

Trevor Winkfield's Undomesticated Imagination

Winkfield's combinations of forms are inexplicable, a seamless fusion of the sinister and innocent.

By John Yau



Trevor Winkfield, "The Painter in Her Studio" (2014), acrylic on linen, 31 x 45 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery)

Trevor Winkfield has a small but intensely devoted following, and much has been written about this English painter who moved to New York City from London in 1969.

As the editor of an important mimeograph magazine, *Juillard*, in the late 1960s, he became associated with poets and writers such as John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Harry Matthews, Ron Padgett, Larry Fagin, Charles North, Kenward Elmslie, and others connected to the New York School.

In addition to collaborating with many of these writers, as well as providing inimitable designs for their books, he is the author of two marvelous collections, *George Braque & Others: The Selected Writings of Trevor Winkfield, 1990-2009* (2014) and *The*

Scissors' Courtyard: Selected Writings, 1967-75 (1994), and the translator of a cornerstone text, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* by Raymond Roussel, with an Introduction by John Ashbery, which was first published in 1977. Among the artists he has written or spoken eloquently about, I would list Jasper Johns, Maurice Denis, Burgoyne Diller, Charles Filiger, Gerald Murphy, Giorgio de Chirico in 1918, and Patrick Henry Bruce.



Trevor Winkfield, "Signals" (2013), acrylic on linen, 38 1/2 x 45 1/2 inches

This is how Ashbery describes Winkfield's paintings: "At times it as though Bosch and Beatrix Potter had collaborated on a Book of Hours [...]." Later, in the same review, he cites Jean Cocteau's description of Roussel's writing as fitting Winkfield's work "perfectly": "a suspended work of elegance, fantasy and fear." Whatever territory Winkfield has brought us to, it is not like anywhere else, as Ashbery's conjoining of Bosch's macabre fantastical domain with Potter's world of benign bunnies surely suggests.

While I was on my way to see his current exhibition, *Trevor Winkfield – Saints, Dancers and Acrobats*, at Tibor de Nagy Gallery (February 17 – March 25, 2018), I began to wonder — as someone who has followed his work since the late 1970s, and who has read many of the things written on his work, as well as much of his own writing — if I could add anything to what has already been said.

Winkfield begins with a collage, which is a hybrid of geometric forms and representational motifs rendered in solid colors. Whether the resulting image is a bird or an unidentifiable thingamajig, it is composed of outlined abstract shapes, which may be patterned or solidly colored. Over the years the artist has accumulated a vocabulary that ranges from heraldry to cartoony biomorphism, from crisp patterns to sly nods to artists he admires, such as Rene Magritte, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich. Along the way, he seems to have become an expert in vexillology, the study of flags.

The painting is a copy of the collage, presumably with a few minor tweaks and adjustments. What we see is an airless world of solid colors, geometric structures, and outlined shapes, often joined together to assemble a graphic totem hovering between abstract and representational forms. Winkfield's outlined shapes share something with the painter Nicholas Krushenick, who was inspired by Japanese woodcuts.



Trevor Winkfield, "The Floating Crocodile and Her Keeper" (2013), acrylic on linen, 39 3/4 x 38 1/2 inches

Like M. C. Escher and Mondrian, Winkfield is interested in the division of the picture plane. For his current exhibition, he constructed layered space in his paintings by arranging different-sized, monochromatic rectangles atop of each other. In "The

“Floating Crocodile and Her Keeper” (2013), two rectangles are placed side-by-side, each holding its own image — an abstract totem or candy-colored *personnage* — as if they were the panels of a diptych. The black, green, violet, and yellow bands bordering the rectangles frame the totems as well as underscore their separateness. Other paintings, such as “The Painter in Her Studio” (2014), come across as if there were a painting by Peter Halley or Burgoyne Diller emerging from behind Winkfield’s large, dominant rectangles. The spaces between the planes are as eye-catching as the forms occupying them. At the times, the cropped shapes along the edges vie with the abstract totem for attention.



Trevor Winkfield, “The Sundial” (2017), acrylic on linen, 32 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches

Winkfield’s world is oddly atomized: it is made of parts joined to other parts to make unlikely gatherings. The combinations are inexplicable, a seamless fusion of the sinister and innocent. He has taken the collages of Max Ernst to a new place. I am also reminded of the private symbolism of David Smith’s totems and the imaginary worlds of Odilon Redon. It is as if he is an assemblagist who had neither the objects nor the space to make his work, and had to paint everything on a small table.

In Winkfield's matchless paintings, the *personnages* may be things animated by one's imagination. Didn't we used to spend long hours talking to a stuffed animal or doll? Weren't these objects friends who could keep our secrets? In "The Sundial" (2017), Winkfield depicts a sundial rising from stylized foliage. Seen in perspective, it is crowned by a brown semicircle from which stylized flames shoot upward, a visual pun on the words "sun" and "dial." It is a sundial and a dream of a sundial. In the upper left-hand corner, Winkfield has placed three triangles within an inset white rectangle, suggesting the pyramids or a geometry lesson. So much happens in a Winkfield painting that is not instantly apparent. For all of their strong, solid colors and bold forms, these are not quick paintings. We cannot domesticate the otherness of Winkfield's images, what I have been calling his totems and *personnages*.

There was a moment in modernism when it became expedient to make something simple and friendly, perhaps with a trace of irony. One sees it in the balloon dogs of Jeff Koons and in the gloppy images of Garfield and Star Wars troopers in Katherine Bernhardt's oversized paintings. This has nothing to do with elitism vs. accessibility, though many observers have couched it in those weighted terms. The latter celebrates the triumph of capitalism by offering trophies for both indoor and outdoor settings, the bigger the better.

Modest in scale, rigorous in execution, mysterious and aloof in outcome, Winkfield's invented forms tell us that all is not lost, that capitalism does not yet own our imagination — that the excessiveness of the mind's eye does not require the profligacy of high-end production or large expanses of real estate. Despite all the voices clamoring otherwise, it is still possible to exist in this world and not join those who rejoice in the triumph of popular culture.

Trevor Winkfield – Saints, Dancers and Acrobats *continues at Tibor de Nagy Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 25.*