White

White explores the observation of light and the colour white. It addresses ways of seeing and is influenced by the practice of the nineteenth-century painter Whistler. The work aims to reveal connections between the observation of the effects of light and the way an image of a place can be conveyed. The work explores not the representation of a place, but rather an experience and emotional response to the act of seeing.

The body of work explores narrative, building a sustained sense of the place from a series of abstract white representations that aims to convey a set of ideas about the relationship between modernist architecture and place. The work extends Whistler's exploration of the colour white, linking the artist's work and methods of presentation, the white cube gallery space and modernist architecture. The colour white is used to bind these apparently unconnected ideas together.

White strips away all embellishment and detail, defining simple abstract forms, creating imagined and real spaces. Through the photographic medium it highlights the disparity between what the observer and the camera can see, making the photographic painterly.

The work is situated at Homewood house, one of the earliest examples of modernist architecture in Britain, designed by Patrick Gwynne in 1938. The project explores the house and gardens, building a sustained sense of the place out of a series of abstract representations.

Whistler and modernism

In 1873, Whistler had an exhibition titled *An Arrangement in White and Yellow*. The work was largely monochromatic, deriving from his tour of Venice in 1879–80 and held at the Fine Art Society gallery. At this time the conventional method for displaying paintings was to present the paintings in heavy gilt frames and hang them above each other from floor to ceiling.

Whistler believed that his paintings should be presented in a more considered manner, and he went about creating a presentation of his work that would have far-reaching consequences and influence upon the art world. He thought that while the large skylight in the gallery provided good light for viewing the viewers, it was not sympathetic to viewing the work on the walls, so he developed a covering for it that diffused the light, a device he called a 'vellarium', which he later patented In 1888. In the exhibition space itself he made the walls of the gallery white: the frames were also white and of a simple design of his own. Whistler described the effect as follows:

"I can't tell you how perfect – though you would instinctively know that there isn't a detail forgotten

148 New Bond Street, the gallery space of Whistler's exhibition *An Arrangement in White and Yellow*, 1873.

– Sparkling and dainty – dainty to a degree my dear Waldino – and all so sharp – White walls – of different whites …"[1]

The paintings, instead of crowding the wall, were hung sparsely, thereby augmenting the presence of the white space. His gallery attendant was dressed in white with yellow details, and became known by the press as the Poached Egg Man. His role was to sell the catalogue. This also defied conventions by combining the work and odd comments from his critics. In a letter to a friend, the artist described the catalogue:

"Such a catalogue ! – The last inspiration! – I take all I have collected of the silly drivel of the wise fools who write, and I pepper and salt it about the Catalogue under the different etchings I exhibit! – in short I put their nose to the grindstone and turn the wheel with a whirr! – I just let it spin! The whole thing is a joy – and indeed a masterpiece of Mischief!"[2]

The project was a masterpiece of mischief, questioning the Victorian aesthetic. He had created the forerunner of the contemporary 'white cube' gallery space. He had made the white gallery space and white a colour for the artistic elite. A space that said you are not welcome, do not come in.[3]

Whistler's exhibition *An Arrangement in White and Yellow* created an event linking the work on the wall to the gallery space and rethinking the function of the gallery. It is not the work that creates a sense of abstraction but the space itself. It is a world made white.

The effect of this exhibition has long been felt to be a precursor of the modern gallery space, maintaining an aura of exclusivity, including the presence of the foreboding security guard at the door.

"The outside world must not come in, so windows are sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light The art is free, 'to take on its own life'."[4]

The colour white in the hands of the modernists, and in particular the architect Le Corbusier, would come to represent a way of representing the highest aesthetic and cultural values.

The law of white

In 1925, Le Corbusier published a polemical article on whiteness in the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau*. The article was entitled 'A coat of whitewash, the Law of Ripolin'. Le Corbusier argued in the article that white paint will "perform a moral act: to love purity … improve our condition: to have the power of judgement!", leading "to the joy of life: the pursuit of perfection". To achieve his

The Homewood, the dramatic sitting-room that offers a great expanse of uniterrupted window.

vision, “Every citizen is required to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wall-papers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white Ripolin. His home is made clean.”[5]

The resulting white buildings were constructed along simple lines that followed the theory that form should follow function, and removed all unnecessary detail and ornament. The simple form in modernist houses, was allowed to function as a reflection of the user. The space would be filled with light, enabling the interior to interact with the exterior; it was a space for looking and reflecting. The white space both framed and created a modern image of both the interior and exterior views.

The modern construction methods, allowing for large glass windows from floor to ceiling, created a dialogue between interior and exterior spaces. The panes of glass were broken by reflections that constructed images of the exterior imposed on the interior, as if the glass itself had become the canvas describing both interior and exterior places, constantly changing as the white light shifted.

The Homewood

The house, designed by Patrick Gwynne in 1938, is one of the earliest examples of modernist architecture in Britain. It was largely inspired by Gwynne’s encounters with Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye (1931). The house is situated at the top of a gently sloping hill that forms part of the grounds. Like the Villa Savoye, it is built on pilotis that allow it to float beautifully over its mature, wooded gardens, visible from the dramatic sitting-room that offers a great expanse of uninterrupted window wall – integrating the interior and the exterior. The lean modernist lines and industrial materials of the open-plan space produce a strange mixture of shapes: most are rectilinear, but sometimes curves emerge, such as the spiral staircase. The house has two wings set at right angles to each other; the main accommodation is on the first floor, one wing for living space, the other for bedrooms and dressing rooms.

White

White explores ideas of representation, modernism and abstract representation through a concentrated period of observing the effects of light and colour at The Homewood.

The white colour of modernist architecture that reflects light off its rectilinear surfaces at first appears to remove colour. So too do the images in *White*, which render the house and garden white – but their denial of colour draws our attention to colour. It is as if the ubiquity of full colour is ignored – the denial of colour drawing our attention to that which cannot be seenby eye.

The modernist neutrality of white as found on the gallery wall functions as a backdrop to the images placed on them but simultaneously functions to reveal. So too in *White*: the photographic representations made white act as substrates to reveal an alternative vision, a kind of abstract imagined world in which white, light and imagination intermingle. The photographic image is rendered ambiguous and in its ambiguity takes us back to the emergent modernist vision at the heart of Whistler’s work.

Notes:

[1] Whistler, James, Correspondence of James McNeil Whistler. 5 February 1883 To Thomas Waldo Story. University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 2013.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Fox, James, A History of Art in Three Colours. BBC, London, 2013.

[4] Doherty, Brian, Inside The White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, University of California Press, London, 1976, p15

[5] Le Corbusier, ‘A coat of whitewash, the Law of Ripolin’, L’Esprit Nouveau Articles, Architectural Press, Oxford, 1998 (first published in 1925).

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