

NATALIE
WHITE
THE
BLEACH
PAINTINGS

Natalie White's *Bleach Paintings*

We've been through a hell of a time, and it's going to take a while to regroup. As some parts of the world begin to open up after over a year of Covid lockdowns, hope is nonetheless tempered by wariness and exhaustion. The pain of isolation and of loss, the ongoing fear of contagion, and the shock of experiencing society at its most vulnerable linger still. When I cast my mind back to what one year ago—April and May of 2020—felt like in Queens, New York where I live, the relentless torrent of bad news in this epicenter of the pandemic became so appalling that I soon withdrew in mind and in body. Like many I was forced to make the world small to preserve health and sanity: to stay indoors, to fast from media, to occupy the long cold spring days, two young children suddenly at home full time, with something other than dread.

In this dark period I sometimes succumbed to apocalyptic foreboding. A sense, as artist Natalie White expressed it to me, that "myself and everyone else in the world might die."

Like a capsule left for us from the past, the artwork done during Covid will no doubt provide some means to make meaning of the tremendous upheavals taking place since March 2020. That's certainly the case with the paintings White produced. The disruption of normal routines was so complete, and so devastating, that out of necessity she invented an entirely new body of work. What we faced was an epistemic rupture, and White's *Bleach Paintings* are emissaries, describing, from the peak of the crisis, the intensity of that experience.

In isolation in Mexico City when lockdowns began, White stripped the top sheet and pillowcases off her bed, and used bleach to apply tiny brushstrokes to the cotton fabric in a pattern of hatches. Unable to acquire more material, she sliced open the fitted sheets using nail scissors, an ad hoc calculation of using the available tools and materials in a time when scarcity was the new rule. Like the hatch marks of a prisoner marking time, the works are an accretion of frustration and compulsion, marks made, as White put it, "to stop from going crazy."

When the opportunity to return to the U.S. presented itself with a residency at the DNA studios in Provincetown, Massachusetts, White resumed the project, still without access to new materials (art supply stores remained closed through most of 2020, having been deemed "inessential" operations). Using the white sheets in the residency guest house and a found bottle of black ink, White continued to work, lengthening the brushstrokes, going from what she called "therapeutic tiny lines" to "getting the energy out" longer gestures. When a fabric store opened about an hour away, she was able to replenish her materials: sleeping on a bare mattress gets old fast.

Bleach is among the fraught materials of lockdown hygiene, alongside hand sanitizer and PPE. During peak Covid the smell of bleach was common in the sorts

of public spaces that remained opened: grocery stores and bodegas. And let's not forget that during this period Trump was, insanely, advocating that people inject bleach to cure Covid. Using bleach as a medium is intrinsically caustic; White described the toll of inhaling so much bleach to produce the works, also without gloves or protective equipment, as a kind of self-inflicted violence.

This is not to pathologize what White has made. For like any artistic exploration, however driven by necessity or duress, White developed techniques that investigated the range of possibilities available with the material and medium. As the constraints of controlling the linear motion of the bleach on cotton became evident, White began to loosen her application, embarking on what she termed "galaxy" works that probed the star-like appearance of rounder marks on the dark sheets. The Pollock-like web of some works in this series invert the logic of expressionistic, gestural mark-making, marks that were historically understood as emanations of subjectivity made visible in the artist's painterly activity. In White's case the bleach extracts rather than accumulates marks, blanching rather than expressing. White's restrictive palette of lightening bleach against a monochromatic sheet employs procedures of reduction not exposure, and in some works so much fabric has been de-pigmented that great, leaky blots are all that remain.

The works have been sewn onto muslin that is stretched on wood frames, which allows the edges and their original seams to remain evident. The paintings exist in a zone between objecthood (their history as bed sheets) and the ornate. For isn't every pattern an attempt to make a world, the contours of which can be imagined repeating endlessly? Pattern is a type of control that promises order beyond that which art can ever provide, arrangements of form, that in this case, perform provisional and precarious acts of stabilization in a period of near chaos.

– Eva Diaz

Eva Díaz is a writer and art critic living in Rockaway Beach, New York. Her writing has appeared in magazines and journals such as The Art Bulletin, Artforum, Art Journal, Cabinet, Frieze, Grey Room, Harvard Design Magazine, and October. She has recently completed the manuscript to her new book After Spaceship Earth, which delves further into the fraught relationship between art, technocratic utopianism, and social justice first explored in her 2015 book The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College. Sections of the new project have been published in New Left Review, Aperture, e-flux journal, and Texte zur Kunst. She teaches art history at Pratt Institute.