

In the Studio

full of possibilities

by Michele Corriel, for At Home Magazine

July 2007

will pope: full of possibilities

Up on the wall in Will Pope's whitewashed basement half a dozen paintings wait for his attention. A couple of them are finished but most still need a little more: a slash of color, a flourish, maybe another stencil. Pope tends to work on three paintings at a time, but in preparation for a show at Visions West in Livingston, the fires are stoked a bit brighter this week.

"Sometimes while I'm working on one painting I can resolve something in another painting," Pope says, applying a stain of pigment and olive oil to the upper left corner of a piece. "I'm creating a visual narrative with my pieces and I have several picture planes operating within one painting."

In some ways his pieces are landscapes, but in other ways they most certainly are not. The horizon lines linger, sometimes they're vertical, creating the sense of a dreamlike place. And like a dream, icons pop up in strange places. There's a kind of moment when you think, what is that doing there? Then upon reflection the symbols embedded in the piece make sense. But if there's a single quality that makes Pope's work unique it would be the colors. They stand out, quietly, perfectly, unobtrusively, involving and capturing the viewer. His pastel pieces, just like candy, are as addictive.

Nikki Todd, owner of Visions West, appreciates the exceptional work Pope is doing, especially those he does using Venetian plaster.

"There's an element of the possibility for discovery," Todd says. "There's so many things going on in his paintings, all these treasures to find if you look enough. There's also an architectonic element with the words he stamps into the plaster when it's still wet."

Pope works in both oil paints and Italian plaster. The plaster is mixed with color and is very thinly laid on the surface, creating a texture that plays a part in the overall feeling of a piece.

"I want people to get a visceral hit off the paintings," Pope says. "The surface is very important to me."

Todd loves that kind of tactile quality that happens with the plaster.

"And the colors of course are very unusual for a man," Todd adds. "There's something really beautiful in that. There's a geometric quality - a symmetry that is very interesting. At first glance it might seem naïve or folk-art looking, but as you examine them deeper there is a lot more to it."

Opening a can of Italian dry pigment combined with Venetian plaster he dips a metal spatula into the almost odorless mixture and spreads the thick blue blend across the surface of a painting. Pope smoothes the color like icing on a cake, gently but quickly.

"I have about twenty minutes until it's so sticky I can't work with it anymore," he says, hardly seeming to think about where the paint is going. "The way I work - it has something to do with logic. I like puzzles. I look at a painting until I just know what comes next. The picture plane is a problem and I try to solve it."

In "Calypso," a piece that is still acquiring symbolic tulips, Pope's use of a shockingly pastel color palette meets with the powerful images of Montana: a buffalo whose body is tattooed with multi-colored grids like a gerrymandered map, a dainty architectural flourish in deep red, stenciled birds in flight and a misshapen heart against a triptych color-block. It is a piece that combines images and feelings, obvious ciphers with invisible emotional strings.

"None of my colors come straight the tube," Pope says, mixing a tinge of emerald with some white and then a bit of ultra marine blue on a palette that is so crowded with dabs and dots, smears and swirls, that it could be an abstract painting all by itself. "I stare and stare at a painting until I see what needs to be done where."

Looking for a bit of yellow, he rifles through a heap of squeezed and folded paint tubes that look like a pile of bones after a feast. Finally content with the color he fills in a tulip stencil on the buffalo painting - a purposely over-romanticized montage of Montana.

Included in this recent body of work animals play an important part. Elephants, buffalo, giraffe, cranes: all signify a kind of conversation going on in and between the pieces. Perhaps, it is the influence of his father, who was the Fort Worth Zoo's resident artist, painting pictures of all the zoo's creatures, great and small. The memory of spending time with his father at the zoo is a rich source of inspiration, especially now that Pope is a father as well.

"I'd say he's become more focused since he's had children." Anne Winkler, a fellow artist from Santa Fe, who has watched Pope's work develop over the last dozen or so years, says, spooning out macaroni for her own boys.

"He's so dedicated to his painting career," she says. "And he's prolific. If I were to look back I'd say he's gotten a lot more adventurous with his compositions. He's always done loose work, and he's always been one to take chances."

She sees something new in his color blocking and a tendency toward the abstract.

"I love his colors," she adds, "they're really juicy and fresh. But as far as his whole composition, I don't try to understand the content too much. I don't question it. It's one of those things."

Like waking up in the morning and trying to interpret a dream.

"And I love his drawings, they're very childlike," Winkler says. "There's no lamenting about redoing an animal over and over. He's happy with the quick sketch."

In the past he'd jumped around with his styles but now Winkler thinks he's found something he can stay with for a while. "These pieces feel like he's cranking on a series that is fluid."

And while some of his pieces have the notion of disorder, Pope's studio reflects the true orderliness of his work. The space feels geometric, white, light, with rectangular surfaces, squared windows, and lines dividing the ceiling. Taped to one wall are drawings done by his young son, drawings included in some of his pieces. Dozens of small canvases lean against the wainscoted wall.

"When you start looking there's a vast amount of art knowledge behind what he's painting," Nikki Todd says. "I've watched his work evolve. He's always changing. He won't be stuck in a rut. Each painting is a stepping stone, and that's exciting to see."

She sees each of his pieces speaking to art movements of the past.

"Even his oil paintings are interesting," Todd says. "They have so much build up, so much texture, and they have a relationship to the plaster. He surprises us every now and then and he'll bring in a small group of paintings that go off on a different tangent. You can tell it's his work, but it's different. I think he's very influenced by the seasons."

She mentions a series he did during the winter with a lot of starkness. But Pope says the seasons drained of color inspire him to warm himself with pastels. During the winters Pope says he turns to a brighter, warmer palette.

"They literally warm and comfort me," he says. "Painting is magic for me. The images I tend to create invoke an archetypal ideal, like Greek statues in a way. I'm not sure it's evident to other people, but there's a positivity in the work that leaves tragedy aside. It's very childlike... and I'm glad about that."