

## Diana Copperwhite's Paintings: Reality, Virtual Reality, and Abstraction

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Diana Copperwhite makes big bold oil paintings that excite and stir our twenty-first-century perceptions. Her compelling images are both complex and energetic. She is never at a loss for the impulse to paint, though she is coy about revealing her concerns, often throwing the viewer just a few clues and leaving a lot of room for the imagination. She creates an exquisite tension between abstraction and figuration or representation of any kind. She appears to tease out this tension to hold our interest, as we both take in the visual splendor of her paintings and try to fathom what they are about.

Born in Dublin in 1969, Copperwhite grew up in Limerick in the more rural Mid-West region of Ireland, with a father who taught chemistry and physics in high school, but who also painted traditional scenes. Her brother became a physicist. She earned a diploma at the Limerick School of Art and Design and then went on to the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in Dublin, where she got her BA degree. After that, she earned a Master's of Fine Arts in Barcelona, Spain, in an international program of the University of Southampton's Winchester School of Art. Thus, it's not surprising that her work looks European.

Copperwhite recalls spending plenty of time traveling about Europe, "visiting the Prado and the Louvre and looking and taking in how paintings were made. Goya, Velazquez, and Fragonard were some of my favorite old masters."<sup>1</sup> Yet when she was a student at art college in Dublin, she recalls that she "started to look more closely at American art; [Edward] Hopper, [Willem] De Kooning, [Richard] Diebenkorn and [Philip] Guston," finding "the light and forms were more important than the division between abstraction and figuration."

To me, Copperwhite recounted her early study of Hopper's most famous painting, *Nighthawks* (1942), and of being inspired to draw a café that she saw at the train station. She told how she left out the figures and found that the space "became more unstable." Her own pictorial language and style was beginning to develop, where shape and "color melt in the process of forming." From that, she explained, "I started to realize that it was the light and energy as opposed to any idea about topography that was interesting. I found myself wondering about what

else was going on that wasn't visible to the naked eye. I have always been fascinated by devices that show the usually unseen infra red light, ultra violet light, etc."

Copperwhite soon focused on paintings by Diebenkorn, who, early in his career, had taken an interest in Hopper's work. She looked at all aspects of his development, "from the early abstract pieces to the figuration, to the Ocean Park series." She also found engaging "the fluidity of de Kooning's work, his color, and his feeling of light and morphing form," especially his "milky light and confident autonomous brush marks." The "cartoon-like" images of his fellow abstract expressionist, Guston attracted her as well. But at first Copperwhite knew all these works only at second hand through reproductions that she saw in Ireland. She explained that "the added dimension of reproduction and the real thing" became "two different realities." Not until she got to see the De Kooning show at the Tate Britain in 1994, did she have her "first real exposure where the surface finally got examined."

While tactile reality turned out to be important, "that split of understanding might have been more important then," she reflected. "It opened up a third space, which was very influential in terms of my own studio practice. I drew a lot then and still do now on and off. Drawing for me is a form of visual thinking. I sometimes draw from images I took myself, as well as from stills from film." For her, these photographic compositions "create a structure" that she sometimes draws upon when beginning a painting. In the process, the paintings' compositions "start to become autonomous."

Like De Kooning, Copperwhite produces a kind of kinetic energy in her paintings. Her large canvases convey a sense of movement across the surfaces as well as in and out of space. This implied sense of movement makes the viewer think of cinema. "I love the large scale of paintings; they make me feel like a director of my own movie," said Copperwhite.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is as if the projector has had something mechanical go wrong, causing the projected image to appear blurred and indistinct-- as if the speed of the film has been augmented beyond reality. We find vibrating spectral bands have become a kind of a trademark in Copperwhite's recent large paintings, recalling that as she grew up, chemistry and physics were common topics at home.

From a more ordinary point of view, these spectral bands can be read as an upbeat reminder of a rainbow after a storm. Yet their colors are often altered beyond those visible in nature. In fact, Copperwhite believes that in her paintings she has responded to Ireland's changeable weather, which may have caused her to see the world as if she was looking through a visor into a "grey low-light vision."<sup>3</sup>

As she became aware of weather and its extremes in other regions of the world, she began to develop a lasting desire to explore light and color. She states that color is very significant for her: "Acid colors against grays and earth tones." When she chooses color, she does so without any hierarchy: "Each time it different, but white is always consistent as a way of making sure there is a lightness and tonal graduation." She uses color to create space and says that principle "overrides any other ideas about form and structure." Thus, she responds in a counter-intuitive way to the climate characteristic of Ireland, to its legendary cold, wet and gloomy weather, which is often present, even in mid-summer.

Although Ireland is better known for its literary heritage than its contributions to painting, Copperwhite is well aware of her national precursors in the visual arts. She took a particular interest in the few Irish women who made names for themselves in the visual arts during the early twentieth century. The work of three outstanding early women modernists got her attention and earned her respect: Evie Hone (1894-1955), Mainie Jellett (1897-1944), and Eileen Gray (1878-1976). Hone and Jellett met when both were studying in London, under Walter Sickert. They went on to Paris to study with André Lhote and Albert Gleizes before settling in Ireland, where they introduced cubism and other abstract art forms, and founded the avant-garde *Society of Dublin Painters*. Gray, a leading modernist architect and designer, also spent time in early-twentieth-century Paris and worked with a vocabulary of elegant geometric forms. Jellett's colorful, hard-edged geometric abstraction seems relevant to some of Copperwhite's more ambitious pictures with their notable spectral bands, which can perhaps also be linked to Hone's explorations in designing large-scale stained glass, which is animated by light. Copperwhite's distinctive painted light is as vital to her canvases as it was to the French Impressionists, but hers has a force of its own. Copperwhite, however, does say that she found these early modernist Irish

artists' works "lacking in rawness," a quality, which she sought and perceived the European modernists had.

Another, unrelated hint of Copperwhite's Irish heritage also comes out in her title for her canvas, *Shapeshifter* (2016), which evokes the stories in Celtic and other mythology, when one form transforms into another being, such as a human turning into an animal, or vice-versa. Such a metamorphosis is believed possible because of an inherent faculty of a mythological creature, divine intervention, or the use of magic spells or talismans. In this painting, there appears to be a figure on the right side (dressed in black and white) standing across from what appears to be a strange, orange four-legged animal. We can see hints that Copperwhite's imagination is working overtime.

Beyond content, Copperwhite's paintings show her very personal engagement with surface texture and reflection. Unlike many contemporary painters, who hire assistants to execute parts of their work, she is not one to allow anyone else to touch her paintings in progress, when a lot of her creativity takes place. She works by applying paint with brushes, knives, and "anything else that creates a mark." She finds her balance somewhere "between control and chaos." She describes aspects of her process as "mechanical and almost Zen-like," but the results always reveal the artist's hand at work.

Her love of texture encouraged her to travel across Europe to see the great works for herself. "I remember visits to the National Art Gallery in Dublin and looking closely at the surface of paintings, realizing that they were fragile and made by the human hand, and not as I thought, made by some mythical mechanical being," she recalled.<sup>4</sup> She has observed closely and responded to old master paintings--not so much to their subjects, but rather to their textures and to the artists' use of light and color. She credited Fragonard with influencing her own series of small heads: "I was amazed at just how loosely and free of unnecessary detail they were; also the lack of a background in the small portraits made them seem very human-made in an unstable violent era."

Copperwhite was also drawn to what she perceived as similar issues in Holbein's portraits. She recently recalled to me how she first experienced Holbein's portrait of Sir Thomas More: "I

remember thinking it looked as if the arms were painted as if he was looking at them through a device that showed infra red light-- but this isn't possible, as it's 1527, and they didn't know it even existed until 1800. This notion of color and light and interpretation fascinated me as I was viewing it through 20<sup>th</sup>-century eyes with a sense of the unseen made visible.” Copperwhite added that the color bars that she paints on her canvases might be as shaped by this perception “as much as they are by technology and screens.”

Like both Holbein and Fragonard, Copperwhite is painting the human figure. She not only paints portraits that are either rather blurred or otherwise abstracted, but she also paints full figures in complex spaces. These figures may not be very obvious, but they are present and visible in many of her large compositions. They reveal themselves when we are open to seeing more than first meets the eye. For example, we should look closely at works from 2016 such as *A Version of You*, *Singularity*, or *Depend on the Morning Sun*. In the latter, a figure in a striding posture is visible in the left foreground. This figure's head toward what Copperwhite confirms are three more figures in the right in the middle ground. Just what the setting here represents remains a mystery that Copperwhite informs me is an “obscure space....that is never solid.”

Several of her titles evoke lyrics from popular songs that she listens to on her phone while painting. Music is important to her. *Depend on the Morning Sun* quotes lyrics from a song called “True Faith,” sung by the band, “New Order,” an English rock group (formed in 1980, in their album, *Substance*, released in 1987). The words of these lyrics speak of the morning sun as “the drug that brings me near. To the childhood I lost, replaced by fear...” Asked about her choice of these words for her title, Copperwhite, reflects that they “take me back to when I was relieved when I left school as I didn't really like secondary school,” but, she notes: “art school was a revelation. I wouldn't say I had a stormy childhood. It's maybe more that it seemed difficult being Irish, as we always felt left out; we felt as if we were the underdogs.” Copperwhite's ambitious, up-beat paintings resonate with Ireland's recent economic growth and dynamic social development, and, especially, with Dublin's becoming a leading center for the tech industry. Copperwhite, too, seems to envision an optimistic future, as expressed in this song's liberating message.

Copperwhite's title of the canvas, *Singularity*, with its pale pink seated figure on the right side, brings to mind the 2005 book, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, by Ray Kurzweill, the great inventor and futurist, who advocates for the role of machines in the future of humanity and imagines "the singularity," in which technological change becomes so rapid and so vast that our bodies and brains will become one with our machines. Copperwhite, however, has not read this book. She chose the title, *Singularity*, to mean "the position or configuration of a mechanism or a machine, where the subsequent behavior cannot be predicted. . . . I was thinking about unpredictable spaces, shifting ground, people, science and technology." "*Singularity*," she points out, is also another song title by the group, "New Order."

Copperwhite's interest in technology does include the manipulation of visual imagery on computers, on scanners, and elsewhere. In 2015, she called one canvas and the entire show it was in, "A Scanner Darkly." She gave canvases from that show names such as *Trip Switch*, *Close Up*, *Double Take*, or *Eyestorm*. The latter features vertical bands of color such as those one might find on a computer screen that is not functioning properly. These other titles relate to mechanical visual reproduction and to turning off the machines used to create forms of mechanical reproduction. Her handcrafted canvases seem ironic as they call attention to growing technological change that increasingly shapes both our daily lives and our destinies. This reference to the contrast of visual and virtual reality appears to be the theme of her 2015 canvases called *Sight and Simulation* and *Divider*. The title of the latter refers to a "room divider," which she saw as dividing this canvas into an object split between "the imagined space within it and the psychological space between the people in the composition." According to Copperwhite, "Reality would yield to virtual reality and our assisted intelligence would become much more powerful than ordinary human intelligence."

Yet people, with their "human intelligence," inspired Copperwhite to craft a series of portraits in 2015. These are all abstract heads, although some are much more abstract than others. *Portrait of V* is one of the most literal; we can actually see the person's hair, neck, and the overall shape of the face. *Disappearing into One Two* represents a person whose hairline, eyebrow, chin, mouth, and ear are recognizable, if somewhat muffled. *Portrait of H* is frontal and bold, wearing a red

headband, and painted in expressionist brush strokes. Some of these portraits are so vague, however, that they require the word, “portrait,” in their title: *Dark Light (Portrait)* or *Blue Portrait*.

Some of Copperwhite’s portraits from 2014 appear to be even more abstract: *Pink Mime*, *Green*, and *Sideways*. The title, *Pink Mime*, suggests a performer dressed in pink, many of which populate the internet; related are some pink female Halloween costumes. By continuing to produce the smaller portraits, it would seem that Copperwhite wants to stay in touch not only with the figure, but with the infinite individuality of personality, character, and personal appearance. Copperwhite’s paintings all play tricks on our unconscious. They provide both visual stimuli and pleasure, while continuing to provoke our imaginations.s

<sup>1</sup> All quotes, unless indicated otherwise, are from the author’s own communications with Diana Copperwhite.

<sup>2</sup> Helen O’Leary interviews painter Diana Copperwhite on the occasion of her show *A Million and One Things Under the Sun* at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, on view through April 25, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Helen O’Leary interview.

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