

Artist Interview: Mike Glier



By Jonathan Beer, Art-Rated

Art-Rated: What I'd like to start with is where you started. Your work gained notoriety in the 80's with the 'White Male Power' series, at least that's how I was introduced to you. Looking back at this work and comparing it to what you are doing now, I'm curious to know the trajectory.

Mike Glier: Well, it's been a long trajectory at this point. The inspiration for *White Male Power* arrived during a conference on art and social issues organized in part by Lucy Lippard. I was the only able-bodied, white, Christian male in the group and it became a joke, during the discussions, for my colleagues to look at me and say "it's your fault." [Laughs] I began to see that my identity as an able-bodied, white, Christian male was not the norm, but in fact a very specific identity, which was a topic of interest. And this intellectual interest in identity fit nicely with a pissed-off feeling I was carrying around. I grew up in Kentucky, where there were very narrow expectations of what a man was to be and I was fed up with trying to be traditionally masculine. So, in *White Male Power*, I explored my white male identity from the inside out. The masculinity thing came back when our daughter, Lili, was born. I was a much more hands-on father than my own Dad had been and to celebrate this evolution, an evolution that a lot of men have made in recent years, I painted a twenty-six panel installation called *The Alphabet of Lili*. The images in each panel of this

series correspond to a letter of the alphabet. I loved reading with my daughter before bedtime, sitting on the couch, making up tales and reviewing the events of the day. This was my favorite part of caregiving, so I recorded it as art.

A few years later the issue of masculine identity returned in another installation, *Garden Court*. In this imaginary garden the stucco walls were peppered with bullets, scarred by mortars and splashed with blood. But on top of this grisly setting were images of pretty flowers, lacy tree shadows and the occasional bird. I realized as I was painting these big pictures, that I was enacting a lot of masculine roles. First, I was the victor, shooting up the walls. Then I was the loser, splashing my blood around. Finally, I took on the role of the gardener, who observes what has happened, tends to current needs and returns the garden to productivity. I liked being the gardener, and found in the role some answers about how to construct a modern, masculine identity.

Now, I'm making landscape painting in the time of global warming. When the oceans rise, there will be extraordinary chaos. So, I'm painting landscape pictures because the subject is so urgent.

AR: *Along a Long Line* was thrown in there. It was an extensive, multi-year project where you traveled along a line of longitude, which began at the Arctic Circle and ended at the equator. What prompted that project? What was that like? I imagine

that there were many amazing moments but are there any that really stand out from that undertaking?

MG: Working in the studio got boring, so I started to paint out of doors in upstate NY. I'd get set up outside, choose a subject and then the wind would blow everything to the ground. Or the clouds would come in and change the light completely, or a bird would fly by and it would be so much more interesting than what I was painting, that I'd change the course of the picture and paint the bird. Plein air painting is about serendipity and giving up any sort of plan and being responsive to what is happening. I love it!

So I did that for a couple of years, and it was fun, but I questioned if the project was relevant to contemporary life. I began to think about the stretch of perception that all of us are asked to make as citizens of the 21st century; we are asked to be sensitive to our local environments and to protect their uniqueness, but at the same time we are asked to be conscious of the consequences of our actions on a global scale. To be sensitive to your local environment and conscious of your role as a global citizen requires a lot of imagination and empathy. So, I wondered, 'How can an artwork possibly engage these extremes of perception? So, I combined plein air painting, a practice that is very attuned to a particular place and time, with lines of travel that describe big shapes on the earth. The itinerary of *Along a Long Line*, describes a big arc that makes

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a quarter turn around the earth, and the current project, *Antipodes*, describes diagonals through the center of the earth which begin and end on locations on opposite sides of the globe.

In terms of great experiences, they were legion. In the rainforest of Ecuador, the night before a visit to the home of my friend, Juanita, the rain fell, heavy and drenching for 8 hours without a pause. The Rio Napo breached its banks and the canoes were pulled up near the path for safety. We set out for her house after lunch, but the track to her house was still flooded and fish were swimming among our feet. With a leap and cry of, "Pescado!", Juanita lanced one with the tip of her umbrella and wrapped it, still flopping, in a foot-long, banana leaf to carry home.

AR: How long did you stay in Ecuador?

MG: I stayed two months, and got about 15 paintings done.

AR: What would the two months be like in terms of your everyday experiences? Were you painting every day?

MG: Yeah, I rented small houses in each place and set up indoor studios. I'd go out in the field two or three days a week to collect motifs and colors and begin each painting.

AR: In your recent abstract landscapes, drawing provides an understanding of shape and composition, which pushes the picture past the initial moment of interest

that stopped you in the first place.

MG: Yes, drawing helps to get a little deeper into the scene and suggest immersion. While I'm sitting outside, I try to draw not only what I see, but also invisible things like wind, sound, and smell. The drawings are very chaotic and formless to start, and then I take my erasers out and try to find something in the mess.

By avoiding preconceived outcomes and working as improvisationally as I can, I'm trying to model an important ethical position. I cringe a little saying this, since it is so pretentious, but it's important in the time of global warming that we, as a species, reconsider our relation to what is outside us. The "natural" world is not something separate from. Culture and nature are the same; what is inside is intimately, fluidly and constantly exchanged with what is outside. That phrase in the Bible, "fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Gen. 1:28)," is the most dangerous phrase out there. We are not separate and insulated; we don't have control over everything, and if we keep up with the attitude that we are lords of the earth, we'll destroy our habitat and die from hubis.

AR: That makes me think other people who work within the landscape genre, and attempt to go beyond depiction. I think of Peter Doig's snow paintings; I once read that the entire series was based around his attempts to capture weather. His initial

attempts to build the surfaces we now know him for came out of his attempt to hang or suspend weather on the canvas, to float those layers of meteorological events there. I always thought that was amazing.

MG: I also like Ronnie Horn's portrait series called *You Are the Weather*. She photographs one woman many times and shows the portraits in series. The title suggest that the woman is the atmosphere, that any slight change in her expression is a change in the temperature and the velocity of the wind. I think the equation between facial expression and the weather is so beautiful. It really gets at the idea that there relation between the self and the outside is fluid.

AR: I think a lot about the Futurists when I look at your work, in particular artists from the Second Futurist movement like Giacomo Balla. They are interested in the conflation of self and space. Do you see your work in relation to those artists?

MG: I hadn't till you said it. Working in the rich, historical context of painting is a great comfort, since it's a way to overcome alienation. As a painter, one learns from all the people who painted in a previous time and one brings this knowledge into the present in an attempt to add something to the discourse. It really feels like a family, or maybe a guild is a better description. It's a group with similar interests in which you can participate across generations.

I question the value of the avant garde model, since it requires a rupture from previous generations, which ensures a



measure of alienation.

AR: Maybe a healthy disregard is the right attitude. It's something we talked about before: the ability to acknowledge your foundations, but to be able to have a healthy disregard for them at the same time.

MG: Yeah, finding your own voice is important. But I think we need a new language to describe the process of creating a point of view. I don't like "rupture" since it's violent and it's wholly impossible to completely sever oneself from the past, and "disregard" is too dismissive. How about words like "absorb, analyze and contextualize" to describe the process of learning from the past and constructing a position in relation to it?

AR: Can you talk about abstraction in your work, in particular about the new work here at the gallery. Attempting to create an abstract visual language from direct observation is a familiar approach and could so easily fall on its face. You've talked about that a bit, but I'm curious, how did that develop for you?

MG: [Laughs] I teach drawing and have for a long time. In drawing there is no separation between representation and abstraction. To create a convincing representational image you have to understand its underlying geometry. As soon as you see that, you realize that representation and abstraction are not in conflict; instead, they are elements in a perceptual system and they are

codependent. An artwork that navigates this relationship will always be of some interest because it will celebrate the amazing capacity of the human brain to collect large amounts of data, reduce it to bits for processing, and reconstruct it into context-specific knowledge. To work between abstraction and representation is to celebrate how our brains work!

MIKE GLIER was born in Kentucky in 1953 and lives in New York State. In 1975 he received a BA from Williams College, Williamstown, MA, and then attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. He received an MA from Hunter College in 1975.

From 1978 to 1984 he was an active member of Collaborative Projects, and participated in the Time Square Show. Between 1979 and 2000 he was engaged with Printed Matter Inc, NY, serving on the staff and then the Board Of Directors. Solo exhibitions of his drawing and painting have been presented internationally in galleries. The list of museums that have presented solo exhibitions of his work include the San Diego Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Museum of Modern Art, The Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center, The Wexner Center, Columbus, OH and Mass MoCA, North Adams, MA.

In 1989 he was the New England recipient of Awards in the Visual Arts 9, and 1996 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in painting. In collaboration with his wife, Jenny Holzer, he completed in 1999 a



permanent memorial sculpture for the City of Leipzig, Germany and in 2004, "Town Green" a wall drawing installation for the Cambridge, MA City Hall Annex was selected by Americans for the Arts as one of the best public art works of the year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jonathan Beer is a New York-based artist and writer. He began to write critically in 2010 while attending the New York Academy of Art for his MFA in Painting. Jon is also a contributing writer for The Brooklyn Rail, ArtWrit and for Art Observed

Images:

1st page:

(Left image): October 28, 2011: Hedgerow, Mt. Hope, Williamstown, MA, 34 F", 2011, Oil on panel, 47 x 70 inches

(Center image): "White Male Power: Liberty", 1987, acrylic on panel, 48" x 86"

(Right image): July 28, 2007: Clouds and Moss, Pangnirtung, Canada, 48F, 2007, oil on aluminum panel, 24 x 30 inches

2nd page:

(Left image): "Garden Court Summer", 1994, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 120" x 90"

(Right image): "Alphabet of Lili: B" 1991, 26 panel installation, each panel 45" x 36", acrylic and charcoal on fiberglass

3rd page:

(Left image): "December 19, 2010, Mt. Hope, Williamstown, MA, 30F, 2011, Oil on panel, 32" x 40"

(Right image): "August 22, 2011: Mt. Hope, Williamstown, MA, 70F, 2011, Oil on panel, 47" x 70"