

ben whitehouse



revolution

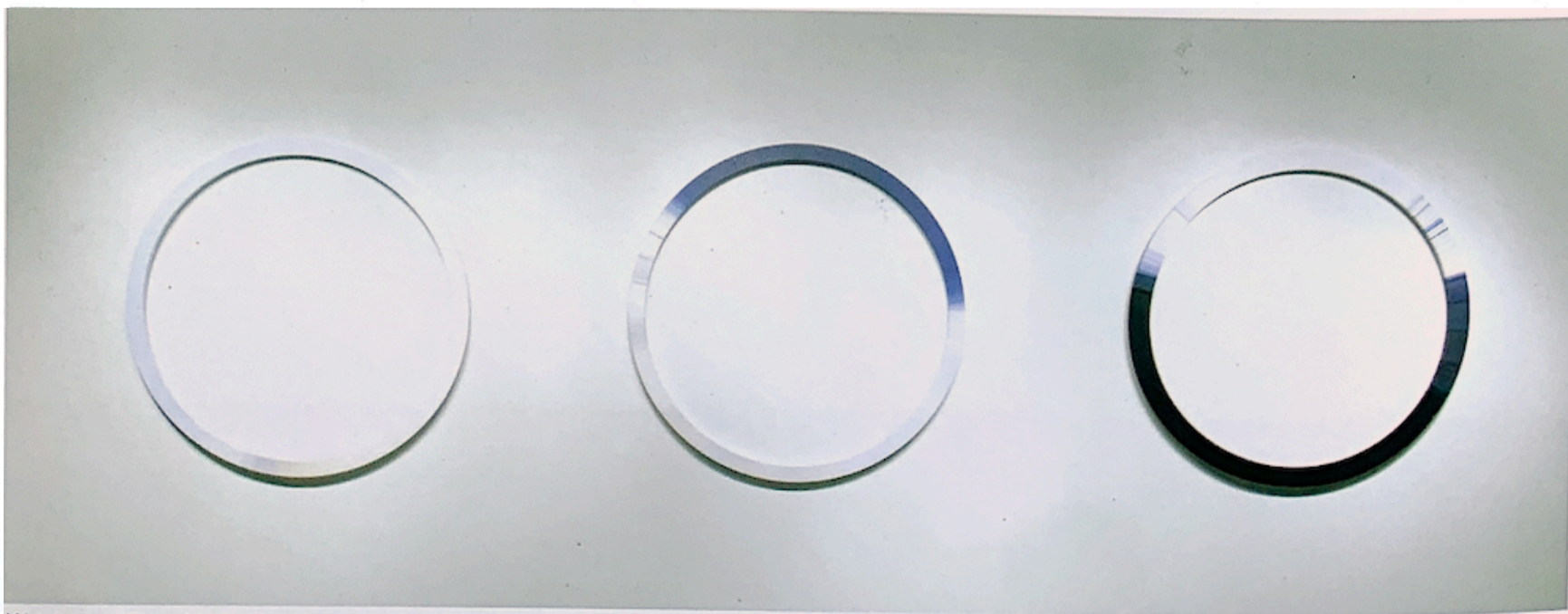
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ben whitehouse : revolution

Ben Whitehouse's passion for submerging himself as well as the viewer in the all-encompassing experience of the natural landscape is captured by a photograph of the artist taken in 2001 in which he is depicted standing knee-deep in a river of the Chicago Botanic Garden with his easel, also in the water, in front of him in the mid-day sun. At the time, I thought it was one of those wonderfully "staged" photographs for the purposes of developing press interest on a contemporary artist committed to expanding the romantic genre of plein air painting. However, as time has gone by and I have come to know and deeply respect the artist and his methods I realized that there are never any half measures when it comes to Whitehouse producing his work, and nothing, absolutely nothing, is ever "staged" for the purpose of a romantic effect because the truth of the natural world, according to the artist, does not require enhancement. If Whitehouse needs to stand knee-deep in a lagoon for hours on end to capture the intricate subtleties of the sky reflected in a body of water, he does so. Likewise if he must brace himself on a freezing windswept Chicago beach staring at Lake Michigan day after day at the same time during the month of March to create a visual calendar for each day of ever-shifting weather he will do it. And in the case of the current works on view at the Tarble Arts Center, if he needs to stay up for 24-hours to methodically record through paint or the digital process the shifts in the color and light of the sky as it passes from day to night he most certainly will forgo sleep, brave whatever elements he must, and invest himself, body and soul to record the passages of time marked by the revolutions of the earth.

Whitehouse, who came to prominence in the mid-1990s as an incredibly gifted landscape artist who painted oversized canvases of Janus-like reflections of sky and water, was always something more than the sum of

the parts often used to describe him. Born and raised in England, there was always the temptation to label his work as a mere extension of British painting's love affair with the landscape, or part of a contemporary trend of neo-romanticism evoked by New York painters such as April Gornik. But the artist is not a product of the Royal Academy of Art, (or the New York art scene), instead his MFA is from the University of Chicago and he makes his home on the city's North Shore, and he has never paid much attention to stylistic trends in contemporary art (yet his current practices place him in some elite company that will be discussed later). And while Whitehouse will acknowledge that growing up near the woodlands and ponds of Hampstead Heath in north London sensitized him to looking at the world around him, "the last thing he ever wanted to become was a landscape painter." There are, however, artists for whom sight remains a seductive mistress and they cannot avoid being beguiled by optics to investigate with greater clarity the world around them. In Whitehouse's case this may in part have been influenced by growing up in a household with a father who was a documentary filmmaker. Lenses and cameras as tools for looking at the world were always around, but more important the suggestion of how one frames the world was subliminally suggested by his father's craft. Therefore questions regarding the relationship between sight and perception that were provoked by Whitehouse's landscape paintings soon became, for those willing to look beyond his evanescent paint handling, the subject of his work, as much, if not more so, than the inland waterways of Illinois and Michigan and the lochs of Scotland that he visited. As his mist-shrouded lakes painted between 2001 and 2004 increasingly began to resemble Mark Rothko's abstract compositions, I once mentioned to him that eventually he would be able to remove the last vestiges of trees and shoreline from his



Watch Over Time, 2005, oil on three panels, 48" x 180"

compositions. And as he developed his new bodies of work between 2005 and 2007 --- the *Watch* series, the *Horizons* series, the *Revolution* series --- representations of landscape by Whitehouse assumed a greater visual understatement while simultaneously requiring a greater test of the viewer's perceptual stamina. The resulting works embed comprehension in direct observation of the natural world while allowing definitive answers to quietly elude the viewer.

Whitehouse questions how much we truly see when we look at nature, and how much we unconsciously edit out of our selected frames of reference based on preconceptions of our surroundings. Frequent conversations with the artist in his studio have revolved around my incredulity that the sky or water really assumes the diverse array of colors that his small, seemingly abstract paintings display and his assertion that absolutely that was the color of the sky at that particular moment. Having a background in visual arts I am often amazed by what Whitehouse's work reveals to me about my own visual censorship shaped by too many previous images of nature, as well as too much time in front of the computer monitor and TV. Pulling the viewer out of their visual blindness is something that Whitehouse's work shares with ambitious contemporary projects produced by artists such as California-based Russell Crotty and Arizona-based James Turrell. Both Crotty and Turrell turn the viewer's gaze skyward, Crotty through detailed drawings of constellations from his home-built observatory, Turrell through his Roden Crater, a naked-eye observatory tunneled into a volcanic crater near Flagstaff, Arizona. Whitehouse likewise echoes this upturned gaze through several of his new series, especially the *Watch* pieces. But most clearly what Whitehouse shares with Crotty and Turrell is a passion for fusing art and science. All three artists seek to articulate the awe of the Earth's vulnerability (and consequently our own) as this fragile blue marble moves on its cyclical journey through the cosmos. Surprisingly for all of our exploration of space, these artists' humble empirical investigations of man's relationship to the heavens returns an intimacy to star gazing that suggests what it must have been like when Galileo and Copernicus peered into the galaxy. In an often cynical postmodern age, Crotty, Turrell, and Whitehouse offer to the viewer the precious gift of observation, which all too often seems to have been misplaced in contemporary society.

Whitehouse's *Watch* paintings are aptly named for the durational endurance tests of observation that he must put himself through to create each work. He records the hourly changes of a carefully selected point in the sky viewed through a fixed viewing device, an interstice, which resembles an open square mounted on a pole.

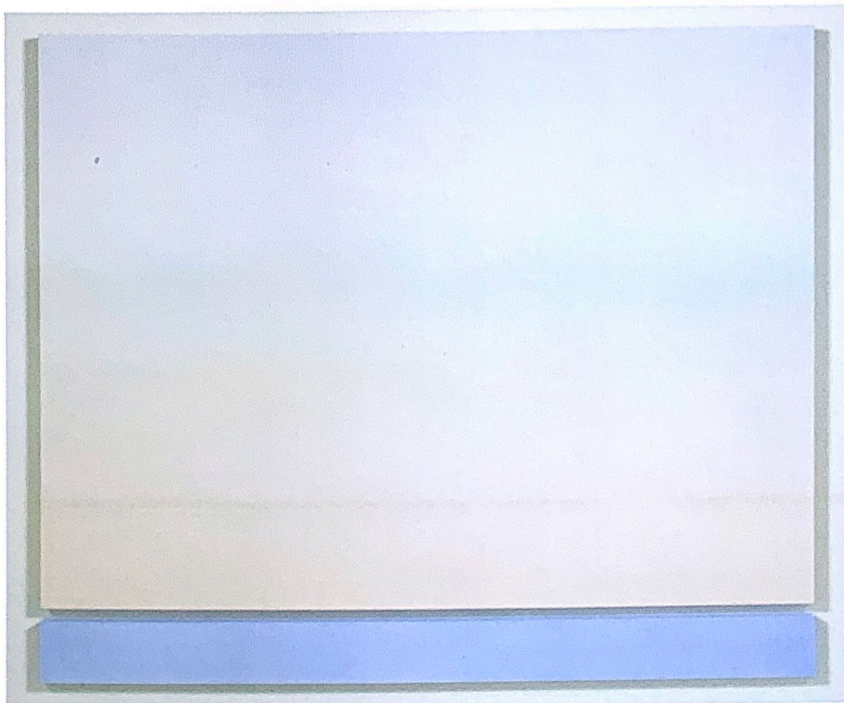


Watch Over Time, 2006, (detail) oil on three panels, 48" x 180"

A completed *Watch* requires Whitehouse to physically endure 24-hours of painting as he stays awake to create individual square panels of seemingly abstract color that are in reality highly representational glimpses at the subtle transitions in the atmosphere. Closely looking at these oil paintings on panel one can detect the same feather-like brushstrokes that graced his earlier large canvases. This human touch reveals the searching that Whitehouse puts into "finding" the right sky for each panel. Colors move from the pale hues of dawn through the richer contrasts of twilight and night. These slices of time are presented in clock-like arrangements held to the wall by powerful industrial magnets referencing the natural force that controls our relationship to the sun and, therefore, our experience of light. Whitehouse slightly twists the square panels in the *Watch* series to emphasize the imperfect tumbling that the earth experiences as it moves through space. He constantly tinkers with his format as he investigates how to accurately capture the movement of light. *Watch Over Time* uses circular, ring-like panels so that the observed experience of the day/night cycle is presented as a continuous, unbroken transition of

different periods of light on three different days, in three different weather conditions.

There has always been an edgy stillness in Whitehouse's painting --- calm lakes and skies often depicted without a clear time of day --- that appeared to subliminally reference the nature of filmmaking in which movement is created through a series of still images strung together. He was masterful in his large canvases for creating the impression that something had happened two "frames" before, or was about to happen two "frames" ahead of the composition that was in front of the viewer. This exploitation of a moment has been honed in his new series. In a work such as *Horizons (24 hours)* he examines the dualities of movement and stasis through a series of minimal compositions of sky and water inspired by the Rothko paintings in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. All the works in the *Horizons* series are plein air canvases and panels that focus on the ever-changing relationships of sky light and the reflective surface of the water beneath it that occur on Lake Michigan's horizon and Whitehouse paints them directly on site. Each *Horizons* is comprised of two panels -- the top of which accounts for a particular sky and the bottom which reflects the sky light mediated through the water below it at a particular moment. The panels are cradled so that while they are exhibited parallel to the wall they appear to float in front of the wall as pure natural light. *Horizons (24 hours)* resembles a strip of film because what the viewer must conceptually understand is that through all the changes in the muted lavenders, blues and grays of the panels they are looking not at twenty-four individual landscapes but in actuality one landscape seen over time.



Horizons (Evening), 2006, oil on two canvases, 63" x 76"

It seems only natural that Whitehouse's interest in creating artworks that expand the possibilities of marking time and recording transitions via the plein air landscape experience, would lead him to his most ground-breaking new body of work -- *Revolution* -- a series of state-of-the-art, 24-hour, single shot high definition digital works that record every movement, shift of light and sound that occurs in the chosen composition for an entire 24-hour period -- one revolution of the earth. These works are then viewed in real time on large scale plasma screens. The *Revolution* series was conceived in December of 2002 as a means of recording the fleeting moments of an entire day through 24-hour seamless digital "paintings." There are six works in the *Revolution* series depicting Whitehouse's observations of landscapes and shorelines in Michigan and central Illinois to urban topographies, such as New York City's Central Park. Whitehouse spends more than 24-hours on location with an assistant composing each composition that unfolds before the viewer with the incremental changes of light and sound. State-of-the-art software from Apple, advanced computer technology to store the large digital files required, and a generous donation of a high definition camera, speakers and plasma monitors from Panasonic make it possible for Whitehouse to realize each of his visions. The resulting works are created in limited editions of three. The *Revolution* works have a precedent in the underground films of Andy Warhol, such as *Empire* which depicted the "stillness" of the Empire State Building from day to night until film ran out of the camera. Debuting at the Tarble Arts Center is Whitehouse's *Revolution: Bowl and Fruit*, a still-life inspired by Claude Monet's *Still Life with Apples and Grapes*, 1880, in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. As this work plays in the gallery the viewer sees barely perceptible changes in light and infinitesimal movement through a window behind the still life. Whitehouse takes the fleeting quality of Impressionism that helped define the speed of modern life in the 20th century and reveals it to be a fallacy. Look, he suggests, life moves at a much slower pace than we can ever imagine. What do you see as the world revolves before your eyes?

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