

# Making it Home

## Will Pope's New Paintings

It's the spring equinox today and as I write these words an unexpected storm brings wet, driving snow out of the northwest. Along the banks of the river where we live the willow and alder - luminously golden, scarlet and rust-colored in the mute grey light, each branch laden with swollen buds - are momentarily limed with white streaks of new snow. The intrepid magpies dive purposefully from bank to bank and mergansers drift by all morning, riding the river engorged now with early runoff. The world outside my window is all shifting color, motion, surprise.

I also have before me this morning a group of Will Pope's surprising and compelling paintings, and like the world outside my window, they too are full of color, motion, and mystery.

### **Composing, Building, Playing**

Will Pope's working method - highly complex and layered, wild and passionate - is a form of alchemy, with one foot solidly planted in oil painting's history, the other finding purchase in present-day electronic magic. Pope refers to his paintings as "oil on plaster on panel" so as not to confuse the viewer. "I'm an oil painter," he says, "and I paint on Venetian plaster which is for me a glorified - and glorious - form of gesso." He begins by saturating the plaster with raw Italian pigments, a method that dates back several thousand years, applying the concoction to wood panels in micro-thin layers with various sized trowels in predetermined geometric or random fields of color. The application is quick and appears spontaneous - but one would be remiss to think of it as *mere* spontaneity; by now it is second nature for him. Next, he lays in graphite drawings that he builds up with oil pigments, or, using any of dozens of stencils that are taped to his studio walls, he adds images with oil pigment towed through the cutouts, yielding a silhouette in the picture plane - a bison, a wolf pup, a man working. When I asked him how he came to use stencils his answer was unhesitating and direct: "Matisse."

These stencils have their own history. Pope photographs wild animals in Yellowstone National Park and in the big valleys north and west of Yellowstone near his home in Bozeman, Montana. Loading the images into his computer, he creates templates using Photoshop to separate the color layers, and then makes templates for each color, cutting them out of cardstock. These separated color layers are then applied to the painting one by one, yielding a rich visual aura much like a multi-colored woodblock print. Sometimes he also builds images on the plaster surfaces from resin or thick, wax-like glycerin—or he may apply encaustic by melting beeswax mixed with blended mineral spirits, damar varnish, Venetian turpentine, and pigment. As the plaster and encaustic dry, a controlled craquelature sets in that fascinates him. Recently he has begun to add images from lino cuts and photo transfer, using wintergreen oil or gel medium. And there's more: sometimes he adds small pieces of text using a set of antique leather-stamping tools that have been in his wife's family for over a hundred years. Miniature poems, the texts float like leaves on a pond's surface. With all their layers of oil color and images these paintings are wondrous objects conceived in photography, gestated in computer graphics, and born as oil paintings.

After all of the elements are complete, the work is coated with successive layers of marine urethane and, finally, varnish and beeswax that seal and protect the piece - these last two steps giving a lens-like effect to the surface, as if you are peering into a different world. And you are.

You should be getting the idea that the surfaces of Will Pope's work are complex, visually and tactilely, with an intricate texture that lends the finished paintings multifaceted avenues of approach. Why this level of technical complexity? Why not? With so much *work* to do to make a painting, almost anything can happen. And does. Through preparation and chance, seriousness and play, and between patient care and an intrepid wildness and spontaneity, a curiously striking tension inhabits these paintings. At work in the studio he is loose, animated, dancer-like, playful - mixing plaster and pigment, grabbing for a stencil, intuitively stamping on a word or phrase, boldly adding and subtracting images, altering and adjusting the compositional structures. And out of the wet, oily mess of wet plaster and color there coheres a vivid, unified composition that transcends the weight and history of its construction.

### **Marks, Signs, Crossroads**

The lingering, resonant presence of the hand and mind at work in Will Pope's paintings begins in the many different intimate engagements the artist has with his paintings. Mark-making - the apparition and echo of the hand at work dispersed across the paintings' surfaces - is of fundamental importance to this artist; it gives the

paintings depth and visual richness. The dynamic energy that crackles between the images, the charm and challenge of multiple points of view, the occasional and surprising text bits, the rich and sensuous textures of the plaster and craquelature all contribute. *The bottom of the mind is covered with crossroads*, as the poet Paul Valéry said, recalling here the many crossroads - of technique and imagination - Will Pope explores.

The paintings are like maps, geographies of the imagination full of signs and clues and memory, yet are composed almost musically, with spontaneous bursts of image-building, intuitive beats of color, and stream-of-consciousness chords laid down like the signposts and tracks of a journey, an evolution not of formal design but an organic process of balance and surprise. Pope, who is also a musician, filmmaker, and children's book author, says, "One way to think about it is that there are two paintings: an underlying abstract, and a formal representational painting on top." In Pope's paintings there are traces of Larry Rivers's early fractured and energetic Pop compositions and Joan Mitchell's wild and masterful color, as well as Rauschenberg's collisions of the nonobjective and the concrete. But these are at best historical background - you would never mistake the wild and courageous imagination at work here.

Pope's 2007 *Some of the Animals You're Likely to See in the Park Today* is wonderfully representative of his painting. "The Park" in our part of the world means Yellowstone National Park, just a short hour south of the artist's home. The painting, like the park itself, is rich with a concentration of large animals that once thrived in vast numbers throughout North America - bison, moose, elk, mule deer, wolves, bighorn sheep, grizzly bear, swans, pelicans. But its freshness rings true, unlike the countless trite, sanitized examples of "wildlife art" one finds in the tourist-town galleries surrounding Yellowstone. Visit Jackson Hole and Cody, Gallatin Gateway, Big Sky, Bozeman, and Livingston, and you will find paintings that endlessly recycle saccharine and romanticized images of a world long lost to us, with its vanished animals and grand landscapes. By contrast, in Pope's painting here - and in works like *I Shan't Be Gone Long, You Come Too*; *Skyline Boulevard*; *Dinquinesh*, and others - the animals seem to reside in a kind of ghost realm, poised somewhere between their world and ours. The splintered nature of the landscape these animals inhabit, the various points of view, the uncertain and multiple horizon lines, the sinuous and muscular colors he mixes, all contribute to make this work startlingly contemporary and prescient. After all, one has to honestly face the fractured and broken landscape of the American West, a place that today no longer provides open country for the largest animals to migrate and feed, but restricts them to habitat insufficient to allow them to thrive. Yet in these paintings there is another space discovered, one where something wonderfully illusory and at the same time concrete, grounded, and essential is at work.

*Landscapes are culture before they are nature, constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock*, Simon Shama has said, and Will Pope's paintings essentially illustrate Shama's insight. Here's the thing: I believe it's nothing short of courageous for a serious artist to paint wildlife today. The subject is bone-tired, freighted with nostalgia, and sullied with commercial frenzy. It's impossible to find anything new in it. Yet Will Pope has ferociously and surprisingly revealed something fresh for us in that history. The paintings are filled with images - signs and signals and pictograph-like glyphs - that carry within them a kind of delightful news, late-breaking bulletins from the front lines of his deep passion and engagement with the world. These are fully realized landscapes of the imagination, paintings of a purely intuitive order, and that also operate within the realm of simple record-making. That is, they uniquely record what we find at the intersection of traditional nineteenth-century Romantic landscape painting and something wholly original and of our own time.

"I very much relate to these animals as a part of our everyday life in Montana," Pope says. "I feel that painting them brings them closer, that somehow I become a part of them, and them a part of me . . . I'm a third-generation painter of animals in the landscape; my father still does this and my grandfather did before us. So while these are landscapes, they more and more become not only self-portraits, but family portraits as well." Perhaps, in seeking to find a way to live more wholly in the place he does, his concept of family has now expanded outward to encompass the animals and plants that are intrinsic to this world. With technical virtuosity, childlike curiosity, unbounded energy, and a courageous and unfettered imagination - and with respectful attention to what it is that surrounds him, his place in it, and a trust that awareness grows into fondness - Will Pope stakes a claim to helping us learn again how to live more fully in a world that is still, thankfully, full of surprise and mystery.

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