

ARTFORUM

Paul Winstanley

1301PE

For the past three decades, British artist Paul Winstanley has been painting the future past—that utopian architectural imaginary of the postwar years concretized in a range of quasi-public/quasi-private milieus, from the airport to the hospital—making only the most incremental variations in his address of the subject matter from one



Paul Winstanley,
*Interior with Chairs in
Three Primary Colours*,
2010, oil on linen,
44 7/8 x 30".

show to the next. With this exhibition of eight oil paintings on linen, Winstanley remains consistent in his examination of modernity as a cultural phenomenon, but one that exceeds the narrower aesthetic parameters of modernism per se. The most obvious model for this work, in both substance and form, is, of course, the practice of Gerhard Richter. But whereas Richter delivers an exhaustive overview of the possibilities for painting today, a nearly complete remapping of the medium's terrain for the postmodern era, Winstanley restricts himself to a single path, and then moves along it at a snail's pace.

"Everything I see is in principle within my reach," writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his 1961 essay "Eye and Mind," and it is a maxim well suited to Winstanley, for whom seeing does lead to a kind of holding, or at least a very strong sense of beholding. Coordinating the work of the eye with that of the hand, he produces a convincing Photorealist tableau that is at once a two-dimensional image and a physical record of his own observing. And Winstanley's refined illusionism exploits this two-sidedness to the hilt in work that at first appears static, like a kind of window, only to become subtly activated—I want to say, enervated—as we begin to recognize the image as a reflection of seeing itself. But if everything Winstanley paints is, in one sense, "within his reach," it is typically rendered as though receding from his touch, with a gentle hazing of contour. The influence of Richter is evident here, and not just in the blurring, but in the way that it demonstrates the painter's distance from his object. However, whereas for Richter this strategy points to where photography's technologically extended vision breaks down, for Winstanley, photo mediation is almost irrelevant; his compositions are more often than not framed so that the rest of the world is abruptly cut off at the edge, as if he's already internalized camera vision.

In Winstanley's most recent series of paintings—mostly of an institutional waiting room furnished with colorful modern chairs and a few potted plants—the picture has been considerably sharpened, and yet the space appears remoter than ever. The generic modernity of the furniture, once a nagging source of suspicion, has become cozy. The accusatory question that shrouded so many of his earlier works—What happened here?—is directed outward into the space that we occupy at present. This is where the blur now resides, like a blanket of fog pulled over, though not fully covering, the traumatic consciousness of a period that reconciled us with the inevitability of violence.

In this room where nothing happens but waiting, one can still imagine the promise of a collective destiny, itself taking shape on the horizon of the historical disaster of total war. As nearly always with Winstanley, these paintings are devoid of human figures, and so at once forbidding and welcoming, or, in the language of Michael Fried, both "theatrical" and "absorptive." This vacated space is shown to us in repetition, the furniture and plant life rearranged in each instance to suggest an endlessly adaptable social structure that is nevertheless ruled by strict modularity. And perhaps it's precisely because nothing really changes in this room that the painter is compelled to stay put there as well, waiting, even after the wait is over.

—Jan Tumlir