
There's rhythm in the whiteness:

Walter Price

Matthew James Holman

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There's rhythm in the whiteness: Walter Price

by Matthew James Holman • 04.08.2021

'SAVE YOURSELF'. What kind of warning is this? The command is half-observed by mustard yellow and rides on a wash of paint that skids across the wooden panel of *swoosh* **FIG.1**, the final painting in the exhibition *Pearl Lines* by Walter Price (b.1989) at Camden Art Centre, London. An abstract indigo form resembling a tank or a coiled serpent rests in the foreground. A particularly turbulent mixture of grey and a pigment called 'super white' – the 'whitest ever' – hovers over an assumed horizon line like a thunderclap in a clear sky.¹ What is it that we should we save ourselves from: flood, war, temptation? The words seem to hark back to the four years Price spent in the United States Navy, aboard the USS Whidbey Island, when at any moment the situation might deteriorate into 'every man for himself'.

Price is one of the most original painters working today, an artist whose work whispers in an oblique visual language that appears to be at least partially hieroglyphic. *Pearl Lines* is his first major solo exhibition in the United Kingdom, but the fifth that bears this title. A feature of Price's playfulness with codes of repetition and difference, the titling of the show, as he describes it, is like a radio DJ exhausting a 'favourite song [. . .] a summer hit'.² Set across two large white rooms, the exhibition features fifty-one paintings and drawings that span Price's relatively short but prolific career, which began after he took up a GI Bill to study at the Art Institute of Washington, Arlington, in 2011.³

Dominating the first room are ambitious recent works produced during his residency at Camden Art Centre in early 2020, including seven large works on paper **FIG.2**, with such titles as *Move along your way as the days become a daze* (2020). These works were made when the world was a very different place – one might say dazed itself – when the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic were only just beginning to unfurl. The second space is a tightly hung display of fierce, gestural and predominantly abstract paintings made later in 2020 **FIG.3**. Given how closely these more diminutive works were created and are now shown together, it would be easy for the room to seem rushed or haphazard. Instead, it manifests as a coherent series of experiments; the artist's ruminations created in the heat of crisis.

Price's seven large works on paper confront the viewer with their scarcity of colour. The artist's work is known for its proliferation

of pop references, but here negative space frames and contains bits of paper, lists and ephemera from his studio. Price has worked on these pieces from all angles, crouching down and standing over them, searching for what he calls the 'rhythm in the whiteness' of the chalky-white exhibition space.⁴ In a process similar to that of Helen Frankenthaler, who also had a knack for juxtaposing bold forms, Price took his coloured paper off the easel and, armed with a mixture of oil and acrylic, wheeled the works around the studio. Footprints and smudges left by the body record the dance. Squiggles, lines and odd shapes imply a vast repository of objects that we can only catch a glimpse of. Like a printmaker who works from above, layering one thing over another, Price has produced works that resist easy categorisation, which inhabit the space between collage, painting and diagrams for imagined landscapes.

Viewers have come to expect exuberant, polychromatic canvases from Price; while such examples are indeed here in the second gallery space, the experience is like stepping into a hushed room where everyone is troubled by an unspoken secret. This is the first time that the artist, who has always worked more like a draughtsman, has used oil pastels in his multimedia practice. Markings in pastel are juxtaposed with carelessly dripped black paint; Twombly-esque lines are suggestive of tidal waves; and a sun recalls (to this reviewer at least) the rainbow drawings made by schoolchildren that adorned the United Kingdom's windows at the height of the pandemic. The result is like reading a poem in a foreign language in which, as though reading verse on a paper page, meaning is defined by the whiteness around the printed words.

Opposite hangs a series of smaller works that Price produced when he returned to his Brooklyn studio, which is purposefully dimly-lit, without natural light. Here are loose sketches of haggard men waiting in supermarket queues with surgical masks around their angular jaws, and brooding prisoners crouched behind jail bars **FIG.4**. Holed up in a city during lockdown, Price turned to drawing people. Titles like *Where's Your Mask Fool* are provocative, funny even, ironically intervening in the 'culture wars' discourse. *West stern* **FIG.5** is one of several titles that riff on nautical and Western symbolism; the work features a Stetson hat suspended in space above a collaged image of a frontier landscape that is synonymous with the titular film genre. The cowboy hat, the louche couch, the palm tree, the exercise yard: all are returned and repeated across Price's alphabet of references, abstracted from their context and set awash in a sea of seemingly arbitrarily applied paint. Often painted, the words in Price's works serve a dual purpose: on the one hand they are figural interventions in an overall visual composition, and on the other they beguile, provoke and tease.

Trying to conclusively 'work out' Price's figurative-abstract hybrids is a fool's errand, but one that this exhibition compels the

visitor to undertake. Try negotiating the titles *Whatchu think? Well he did put the picture in front my face* (2020) and *An US Issue* (2020), without imagining the private negotiations of a couple with relationship problems and the afflictions of a United States wrought with racism and injustice – specifically for an African American artist who grew up in the south. Like his sentiments on whiteness – whether in the exhibition space, the paper page, or racial power – Price’s dynamic works are far too complex to be reduced to a programmatic mark-making approach that merely equals a critique of our moment. But it is all there, to be found in subtle flashes of familiarity in a peculiar parallel universe. With their line markings and outlined rectangles, paintings such as *To accelerate the mayhem* FIG.6 and *Learning to love* FIG.7 look like rudimentary architectural sketches lost in space as they oscillate between muted pastel shades and heaving primary-coloured impasto. Arriving at the end of the show, we may not know exactly what we need to be saved from but the call from the paintings unifies us in mutual jeopardy, binding us together in a cacophony of colour and social signifiers.



Fig. 1 *swoosh*, by Walter Price. 2020. Acrylic, gesso and super white on wood, 48.7 by 64 by 6cm. (Courtesy the artist, The Modern Institute/Toby Wester Ltd., Glasgow and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph Patrick Jameson; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Pearl Lines* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2021. (Photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Pearl Lines* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2021. (Photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Pearl Lines* at Camden Art Centre, London, 2021. (Photograph Rob Harris).



Fig. 5 *West ern*, by Walter Price. 2020. Acrylic, flashe, photo and velcro on paper, 88.4 by 68.2 by 3.7 cm. (Courtesy the artist, The Modern Institute/Toby Wester Ltd., Glasgow and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph Patrick Jameson; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).



Fig. 6 *To accelerate the mayhem*, by Walter Price. 2020. Acrylic and gesso on wood, 48.9 by 64.1 by 5.1 cm. (Courtesy the artist, The Modern Institute/Toby Wester Ltd., Glasgow and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph Patrick Jameson; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).



Fig. 7 *Learning to love*, by Walter Price. 2020. Acrylic, super white and gesso on wood, 48.4 by 63.7 by 6 cm. (Courtesy the artist, The Modern Institute/Toby Wester Ltd., Glasgow and Greene Naftali, New York; photograph Patrick Jameson; exh. Camden Art Centre, London).

Exhibition details Walter Price: Pearl Lines
Camden Art Centre, London
21st May–29th August 2021

Footnotes

- 1** S. Cascone: 'Scientists claim this new paint is the whitest white ever made – and it could it [sic] help combat global warming', *Artnet* (27th October 2020), available at [n
ews.artnet.com/art-world/whitest-white-paint-global-warming-1918498](https://www.artnet.com/art-world/whitest-white-paint-global-warming-1918498), accessed 2nd August 2021.
- 2** Walter Price quoted from E. Okoro: 'Pearl Lines by Walter Price – dancing with whiteness', *Financial Times* (24th April 2021), available at www.ft.com/content/7f6c405d-e1a9-4491-ba54-f6ae0d98c3ce, accessed 20th July 2021.
- 3** Originally known as The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which provided a range of educational opportunities and benefits for World War II veterans, today the GI Bill is an informal term that refers to various programmes used to assist United States veterans back into civilian life. Price has explained that he would not have been able to afford art school without such a programme.
- 4** Price quoted from 'Walter Price on his exhibition at Camden Art Centre, 2021', *Camden Art Centre* (18th June 2021), available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yrr7XOQHTQ4, accessed 2nd August 2021.

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