

Lane Twitchell: In the American Grain

The pure products of America go crazy. So wrote William Carlos Williams in his Emergency Broadcast System warning of a poem *To Elsie*. A later prose book, the wildly unconventional history *In the American Grain*, provided an explanation of the brutal whys and wherefores: from Eric the Red (father of Leif Ericsson, discoverer of the American continent before Columbus) to Sir Walter Raleigh through to “Honest Abe” Lincoln, Williams laid out the bloody tracks of a sweeping cultural indictment. “What has been morally, aesthetically worthwhile in America,” the poet said—with one eye peeled on centuries of Puritan and industrial butchery—“has rested upon peculiar and discoverable ground.”

For artist Lane Twitchell, Williams’ modern-day spiritual heir, America’s current ethically bankrupt, economically compromised, bat-shit nature takes on the sharply outlined contours of an exploded Lionel train. Scissored from the whole cloth of America’s topography—like other parts of the national fabric, such as shopping, the movies and alienation, it comes in alternately somber and acid colors—Twitchell’s kaleidoscopic landscapes combine the personal and the cosmological with big-picture historical narratives. That these civic-minded stories acquire greater prominence in Twitchell’s latest pictures is plainly evident. “Art, like morality,” said G.K. Chesterton, “consists in drawing a line somewhere.” That goes double for an artist whose metier today consists of clinically slicing out the dark heart of a culture in crisis.

Like most people but surprisingly few artists, Twitchell knows that the pure products of America have outdone themselves recently. More abstracted, mercenary and icily savage than their predecessors, the latter day doings of today’s politicians, bankers, hedge-fund gamblers and status-quo cheerleaders echo Williams’ original 1922 condemnations with what can justly be called robber-baron industry: “[America] has become ‘the most lawless country in the civilized world’... Today it is a generation of gross know-nothingism... a generation universally eager to barter permanent values (the hope of an aristocracy) in return for opportunist material advantages, a generation hating those whom it obeys.” For present-day parallels, consider merely the canyon-like divide opened up between black and white, the loony alt-right and the managerial left, rich and poor, not to mention America’s income inequality and cultural insecurity as spun by Donald Trump’s nationalistic jingoism.

In response to this new set of artistic obligations, Lane Twitchell has turned his folk art-inspired practice toward crafting Rorschach Tests from the psychic turmoil bubbling beneath the communal parietal bone. Like the Freudian mind or some ancient city—take Imperial Rome, as a best example—Twitchell’s cut paper compositions accrue, detail upon careful detail, into a portrait of the collective unconscious as a teeming image cauldron, a type of tenement housing for the visible. Just as in history (and the fretting brainpan), it can get crowded in there: the Coliseum shares bedroom space with the *autostrada*, and the church steeple rises by the gas station sign. Also, as in psychoanalysis there is no real forgetting—old triumphs sit alongside current crises and past and present coexist. As a result, every black silhouette and saturated highlight Twitchell puts down leaves a trace as associatively symbolic as Halley’s Comet.

Thus, Twitchell’s newest picture windows wind up doing significantly greater heavy lifting than many of their folksier predecessors: they function as eye-popping aides for critical

reflection—as well as, it should be said, full-bore retinal enjoyment—but also like dream catchers of the sort Carl Jung referred to when he spoke of certain concentric diagrams as “representations of the unconscious self.” Visually fulsome, shallow-bottomed takes on stereoscopic vision, Twitchell’s dynamic tangles of patterns weave their stencilled forms into recursive tessellations. These, in turn, resemble one of our oldest forms of sacred art: the mandala. To take a page from Bruce Nauman’s document on the gifts of circularity (see “Clown Torture”), Twitchell peats and repeats from his dictionary of motifs of the national landscape—i.e., his proliferations of brick siding and tract housing—in order to summon up both America’s bathos and tragedy in equal micro and macroscopic measure.

Symmetry and, its opposite, chaos, appear—among other indicators of Manifest Destiny having reached a dead end—as cornices, lampposts, chain-link fencing and blank road signs. Anarchic snippets of architectural Americana are marshalled into robust compositional sense. But besides expanding his formal vocabulary, what Twitchell does with single works like “Century’s End” (an image of a universe of suburban details exploding outward from a lone centripetal figure) also proves akin to picturing the current zeitgeist, our common psyche, in all its roiling, unstable glory. One way to read a work like “Milk and the Honey Cave” becomes the way an analyst picks apart a dream. The artist’s portrait of the culture turns into a self-portrait, with Twitchell neurotically spilling his guts onto history’s couch. No wonder we connect to these works then. With “Century’s End” and other dazzling views of our glaring, unresolved crises—like “Glut Mandala #1,” “Glut Mandala #2” and “Glut Mandala #3”—Twitchell’s pictures contain the bottled up, anxious energy of as many as 318 million citizen-consumers.

Other recent works by this quintessentially American artist—he was raised Midwestern *and* Mormon, which as Harold Bloom once said is “the American Religion”—allegorize the distorting effects of viewing the world through digital glasses and our nearly theocratic dependence on technology (“Buddha Screen”), as well as the prodigal return of the moneyed and cultured classes to America’s cities (“The Birds”). As with the fine print in contracts, with Twitchell the devil is always in the details. Not unlike stained glass murals—in which the artist has previously worked—his building blocks add up to all-over compositions whose final sense appear, time and again, to genuinely hang in the balance. That they pull back from the brink and right themselves every time—notably, in the seemingly infinite expansion of “The 101”—speaks volumes about Twitchell’s insistently renewable search for a worldview, however tenuous or situational.

More Tolstoy than Chekhov in their capaciousness, and trending ever more towards Hieronymous Bosch in the Garden of Earthly Delights department, Twitchell’s latest raft of works enact paradises lost and modern-day morality tales told through a signature method that can accurately be said to be, in a phrase, highly promiscuous in its associations. A way to craft dazzling, free flowing and biting works from an image bank common to most Americans (and to nearly all consumers of American culture), Twitchell’s practice proves the ultimate aesthetic-critical pure product analogy. Broad but meticulously miniature, it comes up both cutting Williams Carlos Williams and July 4th fireworks where it counts. Whoever said politics and eye-candy can’t go hand in hand?

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