



Seven Fires

The millennial medium

Plaster ensures Will Pope's whimsical landscapes will endure

BY MICHELE CORRIEL

WILL POPE'S PAINTINGS TAP INTO OUR COLLECTIVE SUBCONSCIOUS, into our need to hear stories and to understand ourselves. His compilations of symbols and color, of line and landscape pull us like gravity into his work. We can't help but get involved in the piece.

Standing between his large plywood canvas and an old hip-high desk he uses for his worktable, Pope places a new painting – or what is about to become a new painting – onto the easel. He preps the birch board by applying several strata of colored Venetian plaster linearly from edge to edge. When the plaster dries the surface crackles leaving wrinkle-like fissures on the skin of the

painting – a reference to time as it ebbs and flows against the background of history.

“I have to use wood because canvas won’t hold plaster,” he says, running his palm over the dried crackled surface. “And in a few seconds I can change it to a glass-like material.”

He takes the rounded edge of a nearby tool and burnishes the plaster. In a moment the area becomes glossy.

“It’s the ground marble in the Venetian plaster that allows me to alter the character of it,” he says. “And the plaster receives the paint well. I know it’s going to last thousands of years — look at all the old Frescos that are still around.”

He mixes the neutral plaster with pure pigment and paints them across the canvas in a distinctive order. Delineating the horizons of the earth to the sky, from bottom to top: green, black, orange, tangerine, beige, blue.

“People believe this as landscape,” he says. “Just laying it down creates a basis for the space within the work. And then I’ll hit you with a buffalo that couldn’t possibly be real. Everything is representational. It’s symbol logic.”

His symbols hover above the picture plane and the narrative begins to take shape.

Adria, Pope’s wife, helps him with the finishing work by applying the marine urethane so each painting can be as archival as possible. But she also adds her presence in the



The Trail South

studio.

“He doesn’t plan the painting,” she says. “It’s what comes out of his filter and sometimes we don’t make the connections between the symbols until later.”

One of Pope’s recurring symbols is an old car, a Chevrolet Bel Air, to be precise. It shows up here and there like a whirling dervish in the desert.

“I plant them,” Pope says, leaning a hand against the vertical board, he begins to pencil the outline of the car to the left of middle on the piece. “It’s a spiritual arena, and the symbols bubble up. I don’t know why I didn’t have the car in my work before now.”

He dips a gloved finger into a cup of olive oil mixed with red paint. The color dilutes, but it’s still bright. Then he applies the oil fusion to the canvas.

“I like it,” he says, surprising himself. He rubs the oil into the surface and then wipes it away with a towel. “It amplifies the cracks in the plaster.”

And like veins the red seeps into the tiny rifts, leaving behind a kind of invented past.

Picking up a chisel, Pope then begins to gouge the surface taking away a piece of the new to reveal the old, a scrape into the record.



The Dream



Time and Time Again

Nikki Todd owner of Visions West Gallery in Bozeman, Livingston and Denver, represents Pope's work.

"We hit a slow spot for a bit but for the artists who've hung in there, all of sudden the sales are coming in," she says. "There's always been an incredible interest in Will's work. There are always those who don't get it, but there are so many layers, there are the colors, the candy-like finish. You can dig as deep as you want with his work."

Pope's work has been called "childlike" and it may be due some of his simple images and his use of playful colors, Todd says. "But he is really childlike in a good way, he's like a sponge — all these books and things he reads and they're present in his mind ready to be accessed — to pop up in his paintings. He's also really intuitive and seems to work in a trans-like state when he gets a rhythm going."

Besides the Venetian plaster underpainting, Pope also draws from Matisse with his use of stencils, a reference to the cut paper collages, often on an enormous scale, Matisse called *gouaches découpés*.

"Will Pope pulls from a lot of different influences in his work and he's not afraid to borrow ideas from the past masters," Todd says. "He's

got a great sense of color and his palette is so surprising. Always. I like the ones that are really layered and have the distinct horizontal stripes — those are really fun."

The Todds have one of Pope's pieces in their living room.

"It's called 'Baby Animals Zero Sum,' it's all these zebras and giraffes, and we sit around with it having developed our own stories for it," she says. "The painting is full of imagination, all of Pope's paintings are and they always ask the viewer to open their own imaginations."

While certainly addressing the Western landscape, Pope's work stands apart from the typical Western artist.

"When you get out there and look at much of the 'Western' art, so much of it is something you've seen all so many times," Todd says. "And here Will is taking the same subject matter and making it unique, doing things that haven't been done before. Collectors are looking for a delight and that's the appeal of his work — the ingenuity of his work — and that's who I want to represent. Will is definitely way outside the box."

As Pope continues to work in his studio he wants to be sure that the content remains constant, yet at the same time changeable.

"Some things are forward leaning," he says, gouging, scraping and taking away almost as much as he added to a small area. "While some things will recede — almost disappear."

In another painting, called "The Dream," a 36" by 36" oil on Venetian plaster, Pope uses one of his



They Gather in the Glen



South by Southwest

woodblocks, slathered in ink and pressed to the surface of painting. It not only adds an unexpected element of surprise but it also adds another reference to our past — with the way the plaster sporadically takes the black in it looks like an ancient Japanese print somehow appearing amidst a flamingo chasing a trout the wrong way up a stream. There are other symbols in the piece, his often-used lemon trees and of course an old car. In this case the scenario is so cohesive you don't notice your mind snagging on the impossibilities within it.

He marries woodblocks with stencils, Venetian plaster with the New York School's devotion to abstract gridwork. The swirl of candy colored pastels with a believable landscape of today. And that is the wonder and enchantment of Pope's work.

Onto the top stratosphere, the blue area that could, under the right circumstances, refer to the sky, Pope uses a ruler to straight-edge his clouds.

"I always have rectangular clouds," he says, penciling in another rectangle along the same plane. "The line is landscape. I even make square suns."

When you think about it clouds as a square makes a kind of sense. Clouds block the sun. Blocks are usually represented by rectangles. But even if you're thinking literally, the idea of clouds as rectangles builds on the notion of story. It's a galaxy, far, far away. A place where clouds are rectangles and the sun is square. Where cars float in the desert and buffalo are orange. Welcome to the land of Will Pope. ◉



The Citrus Grove