

ALAN TURNER: PAINTINGS, 1979-2009

Curated by Dan Nadel

November 11, 2018 – January 12, 2019

Nothing less than dignity and truth emanates from these 30 years of paintings by Alan Turner. This is an artist, a Jewish artist, as he is careful and fearless (two more good words for Alan) to point out, who seemed bent on discovering the truth of his own mind, of the way he could see things that others could not: of sex, of culture and of the aesthetics of moral and actual violence. In other words, Alan is a subtle philosopher not unlike his friends John Cage and Jasper Johns. Do I need to note that the truth is not always pleasing? Alan's images, and even the way they are brushed, and later, drawn, have the look of an artist touching his canvases repeatedly, with control, but with great intention not to make a mark that might live in some zone of painting, but rather to continue the depiction of a thing that needs actualizing. Which is to say, these are not meant to be beautiful objects, but they are real, honest, and gloriously solid. They contain all the information any viewer would need.

Alan Turner was born in the Bronx and lived there until he was 21. He attended UC Berkeley for his master's degree, where he found favor with Dore Ashton and David Hockney, the latter offering his flat in London, where Alan moved to avoid the draft. When he returned to New York in the early 1970s, Alan met Johns and Cage and began exhibiting his work. In the late 1970s, the paintings held luminous trees with slightly mysterious shadows and viewpoints. They have the feeling of walking the woods, eyes forward with no end in sight, the bark as important as the air around it. I wonder if Alan wanted to visualize the old forest/trees conundrum, and then he solved it by finding iridescent picnic-goers in the intimacy of friendship.

Those bodies, stripped to their own bark, would gradually meld into the humanoid masses – think John Carpenter meets (avowed Turner admirer) Robert Gober – that are among Alan's masterpieces. Treating skin as an expanse as another artist might treat the ocean, Alan introduced images at once erotic, in the literal coming together of carnal forms, and terrifying in the isolation of skins. I think here of Philip Roth's Zuckerman fantasizing about an affair with a grown Anne Frank. Carroll Dunham, from whom I first learned about Alan, absorbed some of Turner's lessons in frankness, and returned the favor by posing with his eldest daughter for a couple of paintings on the subject of paternal dignity. In these and most of his paintings, Turner began with heavily cross-hatched drawings, perhaps of just a single aspect – a clothespin piercing a veil of flesh, a tightly hung bucket, floral wallpaper – which he would then alter with a

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photocopier and arrange on large sheets of paper, perhaps drawing over top of any given composition. With the image settled, Turner would begin painting.

In the mid-1990s, Alan began to move away from the flesh and into the possibilities of plasticine as a bodily stand-in. He molded biomorphic forms into which he then gradually reintroduced human physical and psychological elements. A braid, one like Alan's sister wore, appears. A hand, tentatively holding an alien form – images here of gentle poetic yearning. In the latter part of the decade, Turner, inspired by archeological digs, began making paintings and drawings that seem to document other civilizations, as though the artist was taking rubbings on some far-flung site. In fact, he was pressing his body and some possessions into the plasticine that was once his subject and taking rubbings from the resultant impressions, turning himself into his own site for discovery. In the wake of 9/11 he returned to trees, but now they'd absorbed the picnickers and become unto flesh itself. From there, Alan began spending time in Rome and initiated a final sequence of ideas – neo-Classical forms blended with the historic forms around him, like a Surrealist cutaway map of cultural history.

And finally, the boxes. Alan, always noticing, began taking account of the boxes New York's homeless population uses as shelters. He also noticed how cats flitted in and out of boxes in Rome. Then the box idea expanded, as another surface and idea – the vessels that house fragments, bodies, entire memory stocks of civilizations. These paintings, which gradually shifted to entirely graphite processes, are among Alan's most moving and ambiguous.

There is nothing else like them. They, like all of Alan's work, depict and are containers of a labyrinthian consciousness that flows and flows. -DN, 2018

Parker Gallery has published a full-color catalog of the exhibition with a text by Alan Turner and an interview with the artist by Dan Nadel.

Alan Turner (b. 1943 Bronx, New York, lives and works in New York City). Select solo exhibitions include Mitchell Alpus Gallery, New York, NY (2015), *ITINERIES*, The Graduate Center at CUNY, New York, NY (2009), Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York, NY (1996-2003), Ealan Wingate Gallery, New York, NY (1990-91), Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, NY (1982-83), Carl Solway Gallery, New York, NY (1974-77) and Galerie Neuendorf, Cologne, Germany (1971). His work in the permanent collections of Denver Art Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others.