

1998

Carol Haerer: The White Paintings

Daniel A. Siedell

Curator at Sheldon Museum of Art

Charles C. Eldredge

Hall Distinguished Professor of American Art, University of Kansas

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Siedell, Daniel A. and Eldredge, Charles C., "Carol Haerer: The White Paintings" (1998). *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications*. 15.

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S H E L D O N

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY AND SCULPTURE GARDEN



CAROL HAERER
THE WHITE PAINTINGS
April 7 - June 14, 1998

CAROL HAERER

THE WHITE PAINTINGS

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is pleased to present *Sheldon Solo: Carol Haerer, The White Paintings*, an exhibition featuring Carol Haerer's white paintings of the mid to late 1960s. This exhibition is the most recent installment of the "Sheldon Solo" exhibition series, a series established in 1988 to feature the work of important American artists within the context of the Sheldon Gallery's nationally recognized collection of 20th-century American Art.

A midwestern native who attended Doane College and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Carol Haerer studied in Paris on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1955, and after receiving an M.F.A. from the University of California-Berkeley, she moved to New York. It was in New York where she began to paint intensely subtle white paintings which received considerable critical attention in the late sixties, in part because they seemed to offer a way out of what was perceived by many in the artworld to be the straightjacket of Minimalism. But the critical attention they received in the sixties has rarely been noted by art historians, who have tended to evaluate painting or sculpture from this period by the theoretical standards of Minimalism. But as "minimal" as Haerer's paintings appear at first blush, they are images, even atmospheres, but not "objects." This exhibition offers an opportunity for our audience actually "to experience" these paintings as they were intended to be viewed, as an aesthetic environment.

We would like to thank Dr. Charles Eldredge, Hall Distinguished Professor of American Art at the University of Kansas and former Director of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, DC for writing the essay for this publication.

Daniel A. Siedell
Curator



LILITH, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 97 x 101 in.



Carol Haerer in 1974

Blanching Aegean summer light. The lithic darkness of Machu Picchu. Wide skies and empty spaces of the Platte. The blonde palette of an Egyptian desert. Hot tints of the Mexican tropics. Such impressions have helped shape the eye and art of Carol Haerer.

This daughter of the American Middle West, reared in Kansas and Nebraska, has from there roamed widely, in transits that have left their mark on her paintings. Not that the canvases are mementos of travel, or portraits of place: rather, the comings and goings, and the periods of long habitation have over time helped shape an elegant art that can at once be redolent of locale, yet universal in its evocation and appeal.

Haerer admits to various inspirations for her imagery. She is, of course, attentive to other artists' works, both of her own time and place, and others far afield: from Persian miniatures to tantric designs, the Italian primitives to Navajo sand paintings, Mayan temples to Gothic cathedrals. But she discovers inspiration elsewhere as well, as in the physical pleasure of arm and hand moving over paper or canvas; in the strains of music, and the rhythms of nature; and the close observation of her environs, or, as she once put it, "from reflections on the lake."¹

This attention to her natural environs appeared in childhood and persisted through Haerer's school years. She remembers with special fondness her discovery of writings by the Nebraska naturalist-and-anthropologist Loren Eiseley, whose poems and essays on the Platte, the Nebraska plains, and their bird

and animal life "became part of my being." Over the decades, this attention has been well rewarded, providing some of the most subtle yet profound sources for her painting. This is not to imply that she is a landscapist in any conventional sense of the term. Far from it: yet, the forms and forces of nature infuse her abstract imagery, providing it with its chromatic range, its malleable shapes, and ultimately its significance. Critics have likened the process to that by which Georgia O'Keeffe gave visual expression to her subjective response to the American Southwest, ultimately "transform[ing] earth, wind, and sky into form, line and color."² In Haerer's canvases, nature is likewise dissolved into painterly abstractions.

Sometimes she finds herself "musing about places which have given me the most energy -- Ranchos de Taos, Mykonos (Greece), Block Island, R.I.: all places which are dry and dominated by sky." So too is the landscape of her native Midwest, which she credits with "an influence on the space and structure in my paintings." Recognition of this environmental source came belatedly, however. "I realized this only recently," the artist admitted in 1976, after the White Paintings were finished. Before then, Haerer had painted in Paris for two years (1954-56); returned to graduate studies in art at Berkeley (1957-58); and lived in New York City, where she has maintained a presence since 1958. But, as the esteemed Eiseley noted, New York "is not on the whole, the best place to enjoy the downright miraculous nature of the planet."³ In 1969, Haerer and her husband moved to Hoosick Falls in upstate New York, near teaching jobs at Bennington College, and there she has lived and worked since.

After a formative period in Paris, Haerer's work was dramatically affected by a year (1956-57) spent painting in Patzcuaro, Mexico, during which she delighted in newly intense colors, inspired by the rich hues of land and vegetation struck by a tropical sun. The response to environment changed with her move to

the San Francisco Bay area, where she sought to capture the foggy climate with more vaporous forms. Travels in the early 1960s took her back to Europe. In Greece she turned her attention to rock and land motifs, their forms rendered in high-keyed color under an intense, unrelieved light, a landscape vision reflective of then-current investigations into color vibrations and optical effects.

The preoccupation with color and light was well established by the mid-1960s when her series of White Paintings began. After the chromatic intensities of her Mexican and Grecian works, she abruptly turned to whiteness, an investigation more extreme than at any previous point in her career. The whitening was the product of memory as well as observation, of intellect as well as reflection. "My 'white' paintings of 1965-76," Haerer later recalled, "subconsciously had their source in the marvelous huge sky of the Nebraska plains." Childhood recollections of North Platte were rekindled; reminiscence of cottonwood fuzz blown into pale drifts, of drives through the sand hills, "watching the tumble-weeds, and being always conscious of the *big sky*." The sentiment recalls that of her fellow Nebraskan, Willa Cather, who once wrote: "Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world, but here the earth was the floor of the sky. The landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in, was the sky, the sky!"⁴ What emerged from Haerer's memories, however, were not conventional views of sky or land; rather, in the White Paintings, place and memory were rendered obliquely, through the vaporous emptiness of whitened patterns evocative of the emptiness of the "*big sky*."

In modernism's colorful adventure, white has long occupied a special position. James Whistler's various Symphonies in White announced a new aesthetic in the nineteenth century; subsequently, Kasimir Malevich's Suprematist experiments with White on White assured him a secure position in

FIRST WHITE PAINTING, 1966, oil on canvas, 81 x 68 in.



the history of twentieth-century modernism. Wassily Kandinsky, in his influential color theory, first published in 1912, acknowledged white's familiar associations with "joy and spotless purity," yet he attributed more complex symbolic meanings to it: "white, although often considered as *no color*...is a symbol of a world from which all colors as material attributes have disappeared.... [It] acts upon our psyche as a great, absolute silence, like the pauses in music that temporarily break the melody. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age."⁵ Herman Melville likewise found in white a peculiar force, "a dumb blankness, full of meaning," at once "the most meaning symbol of

spiritual things,...and yet...the most appalling to mankind."⁶

In 1951, when Robert Rauschenberg startled viewers with his all-white canvases, he professed no such metaphysical interests. His radical elimination of subject, color and form seemed an artistic purgative, an experiment that, as Carter Ratcliff wrote, "cleared the decks for experience, for the clutter of images which led soon to the combine paintings."⁷ However, to John Cage, Rauschenberg's friend and admirer, his white paintings were memorable not for their blankness, but for the way they "caught whatever fell on them"⁸: color, shadow, light -- or ideas. He admired their variability, their openness to the changing effects of the environment.

The pale canvases on which

Haerer embarked in the mid-1960s might, for an engaged viewer, similarly be susceptible to changing optical effects, depending on viewing duration, the distance from the work, and the quality of ambient light, as suggested by the painting entitled, *For Morning, Afternoon and Evening Light*. However, unlike Rauschenberg's *tabulae rasae*, Haerer's works contained that with which their maker had invested them. Her White Paintings conveyed those peculiarities of light and color that were the product of her formative environment, one which was specific to place and experience, and significant to their maker.

Rauschenberg's white paintings spawned many other inventions of similar hue in the ensuing decades, formal and intellectual exercises by artists of various origin. Many of them professed solely a formal or intellectual involvement with white, eschewing any mystical or spiritual connotations with which earlier artists and theoreticians might have endowed it. Such artists represent one of the three camps into which Lucy Lippard divided monochromists of the 1960s: "the evocative, romantic or mystical; the formally rejective and wholly non-associative; and the gesture of defiance, absolutism or comment."⁹ Among the romantics, the "lyrical abstractionists" were heralded in the late 1960s for their break with hard-edged geometric designs, moving instead toward more lyrical and sensuous abstractions in which colors were softer and more vibrant. Of these, none used colors paler than Haerer in her White Paintings, one of which, *Abiquiu*, was included in Larry Aldrich's *Art in America* article that announced and championed the movement.¹⁰

Abiquiu, 1968-69, was the first shaped canvas of Haerer's series, previous examples had conformed to the more conventional rectangular format, although some reached unconventional dimensions, some eventually covering entire walls. *Abiquiu* was inspired by western spaces—although New Mexico's, not Nebraska's—the product of the artist's stay in

Ranchos de Taos during the summer of 1968. The artist fondly recalled her morning ritual of walking to a nearby rise from which she "gazed out into that special land and sky space." In the dry, far distance, the Pedernal peak near Abiquiu was visible, a landmark made familiar by Georgia O'Keeffe's many renditions of it and one which made Haerer think of her legendary predecessor in that storied land. In New Mexico Haerer discovered a landscape "filled with the sky," and in that vast sweep, she "tried to open my eyes as wide as possible to let in as much light as possible and one thing I found was this [semicircular] shape -- my field of vision." At the lower corners, the stretcher is bent downward, to suggest the encompassing sweep of space and light captured in the canvas; the triangular peak at the center — a stylized Pedernal? or maybe just the bridge of the nose interrupting the sweep of vision? — leads the eye into the hazy distance which, upon examination, reveals itself as not white at all, but filled with color, subtly overlaid with whites. The effect is of her vibrant Mexican foliate subjects viewed through pale scrims, their chromatic brilliance submerged but intact. After working on the White Paintings for more than a decade, Haerer became so used to this effect of color within white that to her these subtle paintings "looked

as gaudy as Woolworth's."

The semicircular field of vision encompassed in *Abiquiu* was repeated in other shaped canvases of the series, works which likewise draw inspiration from light and environment, such as *High Noon*. In some instances, the arc balloons yet further to fill an irregular circle that is truncated at the bottom edge. Others are shaped like Persian arches, with a post-and-lintel configuration within; or like ancient Chinese fans (*Lilith*), which became one of Haerer's favorite forms and was repeated in many versions and sizes; or an open circle buttressed on each side, an inverted triangle, or a ziggurat. "I never know until the painting has progressed for a few weeks; then the imagery begins to be felt, to be visible. This tenuous edge of visibility is of essence to the finished painting."

Whatever the format, the spaciousness of these canvases, and their sheer size, aptly capture a sense of light and space. In trying to describe their chromatic effect, commentators have resorted to various analogies with other artists' works. To one, the darker hues "dissolve like Tiepolo clouds" and the mottled colors looked "like frostbitten Boucher skin"; to another, the elusiveness of the color was reminiscent of Joseph Turner's seascapes.¹¹

Haerer has explained her technique and her objectiveness in other terms: "Each painting has countless layers of thin paint, alternating pale color and white; when looking at a painting, one's eyes penetrate one layer after

INDAN. 1970. acrylic on canvas. 74 x 74 in.



another," only slowly revealing their complexity over time. The incorporation of time and the changes that are revealed with the duration of looking were novel considerations, which led to the artist's explanation: "Their subject is seeing/vision."¹² "I knew when a painting was finished," she has said, "when it seemed impossible to tell if the color was on one's own eyeballs, floating in the air, or behind the picture plane."

The puzzling effects of color-in-white are enhanced in her most recent white series by the use of transparent supports. Painted on clear plastic panels rather than canvas, the transparency which was simulated in the earlier canvases now becomes actual. Working on the both sides of the glass, she achieves literal (albeit shallow) dimension in these works, giving them a greater sense of depth.

In the intervening years Haerer had produced series of dark paintings and drawings which she described as "the subterranean side of the white paintings. They speak of deep forces under the earth that rumble, expand, and push, of the earth's energy which causes great forests to grow and lava to burst forth." These images draw their inspiration from sources as diverse as the late, dark paintings of Goya, another of the objects of her admiration, and memories of blackened lava fields in Hawaii. In these works,



LILEM I, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 60 1/2 x 60 1/2 in.

Haerer said she was trying to create images "with the richness of Rembrandt and the freshness of Matisse."

After the experience of the dark paintings' weighty, "geological" forms, the airy forms of the most recent white works seem to have greater density than those of earlier date; separate shapes are more legible than in the White Paintings of the 1960s and '70s. Yet the White Paintings of the 1990s share with their predecessors many of the same concerns. The artist seemingly has come full circle to the issues of vision and light that have preoccupied her over a long and inventive career.

Charles C. Eldredge
*Hall Distinguished Professor
of American Art*
University of Kansas

1 Interview with Gene Baro, in *Carol Haerer: Recent Work* (Bennington, Ver: Usdan Gallery, Bennington College, 1978), n.p. Unless otherwise noted (as here), all statements by the artist are taken from her unpublished writings, or from correspondence and conversations with the author (1971-1997).

2 Corinna Smith, "Carol Haerer," *Arts Magazine*, 55 (May 1981): 2.

3 Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 165.

4 Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Knopf, 1927), p. 235. Here, Cather was speaking specifically of the arid Navajo country of the Southwest, but her words seem equally apt to the plains country of her native Nebraska.

5 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912; New York: George Wittenborn, 1947), pp. 59-60.

6 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), pp. 259, 263.

7 Carter Ratcliff, "Mostly Monochrome," *Art in America* 69 (Apr 1981): 117.

8 John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," *Metro* 2 (1961): 43.

9 Lucy R. Lippard, "The Silent Art," *Art in America* 55 (Jan-Feb 1967): 58.

10 Larry Aldrich, "Young Lyrical Painters," *Art in America* 57 (Nov-Dec 1969): 104.

11 Lizzie Borden, review, *Artforum* 10 (Jan 1972): 89; Phyllis Derfner, review, *Art International* 18 (Jan 1974): 20.

12 Carol Haerer, Hoosick Falls, N.Y., to Linda Shearer, Williams College Museum of Art, January 3, 1993.

Checklist

1. FIRST WHITE PAINTING
1966, oil on canvas
81 x 68 in.
Collection of the artist
2. ABIQUIU
1968-69, acrylic on canvas
62 x 110 in.
Collection of the Spencer Museum
of Art
3. FOR MORNING, AFTERNOON
AND EVENING LIGHT
1969, acrylic on canvas
89 x 95 in.
Collection of the artist
4. HIGH NOON
1969, acrylic on canvas
20 1/4 x 30 1/2 in.
Collection of the artist
5. UNTITLED
1969, acrylic on canvas
20 1/4 x 30 1/2 in.
Courtesy of the Mitchell Algu
Gallery, New York
6. INDAN
1970, acrylic on canvas
74 x 74 in.
Collection of the artist
7. SMALL YELLOW SQUARE
1973, acrylic on canvas
30 x 30 1/2 in.
Collection of the artist
8. LILITH
1973, acrylic on canvas
97 x 101 in.
Collection of the artist
9. LILEM I
1974, acrylic on canvas
60 1/2 x 60 1/2 in.
Collection of the artist
10. WHERE TO BEGIN
1995, acrylic sheet
59 1/4 x 28 1/4 in.
Collection of the artist
11. GLACIAL TWIST
1996, acrylic sheet
60 x 34 in.
Collection of the artist

On the cover: FOR MORNING,
AFTERNOON AND EVENING LIGHT
1969, acrylic on canvas, 89 x 95 in.



GLACIAL TWIST, 1996, acrylic sheet, 60 x 34 in.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one-person exhibitions by nationally-recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth-century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who has contributed to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

Financial support for "*Sheldon Solo: Carol Haerer, The White Paintings*" has been generously provided by the Richard Florsheim Art Fund of Tampa, Florida. The Sheldon Solo series is supported by the Nebraska Art Association, a nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska through educational and cultural enrichment opportunities. Nebraska Art Association programs are supported in part by a Basic Support Grant from the Nebraska Arts Council, a State agency.



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MEMORIAL ART GALLERY & SCULPTURE GARDEN
12th and R Street University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 68588-0300
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