

## RAZING SPACE THE NEW PAINTINGS OF C. MICHAEL NORTON

by  
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**The luminous, volumetric passages in C. Michael Norton's** new paintings have a coruscate intensity that lingers in the mind. Part of this mental insistence is the result of the artist's capacity to interject within his painterly project a double movement. It incorporates a language of the body and of gesture with an internalized and submerged geometry which recalls hidden passageways, doors or windows opening up to the unknown and the unexpected.

There is an anticipatory urgency in Norton's work that lies before us, a palpable need to refer to the figure, which is only allowed to see the light of day in the form of embodied painterly contours --- references which struggle for recognizable form, but which are denied totality. The artist's fissured, figural afterimages are atomized and dispersed, as in **Blue Window, White Path**, 1996-8. They

are then cannily regathered and reclaimed through a use of geometricized quadrants. These interlocking liminal squares and rectangles anchor the pictorial plane. The grids suggest restraining devices set into place as fierce gales of painterly energy surge against horizontal and vertical panels. Parts and fragments, voids and chaos, held in check in their tug of dominance over the whole, create effective visual dramas that enable each composition to function in an essentially closed space while alluding, simultaneously, to a bursting of separateness and confinement.

Blue Window, White Path refers to the window of the mind as well as to the pathways of somatic experience as embodied through the painterly gestures. C. Michael Norton is a colorist and a master of composition of hidden reserves. The associations that emerge in his work are the direct result of the levels of purposeful ambiguity that elevate his work and give it a remarkably robust yet sensitive expressive power. Blue Window, White Path is paradigmatic of the artist's poetic capacities: his range of whites and blues creates a lunar intensity, pure and powerful. Here, space is festooned within a surge of poetic excess. Intimations of dispersed petals and florets flutter in the wind. From pockets and windows of space above and below blooms are about to burst.

In several of his recent works the artist remains close to his earlier figurative, neo-expressionistic roots. Yet his newer efforts are about a Batailleian surfeit that expresses itself with deliberateness and subtlety. Norton has combined insinuations of sacrificed human flesh, cauterized, flayed and splintered and references to human limbs in disarray, wrenched from obvious purpose or destiny, as in **White Window/Smoke Ring**, 2000-2001. In this work a Philip Guston-like loopy, gesticulating space is recalled, its agonistic fury is matched by a carnivalesque, transformative grotesque in which roiling figural fragments careen in the form of ghostly afterimages. In other works the flesh-colored linen is left untouched by paint, as in **Full Circle**, 1999-2001. This work is marked by a double movement. What is put into play is a participation in the language of the body



Blue Window White Path, 1996-8, acrylic on linen, 76 x 68 inches



*Full Circle, 1999-2000, acrylic on linen, 63 x 51 inches*

and of the gesture yet a desire to be at a remove from it. In this work Norton does the near impossible: his emblemized spaces of sculptural brushstrokes, acting as cut-outs, seem to have been dropped into the flat undifferentiated space of the carnal.

The argument that John Berger makes, in *Ways of Seeing*, goes a bit like this: he states that Western culture's notion that the framed painting acts as a model of an imaginary window opening onto the world is self-serving. He argues that this metaphor is too self-congratulatory. In spite of stylistic changes that have taken place through the isms of time, such as Mannerism, Baroque, Neo Classical, Realist, Abstract, etc., the window paradigm is really Western culture's way of making "its own claims for itself". Berger proposes that the framed painting is modeled not on that imaginary window open

to possibilities and transformation, but is, instead, "as a safe let into the wall, a safe in which the visible has been deposited"[ ].

In *Red and White Window*, 1999-2001, for example, there is an indwelling, muffled, quality to his thick washes of white that seems to have congealed over pockets of squared shapes in the left hand side of the painting. Here are stacks of space seemingly imbedded into an illusionistic wall. These painterly passages recall safe space, saved space, deposit boxes, spaces of deposit. As we step back and see the orchestration of smaller spaces to the tumult which is occurring in the larger right-hand side with its viscous catapults and swoops of gestures, we see that the painter wants us to confront the sensation that there are not one but multiple windows, some open, some shut, acting as safes. Each one seems poised, about to be broken into and finally extracted from the very wall of sight.

C. Michael Norton's aesthetic is about the extrication of sight from the once reliable wall-safe of Western vision. His nimble implication of informe, an anti-idealizing distortion of the body's integral form, is about a willing disenfranchisement of the eye away from a perfunctory dialectics of rational/irrational. Instead, Norton opts for a need to re-new and re-invigorate a space for painting in which the psyche can dwell in deep enigma, rather than coming from a position in which a painting space is "built" in order for the eye to occupy and inhabit it. Mercifully, there is nothing particularly benign or polite in this process. The anti-reductionist vitality felt in the artist's new work comes from its condition of urgency. This extreme state gives it persuasiveness, authenticity and passion. The artist's world is a fury, a fight for an implanting of soul and psyche in a newly engendered space. Formerly carved out in the service of boundary-thinking — within a logic of enclosure, C. Michael Norton has managed to detonate the pictorial space from within.

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