

Artist With a Bird's-Eye View; From His Shower Perch, William Newman Hatched an Idea

Paul, Richard . The Washington Post ; Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C]15 Nov 2005: C.01 .

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

"The Nest," his exhibition at the Adamson Gallery, includes 17 of Newman's bird paintings, which, unlike most, don't look stuffed. Newman's bird paintings are motion paintings. His grackles aren't at rest. They're blurred by agitation, and by the desperation of their feed-me, feed-me peeps.

A second thing I like about Newman's birds is thinking about them. They are not at all, for instance, like those of J.J. Audubon, which tend to look like statues (and are now, coincidentally, at the National Gallery of Art). Newman's are livelier, though similarly symbolic. Birds can't help being symbolic. Art may have older symbols (the waxing and the waning moon, the newly opened flower, the fertile female body), but it can't have very many. God got in touch with Noah by sending him a dove. The Winged Victory in the Louvre is in part bird. So are angels. Newman's video at [David Adamson] has lent part of its backlit electronic shimmer to the paintings that surround it. Newman's oils look as new as video, and as old as art.

When I met him at the Corcoran in the late 1960s, Newman could still run fast, and throw a baseball, and drive. He reminded me of Jim Palmer, the former Orioles pitcher. Newman, tall, mischievous, candid, wasn't like the other artists. He always had more fun.

FULL TEXT

Light shines through the grackles in William Newman's oils, as it does through the layers of his semi-transparent paints. His frantic birds, their mouths agape, are semi-transparent, too, they're that fresh from the egg. When the leaf-filtered sunlight gets into their nest, it goes right through their cheeks.

Their nest was built in a small tunnel. That tunnel is a tube that Newman had constructed through the wall of his house in Northwest Washington. The indoor end of the tunnel is in his shower beside the fold-down seat. He spends a lot of time in his shower.

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Newman's pleading nestlings are like little blossomings of the life force, vulnerable and poignant, miraculous nonetheless.

Newman, 57, was 31 years old when he learned he was weakening from multiple sclerosis. He put the tunnel in his shower when he found he couldn't walk anymore. The painter nowadays is seldom in a hurry. Once he gets into his shower, he tends to stay there for a while. To the inside of the tunnel he fitted a ship's porthole (salvaged, screw-latched, brass). "That way," he says, "you can open the porthole and put your hand out and get the snow or rain."

The tunnel was empty for nine years before birds decided to nest in it. For 11 days both parents fed their hatchlings ceaselessly. Newman filmed them. His video is on view. He also watched and watched. He wasn't in a hurry. These days he paints slowly. He's worked on and off for years applying colored glazes to the oils in his paintings.

Here are three reasons why I like them a lot.

First, they're finely crafted. When I met him in the 1960s, Newman already was a specialist in artists' materials. He knew all about the stiffness of bristles and the colors of color pencils and the efficiency of solvents and the varying absorbencies of different papers. He knew all that because he had to. Long before Bill Newman became a professor at the Corcoran, he ran the in-school shop there selling professional art supplies to students at the Corcoran School of Art.

Some of his grackles are on canvas, but most are on wood. They're panel pictures painted on cabinet-grade, birch-veneer plywood, but not directly on the wood. Before he puts his colors down he applies a dozen undercoats of white and chalky gesso. He's similarly demanding when it comes to the medium in which he floats his pigments. The medium he prefers is one used by the Old Masters. Its recipe is ancient. Newman can't cook it himself anymore, he doesn't have the strength, but he used to.

"You should have seen him," says Tom Green, his fellow Corcoran professor, "working at his fire, outside, in the parking lot, by the kilns. He looked like an alchemist."

Newman's formula called for 10 parts linseed oil to one part beeswax and one part lead, in BB form. To achieve the proper viscosity he had to heat the mixture slowly, over 21/2 hours, to 400 degrees.

The colored light you see when you're looking at his nestlings has been through his glazes twice -- first arriving from outside, then after bouncing off the gesso, returning through his glazes until it hits your eye.

A second thing I like about Newman's birds is thinking about them. They are not at all, for instance, like those of J.J. Audubon, which tend to look like statues (and are now, coincidentally, at the National Gallery of Art). Newman's are livelier, though similarly symbolic. Birds can't help being symbolic. Art may have older symbols (the waxing and the waning moon, the newly opened flower, the fertile female body), but it can't have very many. God got in touch with Noah by sending him a dove. The Winged Victory in the Louvre is in part bird. So are angels. Newman's video at Adamson has lent part of its backlit electronic shimmer to the paintings that surround it. Newman's oils look as new as video, and as old as art.

A third thing I like about them is that they evoke him.

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Fun wasn't much in evidence in the art world of the '60s. Suffering seemed hipper. Lots of big-time New York art stars then wore a lot of black, and very seldom smiled, and many younger painters here did their best to look as glum. Not Newman. An undertone of play often twinkled in his art.

In 1975, it made him, briefly, famous. It made his "Sarah" famous, too.

"Sarah," young and luscious, was a dark-haired odalisque, amply proportioned, 24 feet long. The Public Building Service of the General Services Administration somehow had commissioned her for the temporary wooden wall that surrounded a construction site (for the new Federal Home Loan Bank Board building) at 17th and G streets NW. The government in those days was putting lots of public art out in public places. Much of it was hard-edged, abstract, made of metal. "Sarah" wasn't like that. She wore no clothes at all.

This, of course, produced a wonderful kerfuffle. The Post called her "Uncle Sam's pinup." Since Newman had been selected to enhance a construction site, he decided he'd give the hard hats there something they might like – "a Playboy-style nude as big as the shark in 'Jaws.'"

What the media enjoyed especially was the bikini the artist added to his nude to placate the GSA. The bikini (colored International Safety Orange at the government's insistence) was tight and brief and fugitive. Newman, it turned out, had mixed soap into his orange paint. "Sarah's" bathing suit began obviously dissolving the first day it rained.

ABC, NBC and CBS took notice. So did all the papers. "The Corcoran had a clipping service," Newman remembers. "We got 3,500 articles."

"Sarah" began as a life drawing – of a 17-year-old, \$3-an-hour artist's model at the Corcoran. Newman made his little drawing huge – as painters had for centuries – with a camera obscura. He was always experimenting with visual technologies, new as well as old. He didn't just paint with brushes. He also tried Q-tips. When he was a member of the Washington Colored Pencil School he experimented with pencil sharpeners as he once had with lead BB's. His most important tool, however, turned out to be the Mac.

He and David Adamson (the printmaker and publisher who also runs the Adamson Gallery) may have been the first artists in the city to fiddle with computers. They began in 1978. "In those days," Adamson remembers, "only place to buy them was in the vacuum cleaner department at Hecht's." They were primitive machines – quarter-inch pixels, 128K, black-and-white, and slow – but Newman loved his from the start.

Newman never abandoned painting. He never sold printouts. He used his Mac, instead, to manipulate his drawings. Sometimes he'd compress them; often he would stretch them. For such paintings as "Bill/Pig" and "Bill/Hose" and "Koi/Bill," he'd start with a self-portrait and the image of a beast, or perhaps a fish, and morph the two together. Once he'd found his image, then he'd start to paint.

Newman isn't an abstract artist. He depicts. He's a paint-and-brush traditionalist. But, unlike his predecessors, he has chosen to investigate those problematic realms where oil painting meets kilobytes and pixels and electrical machines.

While the birds were in the nest, Newman studied them intently. The video he shot is actually a string of some 100,000 separate frames. Newman took the time, he says, to study every one. One sees this in his art.

"The wheelchair," Newman says, "turns out to have advantages. It diminishes your arrogance. It gains you some humility. Most of all, it slows you down. The world slows down. You get connected to the beautiful just because you pay attention. Patience for a painter is not such a bad thing."

The Nest will remain at the Adamson Gallery, 1515 14th St. NW, Suite 202, through Dec. 3.

DETAILS

Subject:	Visual artists; Multiple sclerosis; Art exhibits
People:	Newman, William
Publication title:	The Washington Post; Washington, D.C.
Pages:	C.01
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2005
Publication date:	Nov 15, 2005
Section:	STYLE
Publisher:	WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post
Place of publication:	Washington, D.C.
Country of publication:	United States, Washington, D.C.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	01908286
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Feature
ProQuest document ID:	409942281
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/409942281?accountid=46320
Copyright:	Copyright The Washington Post Company Nov 15, 2005
Last updated:	2017-11-02
Database:	The Washington Post

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