



ROBERT HITE

IMAGINED HISTORIES • LIVING ON EARTH

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ESSAY

BY KARL EMIL WILLERS

There is a certain haunting quality to Robert Hite’s black-and-white photographs of architectural structures placed within natural landscapes. The ramshackle architectural forms – many on stilts – have a dreamlike and other-worldly appearance. They emulate meticulously rendered illustrations from a children’s book recast as documentary critique. The images are pregnant with impending narrative and, more often than not, seem to harbor future events that will run awry. For me, they encroach upon a distinctly southern gothic quality – Beau Radley’s place comes to mind out of Robert Mulligan’s film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (and though I am thinking of the movie, Harper Lee’s book also provides a masterful description of this isolated dwelling place made especially ominous by youthful imaginings). These are places of seductive curiosity and compelling attraction – on their very surface, they exude an undeniable sense of apprehension and foreboding. Always slightly removed and unquestionably out-of-bounds, these are properties where we are trespassing and very much in violation of others’ privacy.

The above reference to Harper Lee is apt, but it would be as easy to cite literary precedents for Hite’s images in Truman Capote, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Margaret Mitchell, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty or Tennessee Williams. Robert Hite is a son of the deep rural south. His imagery draws upon the memories of his own childhood during the civil rights era – a world steeped in proprieties and manners that was also pregnant with segregation, discrimination, and violence. The patched-together shacks and weather-beaten shelters are remnants from Hite’s youthful wanderings up creeks and through woods in the Virginia tide waters. Such structures hinted at isolated existences eked out at the edges of an

adamantly small-town culture, slightly removed either by necessity or by choice from what passed for civil life.

The documentary feel of the images is notably enhanced by their kinship with WPA (Works Progress Administration) and FSA (Farm Security Administration) photography of the 1930s. This look emerges from the starkly black-and-white photographic print, from the insistence on the edifices being frontal and centered, from the emphasis on the patina of gradual dilapidation. Something in the quality of these prints immediately recalls the impoverished sharecropper shacks and worn out substandard housing recorded by Margaret Bourke-White, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Arthur Rothstein, among other photo journalists of the Depression Era. The documentary effect is unmistakably enhanced when Hite’s architectural creations are placed within the natural landscape. Given the visual evidence offered in the photographs, it becomes palpably challenging to distinguish between the factual and the fictive. Whether fisherman’s shack or sharecropper’s cabin or laborer’s quarters, grain silo or smoke house or tobacco barn, the typologies of Hite’s constructions are always slightly intermingled and subtly mutated.

The evacuation of hue for tone – that is, the exchange of admittedly acrid color in the sculpture for the stark shades of black, white, and gray in the photographs – is a tried and proven means of establishing the look of gravity in visual culture. The look of the fairy tale found in the sculpture returns all the more powerfully as something quite different in the photographs of the same objects. Especially in photography and film and video, this arises partially from the very history of these media

and the progress of technology. In brief, snapshots and movies and TV were all black-and-white before they were color. This steady maturation meant that older – read “classic” – modes of production were able to build a vocabulary and even a language all their own.

The look-of-the-real that the photographs approach would be impossible to achieve without the meticulous attention to detail within Hite’s sculptures. The authenticity that emerges in the photographs could never have been achieved if the sculptures themselves were not so carefully finished. The documentary effect and the realistic illusion are successful, I am arguing, not so much from the mechanics of black-and-white reproduction, but rather from the exacting care taken in making the objects that are pictured. No matter how precisely it is orchestrated and calibrated, the camera – whether film or digital – reads the subtleties of color differently from the way it reads gradations from dark to light. At least in part, the effect of the real occurs because of the nuance and subtlety of the sculpture’s coloration is caught and conveyed, even within a black-and-white image.

Hite’s later color photographs (produced after the black-and-white images) shed more light on the artist’s paintings than his sculptures. The modernist Paul Klee provides a ready source for the quirky mix of geometric forms and biomorphic flourishes that appear in Hite’s canvases. However, far more idiosyncratic and distinctly American derivatives of this European tradition are at work here. Like his black-and-white photographs, Hite’s paintings exude the look of a mid 1930s aesthetic that takes European modernism as a model, but create something utterly unique. Early twentieth-century, Neo-Plastic painters in America – such figures as

Ilya Bolotowsky, Irene Rice Pereira, Charles Show, Leon Polk Smith, and Charmion von Weigand -- launched their own versions of Piet Mondrian’s pared-down, non-objective form. The house-like structures painted by Hite often appear to emulate these more derivative but infinitely playful stabs at geometric composition and rectilinear patterning.

A less rigid and more organic abstraction is also very much in evidence in the landscapes and backgrounds of Hite’s painting. Though undoubtedly harking back to the surrealist tendencies of Joan Miró and the cubist inflections of Wassily Kandinsky, the salient precedents for Hite’s compositions are again distinctly American. The biomorphic and nonobjective painters active in New York during the pre-war era – such practitioners as William Baziotes, Rolf Scarlett, and Albert Swinden – keenly inform Hite’s quirky curvilinear embellishments, his scumbled passages, his atmospheric washes. Hite’s vibrant photographic prints actually inform and enhance the reading and interpretation of his painting. In a very palpable manner, the indeterminate spatial configurations and mesmerizing color schemes found in these photographs reinforce and legitimize what has flourished for years within the artist’s palette.

Hite’s canvases attach less to mainstream and orthodox examples of European modernism than to their variation and mistranslation by provincial – read “American” – practitioners. Such distinctions are important to make, for this idea of being lost (and found) in translation is essential to an understanding of Hite’s artistic endeavor. In this art, there is always something of value and meaning emerging from the derivative, from the second-hand being promoted over (and above) the authentic. That which appears in the interstices – amidst styles and between media – becomes paramount and all important. The look being courted is outside the central current, at the edges of the mainstream.

Paintings are recognizably by the artist, but not as a result of any consistent – read “marketable” –

signature style. Hite is more consistent in content than in form, the appearance of the architectural structure within a landscape setting being the hallmark of his mature output. Though always possessed of a facility and skill at image making, Hite maneuvers and manipulates his chosen subject in a fashion that should never be misinterpreted as naïve or merely fortuitous. The artist is anything but unsophisticated in his shifting references – the seemingly unconscious and unpremeditated movements of the artist’s hand are, if anything, utterly deliberate and fully determined. This is made explicit in the paintings through the seemingly endless multiplicity of relatively arcane precedents and slightly obscure precedents invoked – this odd source or that quirky reference and then yet another.

Of course, this continuous habit of seeking and exploration that is endemic to Hite’s working method only increases and multiplies as the artist traverses between diverse media – painting here and sculpture there, now drawing and then photography. This interdisciplinary movement naturally lends itself to producing variations on visual ideas or mutations on emblematic themes. There is method to this free-flowing trajectory, for not only is the shifting between media a persistent tactic, it is constantly focused on a central theme. Hite remains attached to or obsessed with the iconic image of the dwelling in an environment.

For Hite, this imagery is intimately connected to memories of his southern upbringing, and the artist periodically returns to the rural enclaves of Virginia or the Carolinas to revisit origins and reinvestigate his inspirations. However, when making a case for the typically southern aspects of Hite’s art, one must recognize that the artist today resides and works within the Hudson Valley – an enclave in close proximity to New York and all that implies in terms of access to cultural and intellectual sustenance. Though the Hudson Valley is considered something of a refuge from the most intense and exhausting aspects of city life, it is also

a very short excursion to the most cosmopolitan and international enclave this continent has to offer. Within Hite’s photographic explorations, the displacement of a southern vocabulary and its insertion into a northern context does get to the crux of the matter. For those who know it and recognize it, the imagery’s deeply southern origins come through, no matter what. That rootedness in the south will always get into Robert Hite’s work. Resituating this imagery only serves to make it all the more vivid, verifying its authenticity and encouraging its recognition.

This basic logic of resituating is at work in Hite’s photographic project as a whole – it is visible in the artist’s removal of his fabricated sculptures from studio or gallery interiors, and placing them amidst outdoor surroundings. The dislocation becomes mesmerizing – the juxtaposition of the artificial and the natural plays itself out in many ways, but supremely in a confusion of scale. The sculptural models, being less than the size of actual buildings, take on an almost magical grandeur, as if the viewer could viably approach and enter. The wilderness landscape, in turn, is made oddly unnatural. Viewed as backgrounds for the undersized architectural models, every element of the environment appears massive, gargantuan, and colossal.

The question arises as to whether these images can sustain the burden of social references they imply, whether they allow viewers to recall and reexamine and rethink an all-too-serious underlying politics. It is virtually impossible to raise the specter of the southern states during the past half century without invoking issues of race and inequality within American society. Traces of the harsher social and economic and political realities of our times are embedded in Hite’s work. At stake is whether these almost seamlessly constructed translations fall over into opening up the familiar to question, into making the normal appear strange, into producing an abundance of alternative visions.

DUCKWEED PALACE

BLACK CREEK PRESERVE

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2006



PRAYER HOUSE

SWAMP

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2006



HUDSON MUD FLAT HOUSE

HUDSON RIVER

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2006



SEVEN DEADLY SINS

HELL BROOK FARM

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2007



MIGRATION HOUSE

APPLE ORCHARD

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2007



SMOKE HOUSE

SWAMP

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2006



RIVER TOWER

CLIFF EDGE, RHINECLIFF

DUTCHESS COUNTY, NY

2007



PICKET HOUSE

HELL BROOK FARM

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2007



BLACK CREEK BLACK

BLACK CREEK

BLACK CREEK PRESERVE

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2008



SISTER SISTER

HUDSON RIVER BANK

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2007



UPPER PLACE

ESOPUS ISLAND

HUDSON RIVER

2008



HARPERS FERRY HOUSE

JOHN BURROUGHS SANTUARY, SLAB SIDES

ULSTER COUNTY, NY

2008



SUMAC SHACK

ESOPUS, NY

2008



AMBER SUMAC

ESOPUS, NY

2008



WEDDING SHOES

ESOPUS, NY

2008



LILAC BLACK

ESOPUS, NY

2008



LILAC BLUE

ESOPUS, NY

2008



SUMAC TREE

ESOPUS, NY

2008



LAMENT

ESOPUS, NY

2008



WEEP
ESOPUS, NY
2008



LIST OF WORKS



CUBA, PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM KIMMEL.

The sculptures range in size from circa 6' high to 12' high ("River House") and from 2' wide to circa 15' wide. All the sculptures are made with mixed media, found materials, mostly wood and metal. The limited edition photographs are printed with archival inks on cotton rag archival paper. The photographs are of the sculptures placed in situ as captured and edited only in traditional darkroom fashion. Some of the color photographs are taken in the studio and then edited along with the backgrounds. A few of the color photographs are montage (i.e., "Wedding Shoes"). • The limited edition black and white photographs are offered in two sizes: 12"x 18" or 18"x 12" (horizontal or vertical) in an edition of twenty-five prints, and 18"x 27" or 27"x 18" in an edition of twenty prints. • The limited edition color photographs are available in two sizes: 18"x27" edition of seven prints, and 24"x 36" edition of five prints • There is an allowance for each image to be printed twice as oversized-prints or architectural installations (size to be determined).

DUCKWEED PALACE

BLACK CREEK PRESERVE
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2006
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PRAYER HOUSE

SWAMP
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2006
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HUDSON MUD FLAT HOUSE

HUDSON RIVER
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2006
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SEVEN DEADLY SINS

HELL BROOK FARM
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2007
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MIGRATION HOUSE

APPLE ORCHARD
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2007
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SMOKE HOUSE

SWAMP
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2006
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RIVER TOWER

CLIFF EDGE, RHINECLIFF
DUTCHESS COUNTY, NY
2007
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PICKET HOUSE

HELL BROOK FARM
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2007
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BLACK CREEK BLACK

BLACK CREEK
BLACK CREEK PRESERVE
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2008
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SISTER SISTER

HUDSON RIVER BANK
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2007
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UPPER PLACE

ESOPUS ISLAND
HUDSON RIVER
2008
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HARPERS FERRY HOUSE

JOHN BURROUGHS SANCTUARY,
SLAB SIDES
ULSTER COUNTY, NY
2008
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SUMAC SHACK

ESOPUS, NY
2008
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AMBER SUMAC

ESOPUS, NY
2008
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WEDDING SHOES

ESOPUS, NY
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LILAC BLACK

ESOPUS, NY
2008
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LILAC BLUE

ESOPUS, NY
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SUMAC TREE

ESOPUS, NY
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LAMENT

ESOPUS, NY
2008
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WEEP

ESOPUS, NY
2008
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WAVE, PHOTOGRAPH BY RYAN COLLERD.

ROBERT
HITE

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