

# Ben Whitehouse | Revolution

IT IS RARE for the DCCA to devote two of its largest galleries to the work of a single artist, but Ben Whitehouse's current body of work absolutely required it. Whitehouse not only creates large-scale individual paintings and large installations comprised of smaller paintings, but he has now entered the world of time-based video, utilizing sixty-five inch plasma screens. The scale of the subject matter — vast landscapes — and the scale of the presentations—painting installations and video — absolutely necessitated large galleries with high ceilings. The DCCA is a perfect environment for viewing these works.

Whitehouse was born and reared in Great Britain and received his MFA at the University of Chicago. He currently lives and works in the United States. He has been a painter of landscapes for more than fifteen years, a subject matter motivated by a number of stimuli — from living near Lake Michigan to closely examining the landscape paintings of Claude Monet, to a fascination with the color-field abstractions of Mark Rothko. England is, of course, the place that modern landscape painting was born, the land of John Constable and J. M. W. Turner, of Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and William Blake. Monet himself was moved enough by the British landscape school to travel to England while avoiding the upset of the Franco-Prussian war, and it was in England that Edmund Burke penned *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, which in many ways led to our understanding of the sublime much later in the works of Rothko.

The U.S., too, has its own tradition for landscape painting, but especially for painting that has a magisterial awe associated with the tradition of the spiritual in art. Our understanding of landscape, of the sublimity of nature, and the vast scale of the universe, has a lineage that traces back to the abstract paintings of artists like Rothko and before him, Augustus Vincent Tack and Arthur Dove, and then to the landscape paintings of the great nineteenth-century artists: Thomas Cole, Frederick Church, and Thomas Moran, all of whom were influenced by the British school, most notably, J.M.W. Turner. The perception of landscape as a vehicle for spiritualism, mysticism, and the cosmic connects the work of these artists and links Ben Whitehouse to them as well.<sup>1</sup> Whitehouse brings a fresh perspective to the notion of the earth as a place of awe and wonder.

Whitehouse initially painted landscapes in a highly representational style that was attendant to the time of day and the quality of light.<sup>2</sup> His interest in *plein air* painting and observing the light shifts that take place at a particular spot over a period of time and in different seasons of the year can certainly be traced to his knowledge of the work of Monet whose well-known series of identified places and objects — *the Creuse Valley, Grainstacks, Poppies, Poplars, Rouen Cathedral, Waterlillies* — impressed Whitehouse as being “filmic,” a notion that would eventually lead him to making time-based digital videos on location but which initially led him to landscape painting.<sup>3</sup> The artist believes that the idea for the digital works likely goes back to the 1990s when as a graduate student he first viewed the Monet paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. He credits seeing the *Grainstacks* hanging, one after the other, along the wall of

the gallery as suggestive of film frames with the spaces between them as missing frames. It was the first time that he thought of Monet's work in this way, and he wondered how he could account for the transitional experience of natural phenomena in his own work.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, Whitehouse painted his images, though he certainly used video from the beginning too, shooting analogue video simultaneously while making his *plein air* studies for his representational paintings. He would shoot video and make audio recordings when he worked in the out-of-doors in order to use them as studio aids for his large canvases. However, it was not until much more recently that he looked upon the video productions as fully formed artworks in their own right. It was new digital technology that allowed for twenty-four hour, high-definition images, along with a way of viewing them — large plasma screens — which permitted Whitehouse to consider his video productions as completed works and on par with his painting.

The qualities of the environment that most attracted Whitehouse in the early years of his career were its fluidity and its transitional nature, that it was never static and it never repeated itself. He became increasingly fascinated by nature and by capturing its atmospheric effects, and certainly the fact that he lived in Chicago, on the shores of Lake Michigan, with its immense water and broad sky, reinforced his awareness of time-based observations of nature. Even in his earlier representational paintings Whitehouse was keenly aware of the atmospheric changes that took place throughout the day and with the changing seasons.

The DCCA includes several of his most important works in the current exhibition. One of these is a representational painting created in 2002, a diptych landscape entitled *September* painted as a response to 9/11. The artist states: “I am not one to respond to current events through art, etc., but I opened [an exhibition of my work] in Manhattan four weeks after the attack, so I witnessed some of the aftermath first hand and it had a profound effect on me as it did on all of us. The idea of the heartland being ripped from the skies (literally) by such an unexpected and vicious attack became an image I ultimately could not prevent myself from painting.”<sup>5</sup> This image is not a literal depiction of planes falling out of the sky. It is instead an interpretive representation that suggests impending trouble implied through a brooding, turbulent sky.

There is precedent for this in American art. Church depicted a dramatic sky with dark foreboding clouds in his *Twilight in the Wilderness* of 1860, just before the imminent Civil War. Landscape painting has been used in both England and the U.S. as metaphor and should be considered more than decoration; it is often concept driven and Whitehouse is acutely aware of this history and the impact that landscape painting can have. A highly intelligent artist who is interested in investigating his world in order to shape his own response to it, Whitehouse sees our planet as an extraordinary place and is fascinated by the expanse of the universe.<sup>6</sup> Earlier landscape painters were in awe of God's vast power as seen on earth in the beauty of particularly wondrous places like the Rocky Mountains, but a contemporary artist such as Whitehouse contemplates our planet as part of a much more extensive universe.



*March* is an installation, a single work made up of thirty-one small canvases, exhibited on a wall in a calendar-like block. Each image is an 11" x 14" oil on canvas painted between 9 and 11 a.m. every day of March, 2004 at the same location on the shore of Lake Michigan at Leone Park Beach in Chicago. Whitehouse considers weather and light, but also time: "I think of *March* not only as a record of the sometimes subtle and sometimes bizarre day-to-day changes of light and atmospheric conditions observed, but also as a meditation on the fluidity of natural phenomena and the passage of time."<sup>7</sup> Each of the paintings is a kind of meditation on change and the passing of time. Natural phenomena, like the waves beating upon the shore, recall the earth's rotation, the gravitational pull of the moon, and the fact that the water is never the same from one second to another, much less from one day to the next. The calendar-like presentation also reinforces the idea of time passing.

Whitehouse's fascination with the horizon line in this installation, that place where sky meets water, was inspired in part by the Rothko paintings he saw at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.<sup>8</sup> Rothko's late works are simplified in their compositions and suggest the vastness of the universe. For Whitehouse, they propose the concept of the sublime in nature, a quality of transcendence.<sup>9</sup> *March* also pays homage to the kind of studies of weather and atmosphere and place for which Constable is so well known. Some might argue that such preoccupations seem irrelevant in the modern world, but in fact, it can be argued that Whitehouse's approach to the subject is extremely contemporary and highly relevant to a planet in environmental distress and to a world in which global poverty, disease, and warfare play on the news twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

A second major installation in this exhibition, *Watch over Central Park*, is a single work composed of forty-eight *plein air* paintings of the light of the sky observed through

two small gaps in a window view of the park over a twenty-four hour period on August 16, 2006. Central Park, one of the premier parks designed to bring green into the city, and essentially initiating the *City Beautiful* movement in the United States, relates to *March* in that it too is a kind of *rus in urbe* setting.<sup>10</sup> Whitehouse painted these precise, much more abstract works on the hour, looking both east and west from a position at the south end of Central Park.

He designed the installation so that all of the five-inch square paintings hang on the wall in two dial-like forms with those on the left depicting western light, those on the right eastern light. Each dial therefore records the light transitions of a twenty-four hour period directly correlated to a particular coordinate of sky. The artist explains, "The proximity of the dials — and the fact that the day/night cycles are flipped — (midnight is located at the bottom of the western dial and at the top of the eastern dial) is intended to resonate with infinity symbols and ideas of continuity."<sup>11</sup>

Even in the technical installation of the work Whitehouse considers his theme — the forces of nature. He hangs the paintings on the wall with magnets, commenting, "This is a response to the fact that the light observed on that day in Central Park is in part a function of the larger gravitational forces that hold the park in relation to the sun."<sup>12</sup> Also, the axis of each dial tips back slightly, the left dial to the left and the right dial to the right, which, according to the artist, mirrors both the axis of the earth and the angle of sight in relation to the horizontal orientation of human eyes.<sup>13</sup> He is fascinated by the forces of nature, both that of magnetism and of gravitational pull.

Additionally, Whitehouse has designed the paintings as a function of binocular vision as opposed to the way a single lens camera would see the scene. In that sense, the installation is like the stereoscopic photographs so popular in the nineteenth century, especially for landscape images, in

**OPPOSITE***March*, 2004

Oil on thirty-one 11" x 14" canvases

**RIGHT***Revolution: North Bar Lake*, 2006Digital video presented in real time,  
24 hours

which the viewer would see a more three-dimensional image by observing two images made into one through a stereoscope. Whitehouse deconstructs photography with the two larger sections or "dials," now each made up of smaller individual parts.

*Northbar Lake* and *Central Park*, acting as movements of a larger symphony, are high-definition digital videos that make up part of the bigger body of work, *Revolution*. They were shot and meant to be viewed in real time, recording every movement, change of light, weather and mood that takes place at a particular location in a twenty-four hour period, or one revolution of the planet. Sixty-five inch Panasonic plasma monitors display them in real time. The artist sees the screens as "living canvases" and the videos themselves as "digital paintings." He views these works as meditations on change and time.<sup>14</sup>

Whitehouse grew up in the film world. His father is a now-retired British film director; however, the artist finds that he came to digital video not from the world of film-making but entirely from a painter's viewpoint. He states, "*Revolution* comes out of my fifteen-year commitment to authentic *plein air* experience and represents a new effort to account for the fleeting and transitional qualities of that experience."<sup>15</sup> He is now making videos as stand-alone works of art with twenty-four hours of unbroken video in high definition. Every second is recorded; every shift of light, every moment that occurs within the composition is captured.<sup>16</sup> These works share the interest in atmospheric quality and light and weather changes with the paintings. They are clearly all by the same hand.

Although all of Whitehouse's works refer to the landscape painting and literary traditions that have such an important history in both England and the United States, they represent a fresh view of it. This may be in part because as an Englishman depicting uniquely American sites he brings an outsider's eye to the scene. However, it is just as likely that it is because he is of the twenty-first century with all of its conflicts between technology, industry, and nature. Whitehouse lives in an urban area but appreciates nature; he spends the entire twenty-four hours on location and he



is drawn to the land in his travels. His work is not literal or narrative, yet it does address our anxiety about our planet and our wonder at its beauty and its place in the cosmos. We are participants of the Hubble telescope and the space shuttle, of Katrina and 9/11. Whitehouse has found a way to examine the American landscape that is current without being literal, that is beautiful without being cloying.

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**Notes**

- 1 It is with great joy that I write about Ben Whitehouse's art as I have written about or delivered papers on the abstract landscapes of Augustus Vincent Tack, the pastels of Arthur Dove, the work of Tobi Kahn and Kira Lynn Harris, all artists interested in the landscape, in sublimity, and to some degree, in spirituality in art.
- 2 Whitehouse's sophisticated and smooth surfaces with their attention to light and water also recall the work of Hudson River Valley artist John Frederick Kensett.
- 3 Discussion with Ben Whitehouse at the DCCA on 1/23/07.
- 4 Notes by the artist contained in an email to the author, 5/31/2007.
- 5 Notes by the artist on *September* contained in an email to the author, 5/31/2007.
- 6 Discussion with Ben Whitehouse at the DCCA on 1/23/07.
- 7 Notes by the artist on *March* contained in an email to the author, 5/31/2007.
- 8 Discussion with Ben Whitehouse at the DCCA on 1/23/07.
- 9 Discussion with Ben Whitehouse at the DCCA on 1/23/07.
- 10 Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park in 1858. They imagined the park to be a place where people of all social and ethnic backgrounds could come together, and that has certainly happened as the park has 25 million visitors annually. The land was originally quite rocky with quite a bit of swampland too. Today, the park has more than 26,000 trees, 58 miles of scenic pathways, and nearly 9,000 benches on 843 acres. <http://www.centralparknyc.org/cphistory>
- 11 Notes by the artist on *Watch over Central Park* contained in an email to the author, 5/31/2007.
- 12 Notes by the artist on *Watch over Central Park* contained in an email to the author, 5/31/2007.
- 13 Notes by the artist on *Watch over Central Park* contained in an email to the author, 5/31/2007.
- 14 Much of this information is also available on the artist's web site: <http://www.whitehousestudio.com/revolution/about.html>
- 15 Notes by the artist on *Revolution* contained in an email to the author, 5/31/2007.
- 16 Panasonic has generously lent the large plasma screens for this installation.

*September*, 2002

Oil on canvas, 56" x 69"