

March 2021

James Bishop 1927–2021

In February, the American painter James Bishop died in Blévy, located to the west of Paris, where he had lived since the 1980s. Annemarie Verna had introduced me to James Bishop at the opening of a Donald Judd exhibition in her gallery in 1987. Bishop's passion for painting, music, film and literature along with his tremendous connoisseurship was most impressive, while his irony and scepticism was captivating. As the director of the Kunstmuseum Winterthur I built up a group of paintings and works on paper by Bishop for the collection. In 1993 I curated the retrospective that travelled from Winterthur to Paris and Münster (Westphalia); the catalogue included a conversation that I had conducted with Bishop and this became a frequently cited reference for addressing his work. Not only that, but Jim became a good friend, who over the years often stayed with my wife and me in the summer vacation at Soglio in the Val Bregaglia, where we went on long treks through the chestnut forests.



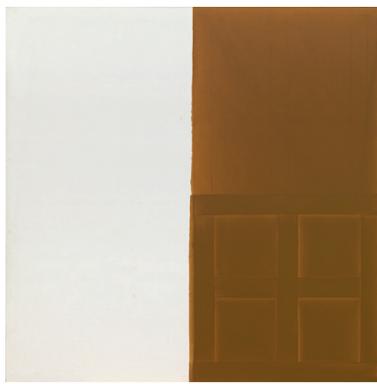
photo: Dieter Schwarz

The following passages are taken from an essay that was published in the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” in 1994, and from the third volume of the Kunstmuseum Winterthur catalogue of drawings published in 2017. The portrait photo of this Southern Gentleman – Bishop came from Missouri – was taken by Jan Jedlicka at the opening of the exhibition Hommage à James Bishop in Winterthur in 2007.



James Bishop at Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2007, photo: Jan Jedlicka

James Bishop's paintings are based on simple scaffoldings, which appear like elementary derivations from the square format of the picture, while also representing a typology of shapes. These structures are partially covered with layers of oil paint in fine membranous expanses. This is clearly not a matter of painting over a preconceived drawing and erasing it; rather, the gestures of the painter are brought to a halt, stalling the emergence of the shapes. Bishop introduces a temporal quality to his painting, in which every move is undertaken in extreme slow motion.



Jacob, ca. 1974, oil on canvas, 194 x 194 cm
Kunstmuseum Winterthur, photo: SIK-ISEA, Zurich

Towards the end of the 1960s Bishop began to work on brown, white and grey paintings. Their air of hovering between closure and welcoming transparency poses a blunt challenge to the dogma of the definitive finality of the monochrome picture. The way the paint flows across the picture plane to agglomerate along the edges of the shapes produces expanses varying in terms of thickness and depth. The oppositions of cause and effect, precondition and consequence, event and history are annulled; Bishop's painting oscillates between these poles, which are rendered inoperative for the duration. Dividing lines form where painted areas meet: this produces an intimation of posts and crossbeams creating their own spatial context. The subtle differentiation of the surface seems to emerge by itself, in a comparable manner to the subdivisions in Ad Reinhardt's black paintings.



Untitled, ca. 1975–1980, pencil, crayon and oil on paper, 19.8 x 24.1 cm
Kunstmuseum Winterthur photo: SIK-ISEA, Zurich (Philipp Hitz)

A painting from 1975 composed of two ochre-coloured sub-squares one above the other was entitled “Jacob” by Bishop, the French translation of his first name James. A self-portrait, perhaps? If you seek the subjective, Bishop answers with historical reminiscences, but if you think you have found the materially objective he refers to his own biography: brown and grey are ciphers standing for personal experience – meanings that emerge one after the other from the nameless colours. As far as Bishop is concerned, the picture only exists if it points beyond its own materiality. He asserts, “I think that painting is a language,” and quotes the words of Alban Berg on Schönberg, “you just have to learn the language and then Schoenberg's music is not difficult at all.”



Untitled, ca. 1980–1990, oil on paper, 19.2 x 25.6 cm
Kunstmuseum Winterthur, photo: SIK-ISEA, Zurich (Philipp Hitz)

In the small grey paintings on paper of the last decades of his life Bishop still worked in oils. With calculated imprecision, he playfully created unexpected shapes without sharp contours, by allowing the paint to flow or congeal. In the A and X signs which appear in these paintings as positive or negative shapes one can recognize hints of a construction which articulates the picture plane. Here Bishop drew on a stock of visual memories, such as the surroundings of his house in Blévy or references to art history that only he could fathom. Bonnard and Vuillard played a predominant role in this respect, in keeping with Bishop's life in France. He made their attention to the experience of the particular his own path to follow, in no way underestimating the depths plumbed by their preferred colours. The poet John Ashbery, who was a friend of Bishop, once commented on Bonnard: “The joy is there, certainly, but it remains potential, modulated by something dark and serious.”

Dieter Schwarz