



Phil Joanou: *Tower of Babble*, 2000, oil on canvas, 61 by 45 inches; at Paul Sharpe.

prising the tower seem to symbolize the loneliness of human existence, as Joanou's brush bears down on an existential truth.

—Jonathan Goodman

Wendy White at Sixtyseven

Slow to admit the viewer, beguilingly sulky, the four paintings and four sculptures in Wendy White's bracing New York solo debut compel attention for several reasons. In the canvases, which measure 5 or 6 feet by nearly 8 feet, the artist works a vein of scruffy, brushy abstraction that conveys skepticism about the viability of its own vocabulary. Her palette includes rumbling, inflected blacks, chalky and electric tints and scarcely anything in between. She augments her acrylics with spray paint but avoids direct references to graffiti or "street art." And behind her congested compositions lies the promise of zooming, unbound space.

A mound becomes a maw in *Gapstuff* (2005), both a barrier to visual access and a portal through which access may be had. Multicolored bands, applied with a stiff, fat, carefully loaded brush, emerge from the murky blacks. (Howard Hodgkin uses this chromatically complex but tactilely anonymous device to other, more romantic, less toxic ends.) In three paintings dated

2006, the color is cleaner, the compositional decision-making is clearer and more deliberate, and the cramped movement of the brush originates more from the wrist and elbow than from the shoulder. The blacks in *Fruit Refraction* are alloyed with green, red and magenta, and they gain in depth and complexity in the vicinity of the cheeky squiggle, in spray-painted safety yellow, that fills up and holds down the lower right corner of the canvas. On the left side of *Grass Stain*, a bristling thicket of curves and spikes yields to undulating, graduated stripes; pinging black and yellow struts on the right buttress the chaos.

Tarry masses structure the contrarily titled *Chunk Lite*, in which White's palette recalls both the sonorous, black-framed color chords of Max Beckmann and the skittish neon weirdness of Ed Paschke. This churning painting threatens to fall apart, so the artist, in an uncharacteristic failure of nerve, stabilizes it by reiterating the corners with slim, taped-edge wedges of color. But the painting is full of surprises: an inverted blue-on-umber teardrop shape at the bottom center; a glowing bar of color that contains pure white; and wispy, barely legible swipes of the brush that substantiate a scuffed, black void.

White considers herself as much a sculptor as a painter, but the four floor-based works

clustered in the middle of the gallery functioned as addenda to the canvases. Steel poles stuck into pails of cement are decked out with fake fruit, Styrofoam and duct tape. Their palette is similar to that of the paintings, and they convey the same sense of plastic investigation and marshaling of visual means. But they are finger exercises compared to the concerti of the paintings. In concealing her virtuosity behind unglamorous color and an unsuave touch, White reveals a different order of virtuosity, deriving compelling effects from blunt, artless means and plumbing the bottomless dichotomies of structure and formlessness, reason and oblivion, scaffolding and swamp.

—Stephen Maine

Sarah Plimpton at June Kelly

The 12 new abstract oils on linen (2004-06) that were in this show are easily underestimated, as the subtle handling of form in Sarah Plimpton's most successful works only slowly reveals itself to the beholder. The compositions of her paintings, their shapes and textures, bring to mind a variety of examples of early modernism, with a slightly archaizing effect that places her latest pictures on the margins of the art world—which is fine. These are works that invite introspection.

Plimpton, who has frequented the literary worlds of Paris and New York, and who writes poetry and produces prints and artist's books (one was included in the exhibition), began more than 35 years ago to incorporate into her work abstract signs inspired by

the letters of the alphabet. One of the more magical paintings here was *Another Letter* (30 by 36 inches), in which a large "A" or "H" (its open top confounds a secure reading) rises on tubular verticals that are like tall bent legs. A closed, notched, irregular geometric form in light gray and brown seems to hang from the top right edge of the picture, balancing the configuration. Although the shading on the suspended form implies volume, it is executed too ambiguously to allow us to fully imagine its contours. Such spatial confusion, along with the brownish hues, reminds one of Analytic Cubism, while the work's awkward drawing and blunt shapes are reminiscent of Marsden Hartley. A blue-gray atmosphere surrounds the shapes, with a lighter value and greater concentration between and to either side of the letter's legs, as if massing there. Plimpton's feathery brushstrokes deny the solidity of forms, though the medium is often gently scumbled, imparting some density to the surface. Interestingly, Plimpton further conveys a three-dimensional effect by seeming to wrap the forms around the edges of the canvas.

Could I Ask (20 by 24 inches) might read as shapes seen from a bird's-eye view, were it not for the cropped disk in the top right corner, which seems to perch like the sun or moon in a sky. As elsewhere, here Plimpton achieves in her interlocking forms the effect of floating through space, with the contours breathing and bleeding. Plimpton creates a kind of symbolic landscape inhabited by dynamic yet indecipherable signs.

—Michaël Amy

Wendy White: *Fruit Refraction*, 2006, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 72 by 95¼ inches; at Sixtyseven.

