

Atmospheres

Francine Prose

In *The Curve of Binding Energy*, John McPhee's book about the nuclear physicist Theodore Taylor, there is a memorable scene in which Taylor is making himself a cup of instant coffee in his kitchen and listening to a recording of Bach.

"Such a simple theme," Taylor says. "The variations must have been the product of a very clear thinker, because the patterns are such a systematic exploration of a lot of different possibilities. Up pyramids. Down pyramids. There's a periodicity to it. Structural patterns like those are the kinds of things that appeal to the theoretical physicist—the combination of predictability and surprises. The measure of greatness of a composer is his ability to combine these. The way I like to think about physics is that there is an exact analogue to the composer, the creator—the knack that Bach had for putting the world together in a way that is somehow predictable but also full of surprises."

I've always loved this passage: the unanticipated way in which the scientist thinks about art. I've thought of it often, and I've thought of it very often when I've thought about the work of Terry Winters. This is in part because he finds inspiration in technical diagrams and texts, in books about mathematics and engineering, because one senses the influence of biological and physical science on his art—but also because his work so often walks the line or the tightrope (in fact a series of lines and tightropes) between art history and scientific breakthrough, between the Paleolithic cave-scrrawl and the most advanced digital image.

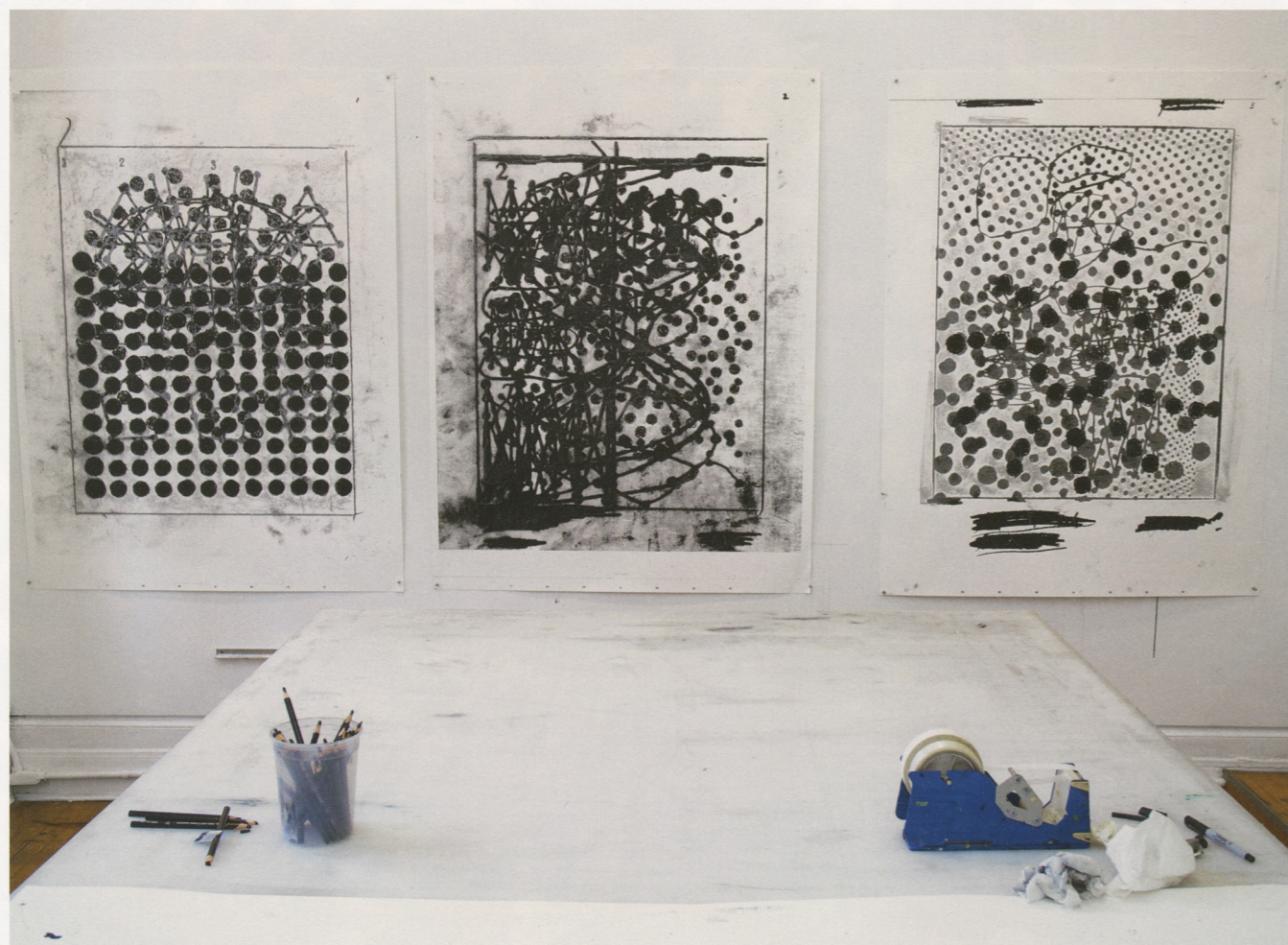
Like all art that holds our attention, and that we find (to use a word that I realize has been going in and out of fashion) beautiful, Terry Winters' prints are the result of a strange and ambitious project. Though to say "result" suggests a conclusion, whereas the nature of the project is

such that no conclusion is possible, it has no end. The image is complete, there is nothing else to be done—even as the artist knows there is something beyond this, something closer to what the artist is trying to achieve. In which case there is no choice but to begin again. To fail better, as Samuel Beckett so grimly and eloquently put it.

This essential elusiveness—the notion that the next print, the next painting, the next poem or sonata or novel will be the one that solves the riddle—is the carrot, the bait-and-switch that keeps the artist working in alternating (or simultaneous) states of elation, hope, and despair. That is because he has set himself a task like something in a Greek myth: Find a way of describing what it is like to be alive today! Describe what it means to be human, how it feels to exist in time and space, history and nature—and (here is the hard part) do it without any words! Or recognizable images, or the tropes and signs we humans have learned to fall back on, in our attempts to communicate whatever we think we might know.

The point is to tell the truth, but, as Emily Dickinson wrote, to tell it slant. And in the case of the abstract artist, to tell it *extremely* slant. To evoke an emotional and cerebral response without resorting to any of the usual ways in which artists have learned to tap into our thoughts and feelings. To work by indirection, by association, to sidestep the familiar and well-worn paths that the visual artist constructs between the hand and the mind of the artist—and the eye and the mind of the viewer.

Terry Winters' prints inspire us to consider certain ideas, they conjure up certain words—*atomic*, *biomorphic*, *technology*, *digital*, *particle*—almost as if they were nonsense words whose meanings we somehow know, or had learned and forgotten and are now remembering again but



without the ability to explain them. We recognize the existence and the growth of vocabulary, but a new vocabulary, a personal one with correspondences to our own and perhaps to the individual vocabulary of each individual viewer.

Then where are we getting these ideas when we look at these prints? Not so much from the marks on paper as from our sense that these marks are in constant motion, swarming over the surface the moment we look away and then, the moment we look back, returning to their rightful places, the positions in which we initially found them: the places in which they belong. What is it about these works that makes these lines and circles seem to thrum and pulse in a rhythm that changes from print to print in a natural progression—like the movements of a symphony, or the songs in a cycle?

They create an odd synesthesia, they make us hear sounds, music—the way the paintings of Arthur Dove can seem to make us hear a foghorn, the way a Mondrian canvas can make us hear jazz—except that these prints make us feel that we are hearing music that has not yet been written, music that resembles the sounds we hear when we open the window in the morning and hear the reassuring, maddening, energizing noises (bird song, traffic, sirens, rain) we recognize as life.

I spoke with Terry Winters at the Two Palms Press, a loft space in Soho where his prints were being made. The studio was a very pleasant place to be, partly because it was clean and simple, partly because there was so much excellent art (Chuck Close photographs, prints by Peter Doig and Elizabeth Peyton) on the walls and shelves, but mostly because the place has the feel of a shop in which people are taking pride in doing something really well—an extremely rare thing these days, rare perhaps at any time, though I'd like to imagine that a similar competence and sense of purpose pervaded the workshops of Carpaccio and Hieronymus Bosch.

The first thing Terry Winters explains is that these prints are being made with a special kind of ink—the ink that's used in books printed in braille. This seems perfectly right for these pieces, not just for the obvious reason that the discovery of this ink reflects the culmination of a scientific search, but because the qualities of the material—its particular black, its pleasantly grainy texture, its slight relief off the page—functions like yet another transmitter in the service of art that so vividly bounces and beams information and mystery, motion and life from the hand of the artist onto the page and off the surface toward the eye of the fortunate viewer.

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