

**Daniele D'Acquisto**  
***In the name of white***

When seeing a color, we certainly do not see only a range of electromagnetic vibrations. We also experience, mostly unconsciously, its emotional effect, which can be determined rather accurately: color gives a specific emotional thickness to experience. In his works, Daniele D'Acquisto tells us about the color white, which is actually the color of light, by virtue of its physical quality – it is the color that best reflects light waves. However, the identity between white and light is not limited to the physics of waves. It is very deep and goes beyond the dimension of reality, extending into the symbolical dimension, too. White includes pairs of opposites: reflection and absorption, life and death, presence and absence. It undecodes the absence of color, its “zero degree”, the phantoms, the apparitions, the fear, the uneasiness. D'Acquisto's research concentrates on immaculate paper, evaluating its potentialities and limits, then cuts out parts of it, which it shapes according to pre-determined forms; subsequently, it superimposes them layer upon layer, and fixes everything on a panel, so as to obtain reliefs. These can be scanned and recomposed by our eye into forms and images that are recognizable, but ultimately de-materialized. In some of these painting-sculptures, we can recognize groups of people of all ages, all looking upwards, as if they waited for something that has yet to come for us who look at the work. The attitude of these figures (in the *Waiting For* series) reminds us of the images we find in sacred art paintings that show ecstasy scenes involving saints, or scenes where we see an apparition related to Romantic mysticism. In this case, white becomes the color of the divine, which is always linked to luminous manifestations, and can be identified with conscience.

In D'Acquisto's works we see not only this presence-absence – we also find panels that possibly hint at certain film framings, where everybody looks upwards waiting for the heaven-sent intervention of a “Super-Hero”, or also, more simply, the perspective of an unconceivable terror that encodes our days, or the small apocalypses of everyday life, wrapped in banality. Banality also becomes the ‘logo’ of our time, a time that is unable to get in touch with the reality of our body, and always pushes us to search for ‘other’ things.

A second group of works (*Floreal Extension*) reproduces a series of portraits of old people, adults and children – from whose heads grow flowers and leaves. The melancholy they express is not compact and opaque, but tied to our psychoses, and can change itself into a myriad humor particles, sensations, and dreams – an atom dust, which constitutes the ultimate substance of the multiplicity of things. Depriving

language of all weight (as happens in works veiled by plexiglas layers that lead us towards shadows inhabited by misty grey shades) in order to make it more similar to light (sometimes moonlight), and introduce the shadow of its absence, also means to recognize the ethereal influences that connect macrocosm and microcosm.

At the center of creativity is the theme of white – in modern art the white of the canvas, or of paper, is the symbol of the artwork as a “denied reality”, a search for the absolute that pushes to the extreme limits of utterability, and frees forms from their dependence from mimesis, suggesting a new ‘optical unconscious’.

Marisa Vescovo

## **MARGOT QUAN KNIGHT**

### ***Est enim tempus?***

Does time exist? This question, asked by Augustine in the 11th book of his *Confessions*, marks a radical break in the history of Western thought. Modernity begins here, in the 4th century AD, with the anxious reflections of the bishop of Hippo, who reveals his painful torment for being unable to rationally capture the enigmatic essence of time and of its whirling flow. “Dissipated in the succession of times I do not know” and “dismembered in the tumult of events”, Augustine views the traditional division into past, present, and future as a shaky illusion, given the fleetingness of the present and the impossibility to reduce it to a solid, extended entity. What he expresses is a totally modern feeling of anxiety, like the one Heidegger – himself a careful reader of Augustine – would describe more clearly 15 centuries later, talking about *Geworfenheit*, the condition of “being thrown”, as the founding quality of being, which is aware of its own limits and of its being plunged in the abyss of temporality.

However, in the *Confessions*, Augustine’s strict analysis of the nature of time leads him to a decisive intuition: *In te, anime meus, tempora metior*. In you, my spirit, I measure time.

Time does not have any existence per se – a rational analysis will never be able to seize it. It is our inner self that generates time. Time is nothing but an extension of our conscience, an inner space of our soul. Actually, Augustine argues, it is we ourselves who measure the impression the passing of things makes on our soul, and organize the extension of past, present and future by means of present perception and memory. Thus conscience finds continuity and duration within our impressions, spreading itself harmoniously and naturally between memory (past), attention-vision

(present), and expectation (future).

Both recent works by Margot Quan Knight, *Portrait of a Woman 1947-2007* and *Window*, reverberate Augustine's intuition of time as the product of our conscience and of our insight. The initial question that prompted the artist to create these works is actually generated by the mystery of the subjective experience of time, with its distortions and unpredictability - for instance, a few minutes can seem extremely long when the individual is worried, and conversely, in the flow of memories, months and years may seem to contract into a few fleeting moments. In *Portrait of a Woman*, the artist mounted, in an extremely rapid succession, a series of different single photo shots, which show, in the foreground, the face of her mother, from the remote years of her early childhood until the present day. It is a lightning-fast visual account, built in real time through a phenomenology of everyday life: moments of distraction, private scenes, and details shared by everyone in their everyday life. The continuity of the narration is given by the unfolding of time and of the seasons of life, made evident by the rapid changes that affect the woman's face. A few decades, full of events and developments, are amalgamated into a less than two minute long video. While the artist uses this strategy to emphasize her wonder at the fleetingness of life and its evolution, which is still in progress, *Portrait of a woman* is also a first, immediate meditation on the problem of time, which reveals an effort to identify a possible thread of continuity.

*Windows* is a technically more complex work, a video installation built on a blurry photographic image of Margot Quan Knight's face. On it, the artist projects a video montage with the traits of her grandmother, of her mother, and of herself. The difference between these two heterogeneous elements, photo and video, is not immediately perceivable. On the contrary, it is organized so that the first photo image, static and inaccurate, receives a series of details and additions from the elements projected onto it, letting the faces of three generations of women flow one after the other, in an almost physiognomic attempt at reconstructing a strictly private family genealogy, tracing the artist's own face, present and future, to the ones of those who have come before her chronologically. In this work the feeling of continuity, which had already been captured *in nuce* in *Portrait of a Woman*, comes to its conceptual and emotional awareness, and turns out to be very close to Augustine's intuition of conscience as the place of time, but also to the 20th century, and to Henri Bergson's reflections, which feed considerably on those of the bishop of Hippo. In the words of the French philosopher, the static, unusually sharply-defined image of memory loses its value, for it is the product of rational analysis, which does not capture the full, flowing reality of memory. Only duration, thanks to its mobility, is the source that can reveal the mechanisms of time. "Inner

duration is the continuous life of a memory that extends the past into the present”, Bergson argues, and his reflection applies perfectly to the work of Margot Quan Knight. She rejects the abstract quality of a single image, or a single portrait, in favor of a communion between different elements (the faces of the three women), in order to condense the actual continuity of a family’s life experience. Here, the web of time is rendered in its natural fluidity, where past memories, present perceptions, and future expectations come to the synthesis of a harmonically complete concordance. Each of the three times actually received information, illumination, and a deeper perspective from the other, forming a layered structure that is as necessary as it is potentially inexhaustible.

Both *Portrait of a Woman* and *Window* use the image of the face to tackle the issue of time. This choice has a strong symbolic value, which recalls an extremely rich tradition in the history of Western thought – from the inquiries into physiognomy of Romantic thinkers, who sought in the human face the somatic traces of man’s likeness to the divine (*in Your image and likeness...*), down to the reflections of Emmanuel Lévinas’s, whose moral philosophy reaffirmed the value of the face as the very first meeting place in the mutuality of human knowledge. For the French thinker, the meeting with the face of the other is the mark of an otherness that is close to us, an otherness that reveals, and makes possible, every form of community life and sharing.

Thus the crucial importance of the face in Quan Knight’s research is indicative of her attempt at averting the feeling of uneasiness generated by the impossibility to rationally control time - and at recapturing harmony, first of all through the gestures and stories of her family. This intimate dimension is subsequently elevated to a universal dimension, through the metaphorical use the artist makes of it, turning it into the object of empathy, of identification, something everyone can feel through the immediate evidence and recognizability of the images.

Next to these video works, the artist has created a series of new photo shots, where the gesture of the artist seems to concentrate on an apparently opposite practice with respect to that of *Portrait of a Woman* and *Windows*. The subjects are visual fragments of falling objects, frozen sprouts of water, and home-life gestures captured in their painterly volume. These images are almost impossible in their incisively visual fixedness. They emanate a fascination that comes from their extremely thick symbolic condensation, not unlike that of the poetic word, which gets concentrated up to extremely high degrees of semantic density. Here, the narrative quality of the two preceding video works becomes less significant, leaving room for a more enigmatic interrogation that once again reveals the artist’s desire to inquire into the sense of time by turning

to prosaic normality and the domestic spaces of everyday life. This time Quan Knight tries to decompose the continuity of movement, the fluidity of events, fathoming the almost abstract immobility of a single image. Like a paradoxical demonstration built on an *ad absurdum* reduction, these shots again confirm the perception of the impossibility to conceptualize time by dividing it into rigid, arbitrary categories. All these photo representations of objects and people, including the artist herself, inevitably recall events and thoughts that preceded and generated them, restoring them back to the full continuity of time and life. Therefore, the thin line that accompanies these events becomes the positive propulsive force of an ever more determined will to understand, and become involved into, the current everyday events of the world.

This humanist will to interrogate reality, which characterizes the whole work of Quan Knight, can be easily resumed in the formula '*taking care*', a favorite with the European existentialist culture of the 20th century. It is not by chance that the artist has given this title to a photo series she did in 2003 - *Taking Care*, where the subjects of the shots are plastic reconstructions of dismembered, fragmented bodies. Hands and arms, along with unrecognizable portions of limbs, become the silent metaphors of an emotional urgency that builds on the score of a surrealist grammar, and aims at generating a feeling of bafflement in the spectators, forcing them to reflect on the hidden violence that characterizes modern time. The yielding sinuosity of these images, set in home environments and indefinitely open spaces, suggests both an empathic invitation to renew your approach to the times and thoughts of others, those who are closest to us and share our most private everyday life. Indeed, what clearly emerges is the symbology of the embrace, viewed as protection, as a containment wall against any kind of dismemberment and shattering.

This emotional strategy can also be observed in the *Veins* (2004) series, where the artist appropriates the practice of embroidery to represent the dispersion of blood spilling out of garments and living creatures, as well as the flowing of traces of wine dropping from a glass. The image of the hemorrhage, made inerasable by the weft of embroidery, is once again a symbolical representation of a state of alarm and danger - almost a harbinger of what could happen to the soldier who wears this uniform, but also a signal of the persistence of memory and the overflow of individual emotionality. In *Veins* there is no longer any distinction between animated and inanimate objects – both are destined to go adrift, but within this shared destiny Margot Quan Knight seems to seek a stop, a possible suture to interrupt the dissolution and restore a stable balance in the relationship between the objects and our perception of them, past, present and future.

In many respects, Quan Knight's work seems to insistently inquire into the very mechanisms of uneasiness and implosion, into the thin threads that hold the poise of a difficult balance. The artist already dealt with this theme in *The Hunt* (2004) series, a photo survey on the life of couples aimed at reconsidering, from a contemporary perspective, the decadence of the American Pioneer mythology, and the current impossibility of that traditional culture, made of stable certainties and unshakable values. A similar structure, although more direct and concise, is also the theme of a new video installation, *Support* (2007), which shows the impossible vital cycle forcibly experienced by a woman and a man, united by one single medical tube, which unites their breaths. This situation is, clearly, physically unsustainable, due to the rapid exhaustion of oxygen – but the artist tries to prolong it by means of an infinite *loop*, which exacerbates to paroxysm the metaphorical image of two symbiotically organized lives, unable to diverge and acquire the stability of autonomy. Thus, in Margot Quan Knight's work, independence and the acceptance of one's inevitable solitude turn out to be extreme experiences, regulatory ideals open to philosophical interrogation and restored to the mystery of individuality and singularity.

A recent, particularly effective image is *UnDress* (2007), which shows Margot Quan Knight in a bridal gown, on her wedding day. The white dress, solemnly waving in the air, enfolds the body of the young woman, and is captured an instant before falling on the ground, after the artist has taken it off at the end of a day of ceremonies and celebrations. There is no time left, another day is about to fall into the oblivion of the past, but it only takes an instant, an exercise of concentration, and that dress will forever remain suspended in the air, the witness of a perfect reconciliation with time and the secret of memory.

Luigi Fassi