

# TIBOR DE NAGY

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## HYPERALLERGIC

My Travels in the Land of Winkfield

Trevor Winkfield's modestly scaled acrylic paintings abound in puzzling, private symbols.

John Yau February 23, 2023



Trevor Winkfield, "From Time to Time, We Will Accompany You on Your Journey" (2019), acrylic on linen, 31 inches x 44 inches (all images courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery)

One of the deepest delights of Trevor Winkfield's graphically precise, kaleidoscopic pictures is that they are visual rebuses with no apparent solutions. In the brightly colored world he scrupulously conjures, every part coexists in rigid isolation from the others. Think medieval heraldry, Victorian lamps, and Edward Lear (both writer and draughtsman) meeting and embracing Burgoyne Diller's geometric abstractions and Joan Miró at his most fantastical. As visually immediate as Winkfield's modestly scaled acrylic paintings are, they abound in puzzling, private symbols.

For anyone truly interested in singular paintings that neither look like anything else nor fit into any art historical narrative, and that define an immediately recognizable country known among his devoted fans as "Winkfield," I highly recommend pondering the works in *Trevor Winkfield: The Solitary Radish* at Tibor de Nagy (January 28–March 4, 2023). What other artist would choose this exhibition title, endowing that lowly vegetable with plaintive poignancy? The show's

14 paintings (all from 2018 to 2023) have titles — such as “Montezuma, Found at Last” (2021) and “Plant Wrongs” (2019) — that are as unlikely as the contents of the paintings they name.

In addition to being an artist, Winkfield, who moved from London to New York in 1969, is a writer, translator, and art writer associated with the New York School poets, starting with first generation (John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Kenward Elmslie, and Harry Matthews). The press release for this exhibition was written by the poet Peter Gizzi. I think Winkfield’s close association with successive waves of the New York School was important to his development because of its wholehearted embrace of the opaque, experimental, nonsense, Dada hijinks, camp, collage, and just about anything that challenged the literary establishment’s emphasis on narrative, sense, and meaning, all while being devoted to craft and form.



Trevor Winkfield, “Guardian of the Broom Closet” (2018), acrylic on linen, 36 inches x 43 inches

It’s easy to see why Winkfield was a favorite artist of John Ashbery, whose sestina, “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,” was populated by the comic-strip characters Popeye, Olive, Wimpy, Swee’Pea, and the Sea Hag. One could, in fact, liken Winkfield’s paintings to a sestina — which is a complex, 39-line poem featuring an intricate, pre-established repetition of end words in six stanzas — except that there is no reiteration in his work. What the viewer encounters is an inexplicable amalgamation of graphic symbols placed within stage-like settings as created by a painter with a deep knowledge of Gerald Murphy’s boldly colored, highly original paintings of match boxes and razor blades. This has understandably led many art writers, including his ardent fans, to characterize Winkfield’s work as eccentric. I want to suggest instead that he consciously rejected what the Western art historical tradition has packaged as the Masterpiece tradition, with its emphasis on revelatory meaning. He never bought into the idea that art should be universal, on the surface, or understood immediately.

The opposite of meaning is not nonsense, of course, and therein lies the compelling mystery of Winkfield’s art. “The Guardian of the Broom Closet” (2018) makes immediate visual sense that begins crumbling under any pressure to become discursive, starting with the title. Why does a broom closet need a guardian? The painting is divided into discrete, solid-colored rectangles and bands of varying lengths that fit tightly together, with a vertical black band down the middle. Within and overlaying this carefully divided ground of pink, pale blue, bright yellow, violet, and

tan are a graphic representation of a blue jay and the inverted silhouette of a row of red townhouses on the painting's right. On the left side, Winkfield has depicted what looks like a combination of a floor lamp, a feather duster, and a triangular spade against a violet ground. On the far left is a tan band containing an Afro comb and a lady bug. Is the blue jay guarding the closet housing this compressed image of interiors and domesticity? Where do the Afro comb and lady bug fit in? Together, they make a kind of sense that resists being named.



Trevor Winkfield, "Plant Wrongs" (2019), acrylic on linen, 26 1/2 inches x 43 inches

Consider the three stylized items in "Plant Wrongs" (2019), each occupying a different-colored rectangle. On the left is a light bulb shaped like a candle flame. In the middle is a flat, stylized version of a Victorian lamp, complete with a multicolored kidney bean base and fluted seashell below the lampshade. On the right, a flower rises out of a trapezoidal pot bearing stylized feathers like those in "The Guardian of the Broom Closet." Does the combination of a modern light, a Victorian-era lamp, and a flower allude to the history of design, dating back to 19th-century England, or the relationship between plant forms and domestic items and architecture? Is the painting about the promiscuity of the imagination?

Should we read Winkfield's vertical arrangements of disparate parts as symbolic phalluses, odd totemic figures, or imaginative still lifes of potted flowers that don't exist in any store or garden? I love that everything does and doesn't fit together in his work, and that sense and nonsense are inseparable. He confounds us, not because he wants, but because he has to — this is what he does best. Winkfield looks closely and sees for himself, the way Max Ernst did when he collaged the 182 images of his collage novel, *Une semaine de bonté* (1934).

Winkfield knows that trying to be popular can be a trap, a rigged contest of which he wants no part. Although he is primarily a painter, I would connect him to another artist and writer of the New York School, Joe Brainard, rather than to better known artists, such as Larry Rivers, Alex Katz or Jane Freilicher, who were close with Ashbery and O' Hara, Whereas Winkfield embraced the hijinks of Kurt Schwitters, Dada, and Surrealism, the later group did not. That combination of playfulness and intellect, along with the rejection of the emphasis on meaning in art by the broader art establishment, is becoming increasingly rare in the United States. Despite the various fads that have swept through the art world since his arrival in New York, Winkfield has remained steadfast in his pursuit of a singularity that over time has become recognizably his. It

is a world without a single reference to the media or popular culture, as if Andy Warhol, Abstract Expressionism, the evenly divided grid, and Conceptual art had never existed. How many artists can say that about their work?



Trevor Winkfield, "Washday" (2021), acrylic on linen, 33 inches x 27 inches

Trevor Winkfield: The Solitary Radish continues at Tibor de Nagy (11 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 4. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.