



Susan Chrysler White

August 10 – November 10, 2013

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It is hard to look past the work of Susan Chrysler White. She is not uncomfortable using bold colors and unexpected shapes and lines in her paintings. Her intent is to grab your attention using bright colors and dynamic lines that hold you long enough to allow the layers of paint to reveal additional ideas and bits of information. Some paintings have the appearance of diagrams and patterning that give viewers a clue that information is being presented. Others burst with theatrical colors that seem to reflect pure emotion. But the paintings remain open to whatever responses might be felt and identifications that might be made by viewers.

From where do these colors and forms and images come? What we find in this exhibition of White's work from the last decade is the continuation of a rapid progression of impulses behind her creativity. Twenty-five years ago, Susan White was teaching at Temple University in Philadelphia and garnered national attention from her massive drawings on irregularly shaped sheets of paper. Twenty years ago, White was teaching at Cooper Union in New York, creating large, mixed media sculptural works, which also drew praise from national critics. Fifteen years ago, White was working with women in rural Mexico, helping them become self-sufficient through the creation of an artistic cooperative. And since 2000, she has been a professor at University of Iowa, during which time she has produced all of the work included in this exhibition.

For White, the choice of materials is not the simple one made by most artists, who are more easily classified as painters, sculptors, printmakers, and the like. The drawings she produced during the late 1980s connected metaphorically to the graphic nature of many of the issues that concerned her. Works in the 1990s that were created using found objects



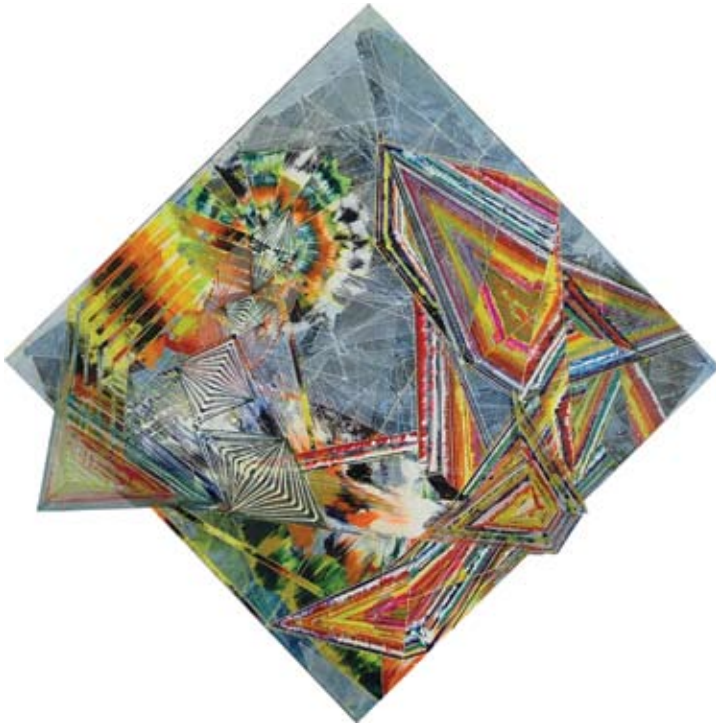
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and vegetation, along with mixed media drawing, were more precise in reflecting White's horror at the plight of the environment and women around the world.

It is easy to call the bulk of her work since she moved to Iowa "paintings." After all, most of what we see is paint. A closer look at her surfaces, however, reveals that she is not the typical painter adding paint to her canvases with a variety of brushes or other tools. She pours and smears. She layers not just paint on top of paint, but paintings on top of paintings. And more recently she layers paintings on top of sculptural additions on top of paintings on paintings. All of these decisions are made not just to create a unique look to her artworks; the tightly connected layers also reflect the ever-increasing demands we place on each other and our relationship with the natural world.

What we discover about White, through her past and her more recent paintings, is an artist and person who is connected—intellectually, emotionally, and often physically—to many of the major challenges our world faces. She uses art in a poetic way to capture the conflict between the common and seemingly trivial individual's experience of day-to-day living when faced with the vastness of the world in all its diversity: its history and future, its knowledge and mystery, its triumphs and its tragedies. The layers upon layers of paint and other materials are symbolic of the barriers that can exist between people or cultures, or between humans and nature.

Though White has been sensitive to large and complex issues, from the environment and climate change to social injustice, her work in this exhibition is a mix of concern and optimism. In



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works such as *Arbol de Santos (Tree of Saints)*, White creates dozens of unique, symmetrical ovals and connects all of them through a web of delicate yet firm, colored lines. The origins of these shapes come from time White lived in Spain as a child—corresponding to traditional shields or emblems known as “escudos;” yet their actual meaning is completely open. Each one is different in size, shape, and color, and each one is supportive of all of the others.

While *Arbol de Santos* is relatively straightforward in its composition, a work such as *Spheres of Privilege* warps the perspective so that the interconnectivity of the elements appears weighted toward the two centralized images. These shapes hold fruits and vegetables, necessary for human existence, which project themselves outward to control a host of potentially competing symbols. What seemed to be a balanced web in *Arbol de Santos* becomes more restrained when a more definable need is on the line.

Still, the webs of connections endure through which, White suggests, we can find solutions. *Attempt to Translate*, with its shifting frames, planes, colors, images, and dimensions, still maintains hope that a translation can be found by following the connections, however chaotic they might seem. The Plexiglas appendages that pop up from the surface offer new openings for resolving problems, even as they disrupt the flat plane of the canvas.

In the works that White has created since 2011, she has devoted much of her attention to the issue of climate change. Inspired by the wild swings in temperatures in recent years, along with the increased numbers of major storms and fires, White has incorporated imagery related to weather



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maps, fires, and water into her work. Her lines and planes have become more jagged and disruptive, and her smaller works literally burst off their surfaces with intensity. While environmental preservation has always been an important issue for her, in these works she attempts to balance her fears for what is happening with hope that resolutions will be found.

The art of Susan Chrysler White is as demanding as it is pleasurable. For every pretty color, there are serious considerations. For every delicate line, there are important concerns. Yet the energy behind and within these paintings represents a confidence to take on such challenges, knowing that the wonders we experience in the world can never be taken for granted.

Susan Chrysler White was born in Chico, California. She earned a BA in Painting from the University of California-Berkeley and an MFA in Painting and Drawing from the University of California-Davis. She has taught art at the university level since 1984, the last thirteen years as Associate Professor of Painting and Drawing at the University of Iowa. She has received numerous accolades for her work including the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award for Painters and Sculptors and a visual artist fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has had artist residencies in both Europe and Asia, and has spent extensive time in Mexico, where her family moved when she was fourteen years old. Her work has been exhibited internationally, commissioned as permanent installations at numerous institutions, and collected by museums and corporations across the country.



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cover

Spheres of Privilege, 2010, acrylic and enamel on canvas
79 x 159 inches, courtesy of the artist

1. *Requiem*, 2012, acrylic and glassine on canvas, 48 x 48 inches
courtesy of the artist
2. *Arbol de Santos*, 2008, acrylic and enamel on canvas
66 x 72 inches, courtesy of the artist
3. *Japanese Wave*, 2012-13
acrylic and glassine on canvas and Plexiglas
42.5 x 42.5 x 6 inches, courtesy of the artist
4. *Fracas*, 2013, acrylic on glassine, 75 x 70 inches
courtesy of the artist
5. *Attempt to Translate*, 2009-13
acrylic and enamel on canvas and Plexiglas
66 x 86 x 6.25 inches, courtesy of the artist
6. *Cradle*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 77 x 102 inches
courtesy of the artist
7. *It Must Be Heaven*, 2007
acrylic and enamel on canvas, 76 x 99 inches
on loan from Kirkwood Community College, Cedar Rapids, IA

The Art Center gratefully acknowledges the funding provided by The Chesterman Family to support this exhibition.