



Wendy White

Suzanne Hudson /ARTFORUM
OCT 2008

Wendy White

LEO KOENIG

For a show of just four paintings, *Wendy White's* "Autokennel" - her first solo exhibition at this gallery - proved exceedingly ambitious despite its modest selection of large-scale offerings, each cobbled together from several panels. That a selection of artworks can make an implicit case for the virtues of editing might customarily go without mention, but it felt like an exceedingly rare and even quixotic thing in our bloated, garishly more-is-more (but still not enough) moment. And, anyhow, White's work seems to be precisely about the gambit of expression - painterly and otherwise - as somehow disinhibited and formally structured. Indeed, each of her paintings employs a similar format that, paradoxically, allows for greater attention to the localized differences between them: Across multiple contiguous canvases, pieced together to both contain and abet sprawl, White goes to work with an admixture of sooty spray paint and fluorescent acrylics, applying various layers that ultimately suggest graffiti tags and well-behaved abstraction in turn.

Back to Scrape, 2007, extends over three segments, one of which nestles in a corner, bent at a ninety-degree angle, so as to stretch onto the adjacent wall. Plenty of open fields of primed ground relieve the aggressive opticality of the omnipresent Day-Glo (tart lemon yellow, hot pink, and a menacing orange jostle for attention), and reveal, in the upper and lower left, two forms in negative, their shadowy outlines preserving the traces of elements that are no longer there. Details like these attest to White's careful consideration of her compositions, as do sections of paint that are demonstrably - even earnestly - taped, layered, and administered in fastidiously lean washes. So as not to get too fussy, though, White also appropriates objects-cwra-sculptures (perhaps a variant of what's gone missing from *Back to Scrape*) and winsomely takes her cues from the likes of "space junk" and "buried hazardous material." The gnomic namesake *Autokennel*, 2007, makes literal White's extrapainterly enthusiasms. Twomblyesque arabesques morph into signs for scruffy urbanism here and elsewhere in the show (while partially buried words evoke Twombly's play with language as textual fragment and picture). But the real hallmark is the neon softball on an upright metal pipe that cannot help but bait anyone close enough to see it.

So, as it turns out, sports underpin White's pictures - less as an iconography than a mechanism of fandom, cathartic excess, mass witnessing, and so on, not to mention a measure of process. In theme, then, White's paintings come close to Julie Mehretu's stadium series, yet - in being so wrong they're right - amble into the land of Albert Oehlen. Odder still are the whispers of Matthew Barney's showy athleticism - or, more to the point, Evel Knievel's hubris-courting bravado - that one hears in White's rhetoric. As she puts it in a recent artist's statement: "Successful paintings to me maintain an awkward, muscular energy that threatens to fall apart at any time. . . . I attack the canvas with a series of direct, semi-calculated gestures that I then build on intuitively, adjusting my speed and cadence to construct areas of levity and density." White seems clear on the fact that she walks a fine line between raw communication and contrivance. In this, she is honest about Expressionism, and hers is a roundabout commentary on the graffiti acts that have worked to secure its authenticity historically: People make marks to affirm their presence, on walls and more vaunted supports. Wendy White was here.

- Suzanne Hudson