

TIBOR DE NAGY

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Trevor Winkfield: *The Mermaid's Revenge*

By Raphael Rubinstein



Trevor Winkfield, *Self Portrait*, 2001. Acrylic on linen, 58 × 36 inches.

The Mermaid's Revenge

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Asked once if his poems contained hidden meanings, John Ashbery said they didn't for the simple reason that "somebody might find out what they were and then the poems would no longer be mysterious." It's easy to believe that Trevor Winkfield's paintings, bristling with precisely rendered, deeply enigmatic visual detritus, are riddled with hidden meanings. Like ancient hieroglyphs or comic book rebuses or tarot cards, Winkfield's paintings cry out for deciphering. This exhibition of paintings from 1991–2001 offered viewers countless opportunities to spelunk themselves into the artist's distinctive, phantasmagoric iconography, while also inviting us to ponder some fundamental questions about painting.

Most of the work in the show belongs to two series, one depicting exemplars of various vocations, another titled "Voyage." Also included is a painting titled *Self Portrait* (2001). Oddly (dare I say, mysteriously), the exhibition's title, *The Mermaid's Revenge*, derives its name from a 1993 painting not on view. The protagonist in *The Student* (1999) is, as Winkfield's figures nearly always are, an amalgam of human and non-human attributes.

This one sports a recognizable head, hands, and feet (in disparate colors and scales), while strange geometric objects serve as the torso and legs. The result is a kind of heraldic cyborg. Surrounding the student figure are several lightbulbs, a wooden chair, a yellow lyre, some chain-linked poles, and an alpine scene framed in a window. The background consists of interlocking, solid-color rectangles, which could be read as some kind of modernist interior but, more plausibly, as geometric abstraction. As always, the paint has been applied in the flattest, most neutral manner. At first glance, Winkfield's imagery also reads as flat, but quickly one begins to notice the nods to illusionistic space: judicious use of shadows and, in the lightbulbs, the reflections of windows which introduce three-dimensionality into the picture. However, the overall sense of the composition as totally flat still lingers. The fact that the artist begins with a collage is probably a factor in this effect, but it's also because Winkfield avails himself within each painting of various styles of illusionism. No single light source is implied. Each depicted object follows its own rules of representation. Winkfield also seems to delight in having his motifs interfere with one another. Notice, in this canvas, how the mountain view cuts off one of the lightbulbs in contradiction of any spatial logic. Something similar happens with the poles and the stylized waves in the painting's lower left corner. Clearly, the disparate imagery and decisive slicing owe much to a collage aesthetic. It comes as no great surprise to learn that Winkfield admires Kurt Schwitters, and that a visit to Schwitters's Merz Barn in England's Lake District as a teenager was crucial for him.



Trevor Winkfield, *The Student*, 1999. Acrylic on linen, 46 × 55 ½ inches.

In a 2010 interview with Miles Champion, Winkfield shared his appreciation of how Sassetta “often used ... people as commas and quotation marks across his chromatic planes, and if they got in the way of an architectural element—a column, say—he’d allow it to ruthlessly cut through a body. The band of pink—the abstraction—took precedence.” (His appreciation of Sassetta’s formal complexity is something he shares with the late

Shirley Jaffe, also represented by Tibor de Nagy and a fan of the great Sienese painter.) Speaking of “chromatic planes,” Winkfield consistently lets the block of color in his backgrounds wrap around the sides of the painting, while every depicted object or motif is abruptly snipped off (an aspect of the work that is usually lost in reproduction). Yet despite his tendency to privilege shape over subject, we can’t say of Winkfield’s work that “it’s all just about formal relationships.” Despite his admiration for Sassetta’s “ruthless” compositions, he is a painter of narratives; the myriad associations (and disassociations) among the things he depicts affect how we look at his paintings, how we think and see our way around them. In other words, the denotations and connotations of his imagery matter just as much as their purely visual function.



Trevor Winkfield, *Voyage II*, 1996. Acrylic on linen, 48 × 70 inches.

A gifted writer on art (see his collection, *Georges Braque and Others*, published by Song Cave in 2014) and a voluble interviewee, Winkfield is, somewhat surprisingly, reticent about the meaning of his imagery. One of the few occasions when he reveals himself is in a brief text titled “Some Clues,” in a modest catalogue of a 2008 show at Pennsylvania’s Erie Art Museum. In it, he describes the origins of one of the works on view at Tibor, *The Navigator* (2000). Inspired by Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers* (ca. 1894–1906) at the Barnes Foundation and how it bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he ventured his own version:

I conceived my own autumnal strider as an escapee from a polluted city, standing corseted at the head of a troupe of invisible refugees. Balanced precariously atop tree-trunk stilts, he wades gingerly through polychrome waves whilst checking the air quality via an inflatable Mercury (allusions to Noah dispatching the dove would not come amiss either, nor would a coal miner’s canary). Like Cézanne’s bather, my navigator is provisioned with fruit....

There's something in the way Winkfield describes the agency of his navigator figure that strongly reminds me of Walter Benjamin's famous description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920).

While it's fascinating to be given this peek under the bonnet, there are still plenty of mysteries left in *The Navigator*, including some probably not even suspected by the artist. The same goes for the rest of the show. Why the plump red tomatoes and three yellow belts in *Self Portrait*? What's up with the cascade of lozenge shapes in *Voyage I* (1995)? Or the three pastel-colored ice cream cones in *Voyage II* (1996)? (Winkfield wields a wonderfully eccentric color palette.) And what are we supposed to make of the resemblance between this painting's yellow windmill and a fork, spoon, and knife tied with a bow? At the age of eighty-two, Winkfield is still producing some of the most visually and conceptually intricate paintings of our time. This mini-survey made one hunger for a full retrospective of his work. Surely there is a curator at a museum in the US or perhaps in Winkfield's native England adventurous enough to embark on such a voyage!

[Raphael Rubinstein](#) is the New York-based author of *The Miraculous* (Paper Monument, 2014) and *A Geniza* (Granary Books, 2015). Excerpts from his recently completed book *Libraries of Sand* about the Jewish-Egyptian writer Edmond Jabès have appeared in *Bomb*, *The Fortnightly Review* and *3:AM Magazine*. In January 2023, Bloomsbury Academic will publish a collection of his writing titled *Negative Work: The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art*. Since 2008 he has been Professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston School of Art.