

Valli, Marc. "James White," *Elephant*, Autumn 2012.

## ELEPHANT

### James White

James White's paintings capture signs of everyday life in the same way that Weegee's crime scene photographs captured violence. The painter has compared his work to that of Noir filmmakers, but the parallel which comes to my mind is that of genre writers such as Raymond Chandler, Jim Thompson and Ross McDonald who refused literary mannerisms to create a form that was much closer to their materialistic and savagely capitalistic environment. Refusing common painterly tricks such as showy brushstrokes, characters, juxtapositions of subject matter and even colour, these pictures dissect moments, creating possible narratives and building up suspense.

by Marc Valli

Surger box, 2010, oil and varnish on birch-ply in perspex box frame, 103 x 103 x 6 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Max Wigram Gallery



— *Could you say a few words about your background?* I was born in Devon. My father's job meant my family moved around a fair bit so I probably went to more schools than most. I spent the majority of my time in Devon as a kid though I also went to schools in Bristol and Swansea. As far as becoming interested in art, I've always been into drawing and making things for as long as I can remember. I suppose it was at about 16 that I realized I wanted to do something creative for a living – not necessarily being an artist, it could have been architecture or graphic design at that point. I had a pretty conventional art education, deciding quite quickly that I wanted to make art rather than be a designer, and ended up at the Royal College of Art in the archaically segregated painting department.

— *You used to work with artist Tim Sheward. Could you say a few words about how you two started working together and why you decided to stop doing so?* Tim and I first met when I came to London in 1986; he was a product design student at Kingston Poly as it was then. There was never any plan to begin an artistic collaboration – we made this short video just for something to do one afternoon and then decided it would be interesting to make a show. At that time it was really common for people to find empty spaces and put on their own shows, so we did this in 1995 and it was a success. We were approached by a couple of galleries, one here in London and another in New York a short time later, and ended up working together for the next five years, completely by accident really. Tim became very ill and had to stop working and needed a long time to recuperate. I carried on working on stuff and it just seemed like a natural time to stop. He's fine now and we're still good friends.

— *How was it setting out on your own?* I'd been making and showing work prior to the collaboration, so it wasn't a great shock, though it did feel like starting all over again. But in a good way.

— *You also seem to have shifted from installations to painting. What prompted this shift?* I think I just woke up one morning and decided I wanted to put the nineties behind me. The work I was making with Tim was very much of that time – concerned with manipulation through the media, advertising, fantasy and ultimately disappointment. Not all, but much of the work made by British artists then seemed obsessed with fulfilling certain criteria – things had to be big, brash and shiny and if there was shock value then so much the better. The Saatchi collection was the ultimate goal for most artists and when *Sensation* was done and dusted it just seemed appropriate to move forward. I



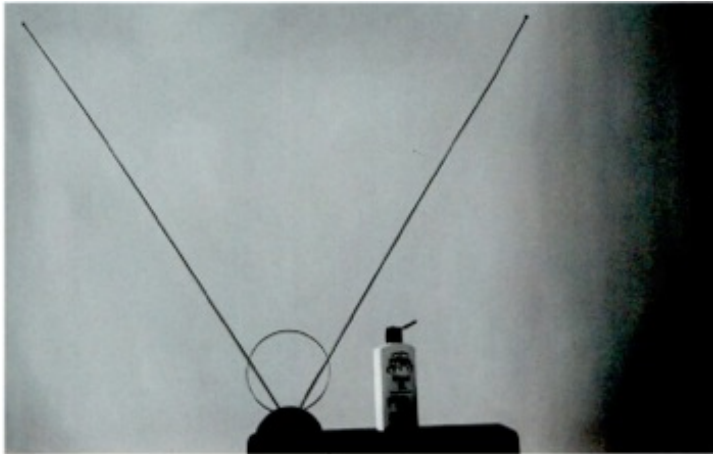
Another Hotel #4, 2011, oil and varnish on aluminium in perspex box frame, 135 x 155.4 x 7.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Pox Wigram Gallery

suppose many would say that to start making paintings was a backward step but I wanted to feel more connected, for my work to shift more towards something closer to home. I enjoyed the intensity of this different way of working, if the paintings were small, quiet and unfashionable then great.

— *Recently, you have developed a very distinctive style (almost a 'tone of voice') of painting. How did you go about developing it?* I hope there is a distinct tone to the work, this is very important to me. It was vital to come up with a method of working that enabled the paintings to be as 'styleless' as possible – they need to have a numb and detached feeling about them.

— *Your canvases display great precision, how long do you spend on each of them, and is there such a thing as a process of carefully paring them down?* I know you're using the word 'canvases' as a generic term but it's important to say that my paintings are never on canvas – they're always painted on plywood panels or aluminium which of course gives them a very different surface. As far as great precision goes, I would dispute that. They're as precise as they need to be. I could spend another couple of weeks on each painting making them more precise but what would be the point? They always appear more photographic in reproduction because of the reduced scale. I think the longest I've ever spent on a painting is about six weeks, it really depends on how complicated the image is and the size of the work, of course.

Whipped Silk, 2007, oil and varnish on birch-ply in perspex box frame, 100 cm x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Max Wigram Gallery



— You seem to avoid painters' most common tricks (showy brushstrokes, colours, etc.) Would you say that you have an uncomfortable relationship with traditional painting? I avoid showy brushstrokes, colours, etc. because they're distractions. In order for the paintings to work they have to be stripped right down, to have an elemental nature. I wouldn't say I have an uncomfortable relationship with painting: I love great painting, but it's not something that informs my work. The function of the act of painting in my case serves as a means of introducing a layer of time to a given moment; it focuses the gaze and lends the objects/scenes an intensity that would be missing if they were to remain as a photographic snapshot.

— This also seems to be the case in your choice of subject matter. For the paintings to work in the way I want them to, the images have to contain anti-subject matter. It's important that nothing too remarkable happens in the paint-

ings as it's what's implied/inferred that is the real subject matter in the work. There's nothing special about a folded newspaper on a table in itself, or a half finished cup of tea, but when seen within the context of a crime scene photograph then that's another matter. There are certain things I keep returning to, like hotel rooms, and I've made a few paintings recently that take a view up or down a staircase. With the stairs especially, there's a psychological element, a kind of 'Hitchcockian' sense of ambient dread that I enjoy!

— Yet there is maybe also an 'atmospheric', almost 'cinematic' aspect in your paintings, as if there were traces of narrative still there. Yes, of course there are stories behind the subjects, but they are implicit. The work does have a strong cinematic connection: there's definitely a parallel with the 'cut-away' shot in film – in the way the painting acts as a pause within a narrative. The exclusive use of black and white can also give the paintings a Film-Noir feel, which can't be a bad thing.

— How about your relationship with photography? I do have a particular relationship with photography, this is true, far more so than with painting. I didn't start out as a photographer, in fact I think the photographs I take for the paintings need to be kind of throwaway looking, not too composed. I really like them when it looks like I've released the shutter by accident – in order for the scenes in the paintings to work best they need to have an incidental quality to them. I always take the images in colour then convert them to black and white later, also adjusting exposure, brightness, contrast, etc., if I need to. So yes, I work from photographs, I'm not sitting there at my easel at three in the morning in my hotel dressing gown. I think the use of the 'photographic, black and white' look just amplifies a need for the bare bones, the fact of the matter, if you like – we don't need to know that the bottle is green we just need to recognize it's a bottle.

— Black and white also implies a relationship with the past. Is there a certain nostalgia in the canvases? No, not the 'N' word, never! And please stop saying canvases...

— Have the 'everyday' and 'stillness' become rare commodities in a visually and narratively saturated world? I'm not sure about the 'everyday', but 'stillness'... yes.

— When you set out as a young painter, what were your ultimate goals in terms of painting? The goal has always been the same, just to make the best painting possible. I want to make paintings that have their own place and stand the test of time.

For the paintings to work in the way  
I want them to, the images  
have to contain anti-subject matter



James White



Comet #2, 2010, oil and varnish on aluminum in Plexiglas box frame, 100 x 100 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Mrs. Winston Gilbey.