



# CATE WHITE

COUNTERING THE CULTURAL  
TRANCE OF NORMAL

INTERVIEW AND PORTRAIT BY **AUSTIN McMANUS**

**ON AN UNCHARACTERISTICALLY HOT MAY AFTERNOON** in Oakland, California, I visited Cate White at the home and studio spaces she shares with her partner, Rory, who appears in the majority of her paintings. Charismatic, deeply introspective and welcoming, Cate’s possesses those qualities we value in those in our lives. We conversed on a multitude of topics ranging from gentrification, the feeling of being an outsider, elitism, coffee addiction, fluorescent paint palettes and Oakland police sex scandals. A little about art, a lot about everything else. The rest of our banter is detailed here, a similar dialogue, with a little more about art.

**Austin McManus:** You grew up on the California coast in Mendocino County, then predominantly around the Bay Area and have now been in Oakland for a while. Living in Oakland must be drastically different from life in Mendocino.

*Cate White:* I actually grew up in inland Mendocino County on a ridge above Anderson Valley. I make the distinction because the inland culture is way different than the coast, as in way more redneck than hippie. I wore Wranglers and rode around in jacked up 4x4s, and I didn’t quit chewing Copenhagen ‘til I was 33. I lived on the coast in my 20s, moved to San Francisco at 30, and have lived in the same spot in the 'hood in Oakland for the last eight years. I never felt at home living in the Bay Area until I moved to Oakland—the 'hood actually felt very familiar. It’s the closest thing I found down there to the way I grew up, so it’s not as different as you might think. It’s a class thing, I guess. So, what I like most about it are the friends I’ve made, especially Rory, who figures hugely in my art and my life. Living so up-close to the struggle with the people I spend my time with expanded my consciousness and shed light on why I could never get excited about the comforts, pastimes and security available

to me as a college-educated white person. Those things are too removed from real-life suffering for them to have meaning for me. So my social world in the 'hood made me understand the nagging feeling I’ve always had that something isn’t right. I always thought it was because I was a fuck-up, but I came to know that it was because something really *isn’t* right.

**Is it true you didn’t start painting until you were 30-years old?** Yeah, it’s true. Like I said, I was kind of a fuck-up ‘til then. Painting pretty much saved me.

**Where you live in West Oakland has seen significant change in the last few years. What have you noticed about the community at large?** White people jogging. It’s a disgrace. But seriously, gentrification is such an insult on top of the injury of being ghettoized in the first place. All the expected shitty things: people being evicted, closing of the recycling center ‘cuz rich people don’t want to have to see poverty, noise complaints about churches that have been there for decades. It’s so painful to watch.

**A new solo exhibition in San Francisco is on the horizon for you. Tell me a little about this new body of work and what most excites you about it?** It consists of some work I did at the Roswell Artist-in-Residence program and the work I’ve done here since I got back in November. I’m just excited to see my work evolving so fast. I struggled along in the Bay Area for 15 years, trying to keep painting and make money to eat. So being given some support—first from The Headlands Center and then in Roswell—has let me be more ambitious in what I can pull off. I can approach a painting for the long haul instead of trying to get something out in sporadic bursts between working for money. They’ve gotten way bigger in scale and I’m able to spend more time on refining details, while still retaining the raw, messy quality—that won’t change. Content-wise, I’m excited to see nature enter into the mix. I never knew how to paint nature without it looking Bob Ross-ish, but all this time being *in* nature, in Roswell and now working a lot up at a shack I’m renting on the Mendo coast, has helped me figure out how to paint nature the way I feel it, a chaotic, psychedelic, healing life-force. This show coming up at Guerrero Gallery is merging the gray-trashy-urban vibe with a crazy-fluorescent-nature one, and finding the nature in the 'hood in the form of life-force imagery and hedged shrubs. And there’s some 'hood in nature, too, like Rory in the outdoor shower.

**Tell me more about your yearlong residency in Roswell, New Mexico. I visited Roswell once, for a day, which, by chance, was the date of the State Fair. It was a very bizarre experience. What’s your personal take on Roswell, and how did you spend your time?** Roswell made me all nostalgic for my redneck youth, listening to the old timers in their hick accents talk about heavy machinery at the bar. I rode around with a cowboy and had my first chew of Copenhagen in ten years and shot his guns into a sand dune. There were Trump signs everywhere, but the guys at the computer repair shop liked Bernie. Actually, a lot of the Trump voters I met liked Bernie. I did past-life



above  
Country Lyfe  
Acrylic, house paint and  
glitter on canvas  
48" x 72"  
2017

regressions with a psychic lady in her trailer on the side of the highway in the middle of nowhere and found out why Rory and I are so bonded—past life shit. Rory came to visit and I made a painting of us in a cliff-dwelling with our past-life child selves in there with us. I still need to make the painting of him shaking hands with an alien at the alien museum. It was just as bizarre as the rest of my life, but productive. You can’t

below  
Dre Looking at Me Looking at  
the Mike Brown Memorial  
Acrylic on canvas  
72" x 60"  
2015



go wrong with being set up for a year in a house with your own studio and money for basics. Plus, the other residents were such good artists and fun people, and I don't usually like many artists or people. It also made me realize how badly I need to have breaks from the city. So, as soon as I got back, I rented a little shack from some friends up on the Mendo Coast and this angel man came along and built me a studio, so I'm splitting my time between Mendo and Oakland. Rory and I are sharing the Oakland house, so I have a little studio room for when I'm down there.

One painting I'm really interested in of yours is the one of you naked, glowing phone in hand, at the Mike Brown memorial. I know this painting was inspired by a visit to Ferguson, Missouri, but can you give me some additional context to this piece and to the *Both on Earth* series as a whole?

After Darren Wilson wasn't indicted for killing Mike Brown, I, like so many of us, was feeling enraged and powerless. This is when I was at The Headlands on the Tournesol Award, so my job was to make paintings for the show at the Luggage Store. I wanted to respond somehow with painting, but didn't want to make an obvious "racism is bad" painting, which everybody who's gonna see my work already knows and agrees with. So I decided to go there to see what new thing I could learn—about the situation and about myself. I stayed with Wanda, a lady who lives there, and made a painting of us in her kitchen called *Wanda Describing a Painting She Thinks I Should Make*. I met this guy, Dre. We hung out for a few days, and he showed me around and told me about what it's like to live there. When he took me to the Mike Brown memorial and parked the car, I saw all these white people driving by, taking pictures with their phones.

“THE CONVERSATION AROUND RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN THE STREETS IS OFTEN IN CONFLICT WITH THE CONVERSATION AMONG EDUCATED ART WORLD PEOPLE.”



right  
*Wanda Describing a Painting  
She Thinks I Should Make*  
Acrylic and spraypaint  
on canvas  
72" x 60"  
2015



above  
*Me and Rory Talking  
About Painting*  
Acrylic, house paint,  
spray paint and glitter on  
unstretched canvas  
73" x 48"  
2016

He asked me if I was gonna go out and take a picture. I had been taking pictures the whole time for painting ideas, and was, like, "This seems wrong, like I don't want to be a death tourist." And he said, "No, go ahead and take the pictures. Put it on Facebook. Make a painting. People need to see this." So I did, and that painting depicts that moment with all its confusion about gazes and power.

I want people to have to dig deeper into themselves when thinking about the power dynamics involved in race, class, injustice and all those things we are all implicated in. A lot of my work asks this of the viewer. As a white artist depicting black bodies (among many other things, though race is a major topic of conversation), I've found that the conversation around race and representation in the streets is often in conflict with the conversation among educated art world people. Since conversations about power that don't include the so-called powerless are incomplete, I want to call attention to this disconnect. I am having these conversations in both worlds, *Both on Earth* reflects my experience. One of those paintings, *Christmas Prison Visit*, depicts just that, with a friend locked up in Louisiana on

an extreme 40-year sentence for stealing some money, railroaded by a corrupt DA and judge. I'm ecstatic to say that he will walk free at the end of this month. All he needed was a lawyer and some money to pay her. I found one and did a GoFundMe, and for \$2500, he will be free after serving 17 years instead of the full 40. So, a lot of the works in that show were pretty specific narratives of situations I wanted people to know about and talk about. And then the next step is to do something about it, which people did by donating to the lawyer fund. There were also paintings of imagined characters dealing with various human fears and struggles, which is the substrate that culture is built upon. To understand how cultural forces work, we have to first look at how they work in us. There was a lot of "boths" in that show: internal and external, cultural and personal, imagined and real, black and white, joy and despair, rough and refined.

**You were quoted somewhere saying "counter the cultural trance of normal," which really resonated with me.**

I don't think I have anything to add to that other than I think that the more honest we are about how we *really* feel, the more this trance is broken.

**I know you’ve been criticized in various ways for your approach to subjects like race and class. What are some of the misconceptions people have about your work?**

The main misconception is that I’m on the outside looking in on a marginalized community and representing people without their input. Going back to “countering the cultural trance of normal,” I think it’s hard for some people to comprehend a college-educated white person being part of the ‘hood community in real way—this isn’t seen as possible or normal. But it’s normal for me and everyone involved in my painting project. I have various methods for conveying the close nature of our relationships in the work, such as including pieces that depict our private, domestic conversations. But sometimes people miss that, and all they see is black bodies and their own projections about them. I am consciously challenging these projections by making these paintings as personal and intimate as I can, hoping that people can see each other as individuals in addition to our skin colors, and maybe ask why it’s such a stretch to think that black people could have a real and equal friendship with a white person not

from the ‘hood. Of course, being white and college-educated gives me a leg up in many ways that my friends don’t share, but part of what we’re doing is using my access to share the stories we create together.

Occasionally I’ve also heard the fear that by having black people in my work, I’m taking opportunities from POC artists—like that’s their social relevancy coin to use. I understand this concern and I have it too. I’ve considered only painting white people, but that would exclude about 70 percent of my reality, and I feel like that would be caving in to the cultural expectation to maintain segregated social roles. What I know I can do is to try to uplift other artists and to name these concerns outright so that they’re out in the open where they can be addressed.

**How was your experience as an artist in residence in the Marin Headlands? Everyone I know who has had the opportunity to go to The Headlands Center for the Arts has spoken so highly of it.**

below  
Rory and His Mother and His Z  
Acrylic, house paint, glitter and  
fluorescent pen on canvas  
80" x 60"  
2017



It was great. Having the time and space to work without having to hustle so hard was just what my work needed to go to the next level. I will be forever grateful for that award. Right when I got it, I was about to give up on an art career and go back to school for something I could make money at.

**Well, I'm glad that didn't happen! What was that “something” going to be, do you think?**

I was thinking some kind of counseling. I have to have honest conversations about real things one way or another. I'm glad it's happening with the painting.

**How do you like to spend your time when not doodling or painting?**

Honestly, I'm a very anxious person who has a hard time enjoying things. I go on solo backpacking trips in the wilderness to clear my mind. I can read for a whole day. I'm kind of a workaholic, but I admit I have a problem and I'm trying to change.

**Can you recall the last time you saw a piece of art that really resonated and touched you?**

Honestly, I have a really hard time being touched by art. I'm much more touched by things in life, like visual stimulation and human interactions. I look at art more like a craftsperson, like what can I learn that I can apply in my own work.

**What has been your biggest fear with pursuing art as a career?**

That nobody would value what I have to share.

**And what would you ultimately like your audience to take away from your work?**

Whatever will help them become more aware of their blind spots, more compassionate and human. It's different for different people. Some need to have the feeling of not being so alone in the world. Some need to be provoked out of their power-serving beliefs. I hope that my work can "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted."

JUX

*Cate White new exhibition, Hello Cruel World, is on view through June 3, 2017 at Guerrero Gallery in San Francisco.*

above (from left)  
Christmas Prison Visit  
Acrylic on wood panel  
36" x 48"  
2015

Can You Feel His Soul  
Acrylic and house paint  
on canvas  
18" x 24"  
2017