I had one little spotlight, can hear the muffled yelling of my parents right above me just before they split up. I think part of that control is me, one little tiny individual creating a universe that I could control, and feel like I was in charge of. That relaxed me somehow, because there's all this nonsense going on around me, and this is one little thing I could control. I could just immerse myself in it, and shove the rest of it out. That's probably true for a lot of artists.

Andy Warhol made the connection that celebrities, like soup cans, are a salable commodity. Your work moves beyond that, distorting and reshaping a Hollywood ideal of beauty.

I don't have some big agenda to try to reinvent celebrities or let everyone know that Hollywood is corrupt. I don't care. But I just want to take it and claim it as my own, and then twist it into something slightly different that's still grounded in a recognizable reality, but there's something wrong. There's something off. Maybe that is exactly what you're saying. Maybe that is what people respond to.

I don't think of them as a negative take on things, necessarily,

but I guess it is wanting to get in there.

It's not negative, per se. It's like having fogged-up goggles on everyday, and then in looking at your paintings the thought creeps in, "Uh-oh. Maybe this is what I'm *not* seeing."

Maybe that is what it is, and also in terms of my psychology, because I know that I do a lot of starlets. We're all programmed by Hollywood to strive for a certain ideal. If you listen to John Cassavetes, what he's talking about, and even in the scene in *Minnie and Moskowitz* where Gena Rowlands is talking to that old woman, it's one of the most beautiful scenes I've ever seen. She's like, "There's no Humphrey Bogart in my life. There's no Charles Boyer in my life." It doesn't exist, but we're so conditioned to think that that's out there.

It's something that developed organically. I never thought that the paintings would be so fixated on films. It also is a way of, in terms of the metaphysical thinking, the idea of an alternate reality. If any movie that does that where it's close to this reality, like *Brazil*, there are things you can latch onto, but then there are things that are completely off. I love the idea that there's this whole other parallel universe where things are very similar, but they're slightly different. That idea has always fascinated me. Have you seen *3 Women* by Robert Altman?

I saw it at years ago at the Castro.

It's one of my favorites. I just love that movie so much, and that was based on a dream Altman had. It's worth getting the DVD and listening to his commentary. Even if you're doing something else. Great to watch it, too, but sometimes I'll put commentaries on while I'm working. I can just glance over it. I used to not watch movies that I really wanted to focus on, but the nice thing about the TCM thing is they were running movies all day. If I like it a lot, then I could either stop it and watch it in a more devoted way later, or I can just glance over it and watch. Sometimes they're shitty, but it's just nice to see the imagery, or just nice to have it as company while I'm just in there working alone.

Eric White, through Oct. 18, at Serge Sorokko Gallery, 55 Geary Street, 415-421-7770.