

Tom Stanley
Slide Script Paintings
March 3 - April 16, 2016





An Archeology of Memory

Tom Stanley invites us to follow him on a journey to an ever-present past. With a long career of solo and collective exhibitions, chair of the Department of Fine Arts at Winthrop University since 2007, he surprises the viewer anew with this show of refreshingly current, yet earlier work. The pieces represented compose four series: 1992-1993: *Profiles en route to Hamlet* (1998); *Profiles Across the River* (2003-2005); and *Profiles* (2005) are visual renderings of experiences described in an autobio-

graphical text from the early 1990s.

Reflecting the fractured structure of the writing, each painting is populated by incomplete and oblique references to fragments of memory. Forms emerge from the background with little apparent connection, in an improvised manner in tune with the Jazz music he listened to while creating them. Like the syncopated sentences and musical rhythms, the images seem to float to in an undefined

environment. Yet once we take them all in, both within each painting and in all the series, a vivid, unifying understanding of the nature and quality of the artist's past experience arises.

Underneath the differences between the four series -- gesture, palette, medium, and technique -- and the similarities -- the flatness of the picture plane, reinforced by letters and numbers, or the omnipresent shape of the profile head, a remnant from the artist's past ("[w]hen I was in high school, or even before that, I had a tendency to do profiles of heads") --, there is a world of connections, references and

cross-references. At one level, the exhibition works as a mirror, reflecting back to the viewer the experience of life's seemingly random moments; at another, it invites us to search for the underlying threads, to dig for strata of material, to become visual archeologists. And there are riches to be found.

Art rejects literalness, and this essay treads a fine line between preserving the work's symbolic charge and acknowledging these references. There is no denying that Stanley alludes directly to his past, most notably in 1992-1993; he calls these his "slide script paintings," as they



Title, Year (medium) size



Profiles en Route to Hamlet #5, 1998 (acrylic) 22" x 30"

portray his childhood through early adulthood experiences found in the written text. Clyde's *Here*, for example, references the Hawaiian math teacher that his brother brought to the family home one day and ended up staying. Allusions to music abound, such as in *Redwood Tree*, an homage to Van Morrison's record of the same name.

Here, one finds what Stanley calls "free-floating visual narrative," paralleling most closely the free-flowing quality of the writing. These pieces also mark his conscious, emerging affinity with "outsider art"; while creating them, he was less concerned with formal aspects than with a mark-making process denoting the quality of an emotion at the time it was

experienced. He acknowledges Paul Klee's influence, particularly the Swiss-German artist's interest in children's art. Using acrylic paint on canvas and collage, Stanley constructs a web of references: elements from favorite artists, like the small sailboats also found in *City Within a City* by Charleston artist Marion Hamilton; copies of fragments from his own artwork as a child; pages from a book; a small pamphlet illustrating positions during the celebration of the Catholic mass; his father kicking a ball; or parts of a wood engraving.

In *Profiles en route to Hamlet*, the allusion to origins, and to the past, acquires a more metaphoric quality. Here is a visual reflection on life's unexpected turns and an artist's

meandering path, leading, in Stanley's words, "to some significant visual idea." Hamlet is the name of John Coltrane's birthplace, literally a very small place with no connection to music, which becomes a symbol of the artist's conviction that "great art, significant art, can emerge from anywhere and anyone." The pieces were painted under the influence of Coltrane's music, and images of old 45 and 33 rpm vinyl records appear in many of them.

These records' circular forms were made using mechanical drawing, a technique favored by the artist. With mechanical tools, templates, and compass, he created these and other shapes, such as the Gothic arches, a reference to the

ruined wall of an old textile mill he saw standing by a highway, in NC. A three-story-high structure with arched windows, the ruin reminded him of an aqueduct, while its handmade bricks, probably made by slaves, brought to mind a troubled national past.

Images in this series, most obviously the profile heads, are taken from 1992-1993; yet now they are isolated and symmetrically placed, creating a linear narrative of a very different nature. Much more somber in tone, these works are influenced by the artist's travels in Europe and the contact with art brut and the work of Jean Dubuffet, in Switzerland. Not surprisingly, they include the sgraffito technique, with its



Profiles en Route to Hamlet #3, 1998 (acrylic) 22" x 30"



Profile Across the River # , 2003-2005 (acrylic) 30" x 22"

inherent line quality and the rawness resulting from the gesture: the artist worked by scratching into the wet paint to reveal underlying paint surfaces, bringing forth a texture that the earlier series only alludes to.

The attraction to line and architectural shapes comes center-stage in *Profiles Across the River*, which includes elements from the larger body of work, *Across the River*. Geometric shapes are drawn on top of the heads, establishing a striking contrast with the watery textural effect of the background. To achieve the latter, the artist used a time-

intensive process, in which several coats of paint were applied on paper pinned to the wall; between each coat, the paper was sprayed with water, and the paint let drip in a highly controlled process so as to get the desired effect. This was particularly important, since the reference to water evokes another personal memory, the artist's journey to New Orleans to learn more about his grandfather, found floating in the Mississippi River in 1920.

Profiles goes one step further in the simplification of shape and space, in geometrizing and



Profile Across the River # 6, 2003-2005 (acrylic) 30" x 22"

abstracting the head, and in drawing attention to the stark contrast between irregular and regular shapes, organic and architectural elements. This juxtaposition is present from the earliest series, and is also found in the ruined wall, which, Stanley notes, was half-covered by climbing kudzu. It is the nature of memories to float, change, morph into new constellations; it is also their nature to serve as the backbone to one's sense of self. In this paradox lies, perhaps, the deeper theme uniting all these pieces. In a very real sense, these images, never shown before, are a route to

Stanley's fuller understanding of his own art and its origins, both literal and metaphoric. In rediscovering them, he came to the realization that they have been resurfacing in, or "evolving back into," as he likes to say, his most recent work. There could be no better time to show them.

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Profile #2, 2005 (acrylic on paper) 22 1/2" x 15"
Cover: Profile #1, 2005 (acrylic on paper) 22 1/2" x 15"

Tom Stanley

Born in Fort Hood, Texas, Stanley grew up in Concord, N.C. He received a B.A. in Art from Sacred Heart College in 1972.

He received an M.A. in applied art history and an M.F.A. in painting from the University of South Carolina in 1980. He has served as chair of the Department of Fine Arts at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC, since 2007. Stanley has served on the faculties of Arkansas College (now Lyon College) in Batesville, Ark.; Barry University in Miami, Fla.; and Livingstone College in Salisbury, N.C. He also was director of the Waterworks Visual Arts Center in Salisbury, N.C. from 1985-1990.

In recent years, his artwork has been exhibited at Barbara Archer Gallery in Atlanta, Ga.; the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, N.C.; and Gallery twenty-four in Berlin. In 2005, his "Floating" series was exhibited at the South Carolina State Museum's Triennial Exhibition and in 2004 at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. In 2002-03, he exhibited at La Galerie du Marché in Lausanne, Switzerland; Hodges Taylor Gallery in Charlotte, N.C.; Musée de la Halle Saint Pierre in Paris; and the Halsey Gallery in Charleston. In 2006, he had a solo exhibition in the Gallery at Carillon in Charlotte, NC with his series entitled "The Neighborhood." Most recently his work has been exhibited at the Fine Arts Center in Greenville, S.C., and Artspace in Raleigh, N.C. For a more detailed biography, please contact the gallery.

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