

Essay – Jordan West – *Go West Young Man*

Jordan West's *Go West Young Man* series depicts abandoned, passed by, and forgotten moments in the American landscape. West conceived of these paintings on his way home to the Southwest after living in New York. His stark and elegant paintings are fragments of Midwestern scenery from the vantage point of driving on long and desolate interstates.

As a traveler on a bleak and lonely road might be lulled into meditative contemplation while passing through a distorted extension of time, West examines moments and places typically obscured in our fast-paced world of motion and purpose. Time is suspended and the unobserved shifts into central focus. West's meticulous attention to detail and scale lends a hushed poignancy to dilapidated and forgotten spaces. Devoid of people, these empty roadsides, abandoned parking lots, and rundown gas stations are wistful snapshots of absence, memory, and decay.

West's work chronicles a faded world in stark juxtaposition to a dazzling color palette of vibrant greens, oranges, blues, and yellows. The mundane springs to life in simple, minimal lines that border on abstraction. His nearly photographic imagery is ordinary and familiar—telephone poles, cracks in the pavement, suburban driveways—depicting urban landscapes that are both common and remote, transforming ordinary scenes into rigorous studies of a forsaken America.

Bright green road signs along empty highways suggest the promise of the next exit, a chance for respite, a new possibility. A vivid orange sunburst on a gas station sign contrasts against a bleak white sky mirrored in a sea of blanched pavement and cracked sidewalks. A puddle of water at a derelict gas station reflects an inconceivably idyllic blue sky. Devoid of activity or potential for action, these paintings are disconcertingly full of hope, vibrancy, and expectation.

West's paintings are imbued with a melancholy reminiscent of Edward Hopper's stripped-down America-scapes. Hopper's world of empty diners and isolated railroads is accessible and familiar, as West's work implies a time and place just out of the reach of memory. It is the universal accessibility of the images and iconography of both artists that make their work haunting, familiar, and poignant.

West's work also calls to mind another characteristically American artist, Ed Ruscha. Ruscha fashions a universe of photographs and paintings in clean lines and deceptively simple and banal facades of car lots, roofs, gas stations and swimming pools. Roaming everyday streets searching for the awareness of real life as portrayed in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, Ruscha, like West, searches for the extraordinary, haunting, and boundless within worlds typically associated with stagnancy and economic hopelessness.

Jordan West's paintings invite the viewer to contemplate what has become of spaces, memories, and forgotten moments in time. What would happen if we returned to these places? The *Go West Young Man* series is a meditation on the sliver of colorful hope in an otherwise isolated, dilapidated, and overlooked American landscape.

Cyndi Conn
Visual Arts Director
Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe
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Trappings of the Mind: Jordan West's Premier Series of Abstruse Books

By Kathryn Crocker

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Desirous inclinations stem from the need to “close the gap that separates language from the experience it encodes,” according to Susan Stewart writes James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. This “gap” ponderously remains whether in slight, or gaping proportions. Individuals may exhaust epistemology to close this gap: excavating the depths of philosophy to meticulously understand phenomenology. No matter the taxing of the brain, however, the gap remains, which results in ever-present questions, endless scientific discoveries, and the continuation of philosophy as a field of study (among other things).

With reference to this beautiful notion that symbols might bring us humans closer to an experience, we use words. Rhetoric pervades as a means of person-to-person connection. Kenneth Burke, American philosopher, refers to humans, thus, as the “symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal,” which is ultimately, “rotten with perfection.”

Obsessions connote “rotten perfection,” like the tireless efforts to exact an understanding of reality (rather from an external, or internal perspective). As if attempting to defeat the Ego in order to glimpse personal truth, artist and writer Jordan West partakes in the self-reflexive act of introspection, his mind reeling with dense philosophical discourses. All the while, the artist knows (as is indicated in one of his books *Dialogues*) that “I” cannot see clearly the parameters of Ego. In *Dialogues* West refers to this idea in the following, “If you are the vase, how is it that you have any concept of what you appear to be?”

West's philosophical investigations—published in a series of abstruse art books—prove enrapturing. The artist's books “mark-off” certain parameters of his identity. The writing consists of a collection of West's fragmented thoughts and personal axioms. Clifford refers to such an act as the, “marking-off of a subjective domain.” The books serve as a counterpoint for the artist, allowing West to see himself more clearly, which extends to us readers the interior of his mind.

Carrying around partial phrases in file boxes for fifteen years, the culmination of these books is vast. The feverish trappings of the artist's obsessive speculations needed to be extricated in order to bring peace, so that he might “free himself of these thoughts,” says West. And, therefore, he writes. The artist has long since written, drawn, and painted. Although, to date, he has only one body of work that incorporates words on paper.

One book in the series, titled *Myth*, opens with two sentences, set in large typeface, on two pages—one sentence per page. Dense sentences require the reader to

carefully consider each phrase. Then, the following pages reveal one image after another, photo-documenting the artist in front of his studio. The expanse of white space on each page provides the reader with time to reflect on the problem presented by the artist. In *Myth* the problem is to consider suppositions that may arise based on the series of photographs within *Myth*—photographs of the artist in front of his studio. Conclusions are the readers' to discover, not mine to judge. Like most philosophical quandary there is no “right” answer, so to speak. However, considering the occult of the artist proves worthwhile—a supposed struggling genius, ragged, mysteriously beautiful, and standing before a “graffiti-ed” garage door.

I will now point to phrases in *TM (Trademark)*. Phrases like “extreme lucidity” prompt a response; the mind begins to search for connections. Either at the precise moment of reading these words, or at a later time, the reader may experience, “extreme lucidity.” Open-ended, short idioms fill the small, square book and its flawless pages—occasioning further investigation. The wordings—filled with conceptual potency—seem to loiter in the mind. “Your development was altered from the majority programme,” reads one page of *TM*.

West's writings seem derivative from another time, or space—more reasonably coming out of Paris during the Situationist International movement in the late 1950s. West's books stand in opposition to banal, consumer-culture. The artist's intellectual and psychological processes, resulting in the subsequent meticulously crafted books, serve to facilitate personal truth, which connect human to human. Thus, the books become precious, and fetishized—a source for internal revelation, which can occur for both the artist and reader.

In this current series, three of the six books are completed thus far, including *Myth*, *TM*, and *Dialogues. Your Place or Mine* (with lithographs from the artist) and *Broadside* are scheduled for completion in the first part of 2011. *Plan for a New American Home* is to follow.

Please note a “certificate of propriety” will not accompany these books.

Interview: Jordan West

ProxArt Magazine,

Literature - An Interview with Jordan West, February 8, 2011, Kathryn Crocker

Jordan West is known to paint the suburban landscape, but has recently ventured into book-making. Although primarily a painter, he has compiled these handmade books from a decade's worth of notes and thoughts. West's series of books include *Dialogues*, *Myth*, and *Trademark*, and are a form of abstract literature. Contributing writer Katy Crocker interviewed West about how his books are not necessarily a critique of suburbia, but may inspire a critique from the readers—if that is their natural reaction. He merely wants to document current states of our society. Make sure to check back later in the week for Crocker's analysis of West's artistic vision.

Although you recently created a series of books, you are primarily a painter. How long have you painted, and where did you study?

I have worked with the medium of paint for 20 years. I consider the work of the past eight years to be the developed work. Prior to that, the work was primarily a study of the material and process, and image collection. My formal studies were in the area of history, philosophy and evolutionary psychology; I studied at Hunter College in New York City. My formal studies were focused on learning about the concepts and thought patterns that would inform my work. The technique, approach and language of painting developed through a process of works accumulation.

What was the impetus for your new series of abstruse books? Why are the books personally and artistically significant for you?

In some regards it was an exercise in cataloguing—a complete catalogue of fragments of ideas, and persistent notions that have accumulated over the years. It also serves to function as a developing platform for the future conveyance of thought—a means to create a dialogue between the reader and myself, and between readers— without the investment of the painting. One can send out books to people; whereas paintings often require an established infrastructure in which to create a dispersed dialogue. They also serve to function as a personal, significant clearing of the mind and notebooks.

Both in your recent paintings and in the underpinnings in your new books, there is a sort of criticism of suburban America; can you speak further to that theme in your work?

I prefer to look at it as a chronicle. That is, I am presenting the image or language as chronicle evidence of the current state of certain aspects of our occidental society. I believe that the criticism is then activated when the viewer or reader observes the work. This is when an image or text has an influence on someone—if someone feels critical about the piece then this only serves to establish the fact that there are issues of importance in our society that are familiar and relevant to many. Hopefully the work will serve as a catalyst for thought and dialogue—this is where the critical process is, not in the execution of the work.

How have the books served as an artistic exercise for you? How is crafting words the same and different to painting?

I have had to edit my writing and consider the reader, which is similar to the formal construction of a painting and how a work becomes effective to the viewer. I seek to clearly present a specific notion, yet execute it in a tone

and manner that I consider relevant and an honest reflection of my thought process. The book format is also a portable device, quite different from the investiture one has with painting. It serves as a new formal challenge and there is a collaborative interaction with the printer of the books, Interbang Press, as I work with them in regards to their printing methods and approach to the graphic arts.

Where did the material for the books come from? In other words, what influenced your thoughts and writings?

Rhetoric. The concept of creating a text that taken as a whole almost quite imperceptibly creates an impression of meaning on someone; the precise meaning of which can only clearly be extracted after a careful reading, and a measured distance from the words. There is a strong influence of the underlying principles of Romanticism: fate, the sublime, isolation, dream, vision, and history.

You are a photographer, painter, and most recently book-maker. Has this interdisciplinary approach always been a part of your art practice?

Yes. There is no separation, or demarcation in the manifest presentation of artistic thought. Art should represent a totality of the artist's *life work*.

As a professional artist, do you feel that this interdisciplinary approach to art-making is important to the survival of the artist in general?

To some established, concerned institutions and individuals this approach to art would be considered extremely *counter-productive* to survival. It is often considered confusing, not easily categorized and structured for unproblematic consumption. So I think that as an artist one has to consider whether or not you can survive and produce with these concerns. I do find it rewarding myself to be able to look at another artist's work over the years and to see the links within their interdisciplinary approach to art—this is when you can really see the manner in which they think and this is when one really gets a privileged glimpse into the internal motivations of an artist.

Do you have any closing thoughts regarding your personal, artistic philosophy and your critic of contemporary culture?

One must minimize their concern as to the structure of the *art-machine*. There must be a persistent investigation, pursuit and development of the personal dialogue with their art as affected by their environment, history and interaction within and interpretation of society by the artist. This, then, can be manifested in a form as to create the programmed experience between artist and viewer, or reader. Contemporary culture is a construct and organism too massive and dynamic to effectively criticize. What one can do is to create work that is digested by this entity and then subsequently chips away at this ostensibly immutable mass through the criticism that is inherent in the observation process.

Article written by art historian, writer, and independent curator Katy Crocker.