



Terry Winters

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

The Mobius Mind

Remember

Remember how, when you were young, you'd lie on your back, look at the stars and be amazed by the enormity of it all? Remember how you'd wonder if we're alone or what other beings would be like? Remember the way it made you feel? Remember how it made you ask *big* questions about things? It was expansive. It was weird. It was wild.

The paintings of Terry Winters get you going in similar ways. They make you know more than you know. Winters' work gives you a window through which to ruminate about things like *the inner life of paint, the secret life of color, the lives of a painting, the metabolic rate of line, the biogenetics of painted form.*

Accidents Will Happen

Big mistake when looking at a Winters painting: It is *not* a picture of anything. But neither is it a picture of nothing. Winters runs a delicate mental and visual cusp between thinking and seeing, figure and ground, abstraction and representation. Sound tricky? It is. He risks a lot in his work, including being taken for a *formalist*, which he is not. In some cases, you think you know what this shape is – a root or a fetus perhaps – while in other cases you think you can't know. The best advice I can think of is forget terms. Relax reason and look at the work. Let it unfurl.

Winters' paintings hover just outside of language, in a realm where for a brief instant you think you know, if not the meaning of it all, then the *feeling*. His work can produce that same welling-up inexplicableness, that ecstatic mystery, that stargazing does. Sometimes in front of a Winters painting you think you catch a glimpse of *life* – a flash of "maybe this is what paint *is*, how it acts." How does he do this?

Chops

Chops is the short answer. Winters is one of the best painters around. And he is, I think, the best wet-on-wet painter anywhere. Winters paints liquid, diaphanous washes over complex, lucid grounds and thickly brushed-on areas of succulent, resonant paint – built up and broken down until he arrives at these complicated, self-sustaining, symbiotic



Conjugation, 1986, oil on linen, 85" x 110", collection PaineWebber Group Inc., New York, N.Y.

relationships between figure and ground, shape and space, light and line, painted form and *living thing*. Terry Winters' paintings become places, space becomes form and form becomes life.

In the Beginning

It's almost as if that which is *alive* in us recognizes and connects with that which is *alive* in the paintings. This is that

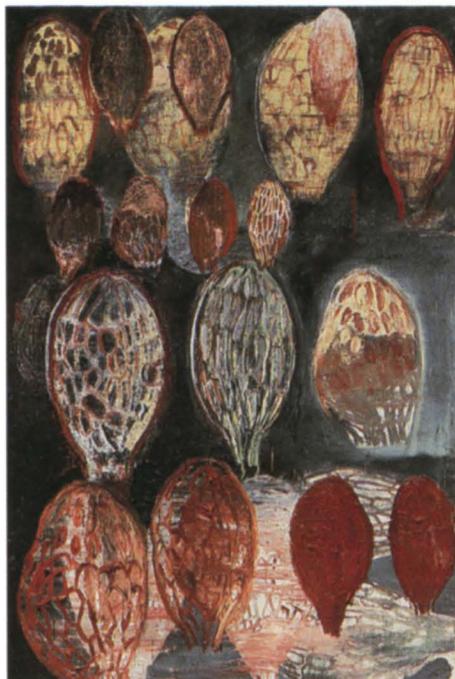
moving experience I referred to earlier – that wide-open wonder you get beneath the night sky. A Winters painting fully engages you, quietly, slowly and with a singular formal and emotional presence. A Winters painting is like a living, mutating cross section of itself. Everything is available. Nothing is hidden.

Separation Anxiety

His canvases are sensuous and saturated; the paint is viscous, mucousy, incompletely complete. There is a miasmatic soupiness to Winters' grounds – something vaguely *reproductive* about them, something very sexual. You get the feeling that if life began in swampy bogs near the equator or in volcanic pools, then the birth of form – aesthetic form – begins in grounds like these.

Ground Work

Let's talk grounds for a moment. Who painted the best grounds in the last 100 years? Ensor? Miró? Gorky? Maybe Klee? Rothko? Winters has to be added to this list, at least in this category. In a way, Winters *physicalizes* what Miró alluded to in the *Constellations* – those amazing works on paper made at the beginning of World War II. Miró never really followed up on these grounds, until maybe the very end. Winters does. These sexy, tactile, generative grounds seem to fulminate, burble, give off warmth and an



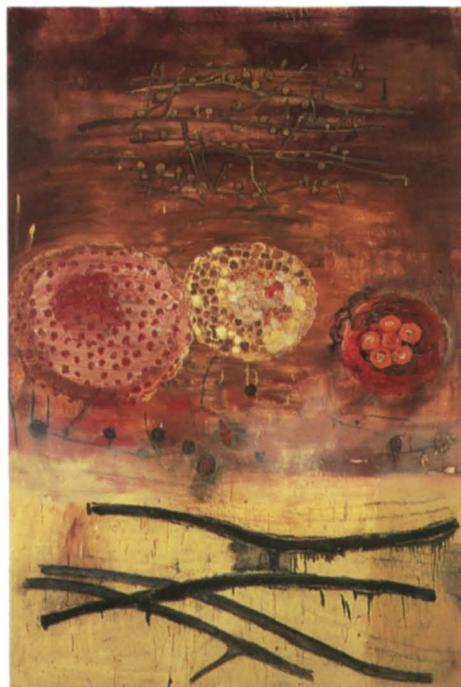
Lumen, 1984, oil on linen, 101" x 68", Sonnabend Collection, New York, N.Y.



The Psychological Corporation, 1990, oil on linen, 96" x 132", collection The Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.

aphrodisiacal wisp of painterly pollen. They waver and pulsate, ebb and flow. In short, they are tangible, palpable *places* – sap maybe – grounds that finally become figures or subject or object. Call it what you will, but “background” or “backdrop” no longer.

There is no master plan to a Winters painting, just as there was no master plan to how life unfolded. Still, the paintings seem logical, or at least you can follow how this, say, shape might co-exist or be reliant on this shape, in this space, in this way. Every brush stroke in a Winters painting serves two purposes. One is to elaborate form. The other – and this is where the phenomenological aspect of his work quickens – is to leave a record of the life of paint. This is *more* than process. It’s a reflection or an echo of, if not the molecular nature of paint (for that would be too illustrative for Winters and would fall into the “Big Mistake” category), then the life cycle or



Point, 1985, oil on linen, 102" x 69", courtesy private collection, New York, N.Y.

the habits of it. What you are seeing is always present. How it was created is all there. The sequential application of paint projects the viewer into a world where inner and outer, tiny and gargantuan turn in and merge with one another. I can think of no other painter who plays with our imagination of space and form more. Hence, the *Möbius mind* of Terry Winters – logical and magical, preposterous and true.

All Over

But for all their *realness*, a Winters painting is altogether unreal and very cartoony. There is no natural light in the work. What light there is seems self-generated or internal, almost phosphorescent. That doesn’t mean his paintings glow – they don’t – but they do have an inner light that seems driven by their inner *life*. There is no real perspective in his work either – no illusion. The paintings, at once so special and intriguing,



1 of 5, oil on canvas,
48" x 65", courtesy
Sonnabend Gallery,
New York, N.Y.

are about just being paintings. What a relief in a time when art wants to be sociology, philosophy or theory to find an artist who wants art to be art for what it is – and it alone – can be.

Finally, it might be interesting to say a word or two about recent developments in his work. Winters is well-known. He's had all the big shows – a traveling U.S. retrospective, shows in museums all over Europe. But Winters has continued to evolve, and lately, he's stepped this evolution up a notch. Starting in about 1989, a new level of complexity entered his work so that by 1993, with paintings like *1 of 5* and *2 of 5* (nice titles), the fields in his work are totally *integrated*. *All Over* is not a new idea in art. Since Jackson Pollack and the Abstract Expressionists, it's been a *Holy Grail*. While it would be fair to say that in his recent work Winters has arrived at an all-overness, this all-overness is uniquely his own. Winters has put his own personal and somewhat amazing touch on this oft-used idea.

The kind of all-overness I'm thinking about has something in common with Pollack (the lack of separation mentioned earlier), but it has something else as well – something almost not human (where Pollack was always "Man

Making Art," Winters is in the grip of something less authoritative and ultimate). No, the all-overness I'm thinking about might be called *bive-mind* all-overness. What is *bive-mind*? It is a sort of mass organism. It's difficult to imagine a single ant. The ant's individuality, such as it is, is group, interconnected and interdependent. Similarly, every part of a Winters painting, especially these recent works, is a part of every other part, dependent on every other part, as opposed to singular. *Hive-mind* communicates through endless information passing. Likewise, in Winters' networks, the colors, composition and ganglia shapes seem to be interrelated and share bits of *essence* about the whole. In other words, where in, say, an ant hill, the whole is greater than the parts but every bit reliant on those parts down to the last ant, a Winters painting is a mass organism, a whole greater than its parts, with each one of its parts an integral bit that carries within it an imprint not only of its function, but also of the whole.

In this way, Winters' work has a kind of consciousness that is at once perplexing and miraculous. The average life of an ant is about one month, but the hill can last – depending on the weather – 60 years. In other words, the next time

you look at an ant hill, you're seeing the product of 600 generations. That would mean an ant hill is, in human years, 1,500 years old. Why all of this bio-gobbeldygook? Who knows? It's just the frame of mind Winters' work puts us in. His *bive-mind* all-overness has this same implacable timelessness and seeming facelessness.

These last two works feel like bodies and whole worlds. They seem like what Winters meant when he used the phrase "the transfiguration of the imagination." It's a nice phrase, catchy. The implications of this for Winters are fecund. The networks that he now paints are totally charged, border-to-border, edge-to-edge works. They suggest that Winters is a *visionary* artist whose vision is expanding and projecting far from that figure gazing up at the stars, that he is beginning to probe something totally unknowable, yet remarkably resonant.

Jerry Saltz, art critic
New York, N.Y.

cover: *Pitch Lake*, 1985, oil on linen,
90" x 121", collection Eli and
Edythe L. Broad, Santa Monica, Calif.

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