



**WALTER JAMES MANSFIELD:**  
**The Head Paintings**  
by DeWitt Cheng

The contemporary art world, in its pursuit of the new for the past fifty years, has reached the end of the “shock and awe” road; to employ another political metaphor with particular relevance to the Bay Area, it has come to the end of the Bridge to Nowhere. While the evolution of art has been necessary and good, the confusion of novelty with aesthetic quality has been, on the whole, pernicious. The art bubble may continue for a time, with speculation driving prices into the stratosphere, but it is increasingly evident that quality is not what is being rewarded, any more than in other stock markets driven by waves of greed and fear. The recent retrospective accorded to Jeff Koons by the Whitney Museum seemed to some observers, myself included, a travesty: the triumph of cynicism and hype.

One of the by-products of the market's fetishization of novelty is historical amnesia: many young artists seem to know or care little about the art of the past, and aesthetic discourse has been infected by academic and theoretical jargon. The death by exhaustion of painting is proclaimed every generation or so (though it seems to linger on quite inexplicably without aesthetic life support), and the death of art—all art—was even proclaimed in the 1960s by one critic-philosopher, the late Arthur Danto (who was overly impressed by the philosophical dilemma of Warhol's screen-printed *Brillo Boxes* sculptures, indistinguishable from the mass-produced everyday objects that they replicate). These deaths of painting and of art have proven to be, to quote Mark Twain, “greatly exaggerated.” Artists with respect for the

tradition of art and affection for their ancestors and colleagues somehow continue working with the goal of self-expression, not, say, hitting one's butt on a national magazine cover (which this mellow Californian hastens to add, is fine for those who like that sort of thing).

Walter James Mansfield is the best kind of modernist painter, in love with tradition—in his case, the work of Matisse, Picasso, de Kooning, Dubuffet, Motherwell, Pollock, and Joan Mitchell—without being trapped by it, confronting and assimilating these influences rather than shying away from struggle and growth. Mansfield was encouraged along this path of self-exploration by teachers Oliver Jackson at Sacramento State University and Wayne Thiebaud at the University of California at Davis. Mansfield earned his MFA in Painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. About his solo show at Vessel Gallery (“Walter James Mansfield's Material World,” *East Bay Express*, September 15, 2010), I wrote:

A noumenon, according to Kant, is an object that is discernible only to pure reason, but not to the senses or intuition; noumena ostensibly constitute the hidden reality behind the world of phenomena. While post-Kantians may have misgivings about such esoteric entities, making private imaginary universes visible to the public has been the goal of artists for a long time, and that aesthetic urge continues, despite repeated recent proclamations about the death of art. Noumenon is the title of a show of paintings by Walter James Mansfield, a Sacramento-based artist who clearly fits this artist profile by Barbara Seabridge: “someone who has ... the urgent desire to build something meaningful and useful, but [not] a house or chair or anything else that can be named”

and “starts building in the vague hope [of making] something correct and meaningful.” Mansfield fuses 1950s Abstract Expressionist painterly gesture and 1970s postminimalism to create complex contemporary landscapes and portraits.

Mansfield's “metaphysical landscapes” are arenas for action as Jackson Pollock's huge canvases were, “physical and psychological place[s] or environment[s] in which experiences, actions and events take place and are given context.” As Pollock composed himself to nature, Mansfield seeks to work in parallel with “physics, gravity, erosion, deterioration, etc.”

Seabridge later used a Kantian term to characterize art imbued with presence, soul and personality: “Paintings are neither houses nor chairs nor anything else that can be named. Things-in-themselves, that's what paintings are.”

A year later, I noted the mythic, timeless quality of Mansfield's paintings (“Here and Now and Then,” *East Bay Express*, September 14, 2011):

Mansfield's paintings in oil and enamel on canvas also flirt with archaism, but here cave art, with its prey animals and hunters strewn across earth-toned fields. Mansfield magically pursues his prey, attuned to how material and process affect and create imagery and meaning (“Emergent Behavior,” “Temporal Mentality”). His stylized, semi-abstract figures suggest botany (“Papillaria”) and geography (“Confluence”) as well as hunters and shaman-artists.

The ancient, archetypal feeling is particularly strong in the paintings of heads that Mansfield has made

**39. REFRACTED INSTANCE, 2010**  
25.75" x 19.75" acrylic, oil on canvas

**33. POURED PORTRAIT, 2003**  
14.75" x 11" enamel on paper  
Collection of Ken Ehrhardt and Luanne Lee





emerge from the artist's immersion in his materials, with the imagery shaped by the artist's improvisations with viscous, thick paint or thin, pourable, fluid paint into dense agglomerations, almost sculpted assemblages. These oval heads with their semi-obscured features are placed squarely and frontally within the picture planes into which they merge and simultaneously from which they emerge, with the format suggesting both cameo portraits and mirror reflections. The tension between the time-honored subject matter and the richly ambiguous, ambitious style endows these works with an unsettling but seductive beauty. As viewers recapitulate the painterly moves of Jackson Pollock, we puzzle out how Mansfield's complex works are made, participating (vicariously) in their creation; even the simpler ones challenge us to understand the artist's creative process. If today's art climate seems

throughout his career (while alternating with landscapes and other subjects). Mansfield's imaginary or visionary heads, which combine Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism, as well as Naïve Art (Art Brut)

at times to neglect visual power and beauty and depend too much on theoretical rationales, Mansfield's compelling syntheses of form and content ratify the dictum of Ben Shahn, that *Form is the*

*Shape of Content*, with the content, as with Cézanne, comprising the visible world, human perception, and artistic representation. Mansfield's 'head shots' are in continual metamorphosis, as ambiguously fleeting as our mental states. Identity is not a changeless entity, but a flip-book succession of states of mind.

If we follow in the artist's footsteps, examining his work chronologically, what is striking is the consistency of vision within the variety of the oeuvre. The earliest work in the show, *Head (Green, Sienna)* (1988) is expressionist in its emotional and pictorial power, with the all-over drawing and earth-tone palette already hinting at things to come. *Portrait for Sophia and Camille* (1991) is a black and white oil painting that resembles a Surrealist drawing by André Masson or Joan Miro; the pictorial field is articulated by hundreds of markings, suggesting topography more than portraiture, although the

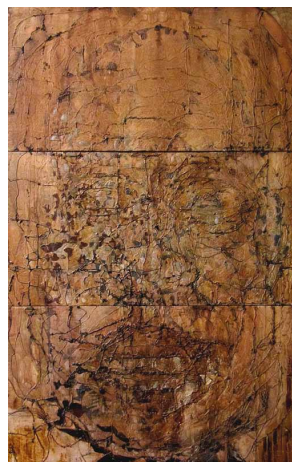
**I paint and sculpt to get a grip on reality... to protect myself.—Alberto Giacometti**

contours of the head are just discernible in this contemporary version of the giant-in-the-landscape fantasy. A work from 1995, *Primitive Self*, depicts a head of almost sculptural palpability; the heavy impasto texture of the oil paint—probably an homage to Dubuffet—evokes carved, eroded stone in this hypnotic image of combined sadness and strength. *Poured Portrait* (2003) and *Poured-Trail* (2004) show Mansfield working with poured paint, utilizing the accidents of the material to generate form and image with economy and wit; the latter, with its scaffold-

ing of black paint 'rebar' containing a glowing white light made from puckered paint, registers almost as a religious icon, light and energy transcending mass and matter.

*Angled Glance* (2010) and *Refracted Instance* (2010) show Mansfield in complete control of his technique of loose poured-paint drawing, creating contours that he further defines and refines by filling in the demarcated areas with color, creating shading, depth and pictorial reality. *Woven Identity* (2013) with its sculptural head composed of a tangle of brushstrokes set against a deep red background shows Mansfield at his most representational, while *Embedded Portrait* (2014) and *Topological Head* (2015) return to the flattened space charged with appearing/disappearing presences that recur in his work, ever strange and familiar, simultaneously. The man's face in *Forebear* (2010) looks ancient and weathered, due to the wiry poured-paint line drawing and the illusion of peeling paint on, perhaps, a plank wall: an ancestral figure from the distant past, gone but not forgotten, living on in memory.

Alberto Giacometti said that painting the human head was impossible, yet he spent the latter half of his career attempting to do so. I suspect that Walter James Mansfield would agree with those contradictory decisions, since human beings are bundles of contradictions and since "life in the material world" (to employ a phrase of the artist's) is rife with ironies that make sense only within the integrative, synthesizing, deep magic of art. ●



44. EMBEDDED PORTRAIT, 2014  
20" x 16" acrylic, oil on canvas

48. FOREBEAR, 2010  
72" x 48" acrylic, oil on wood