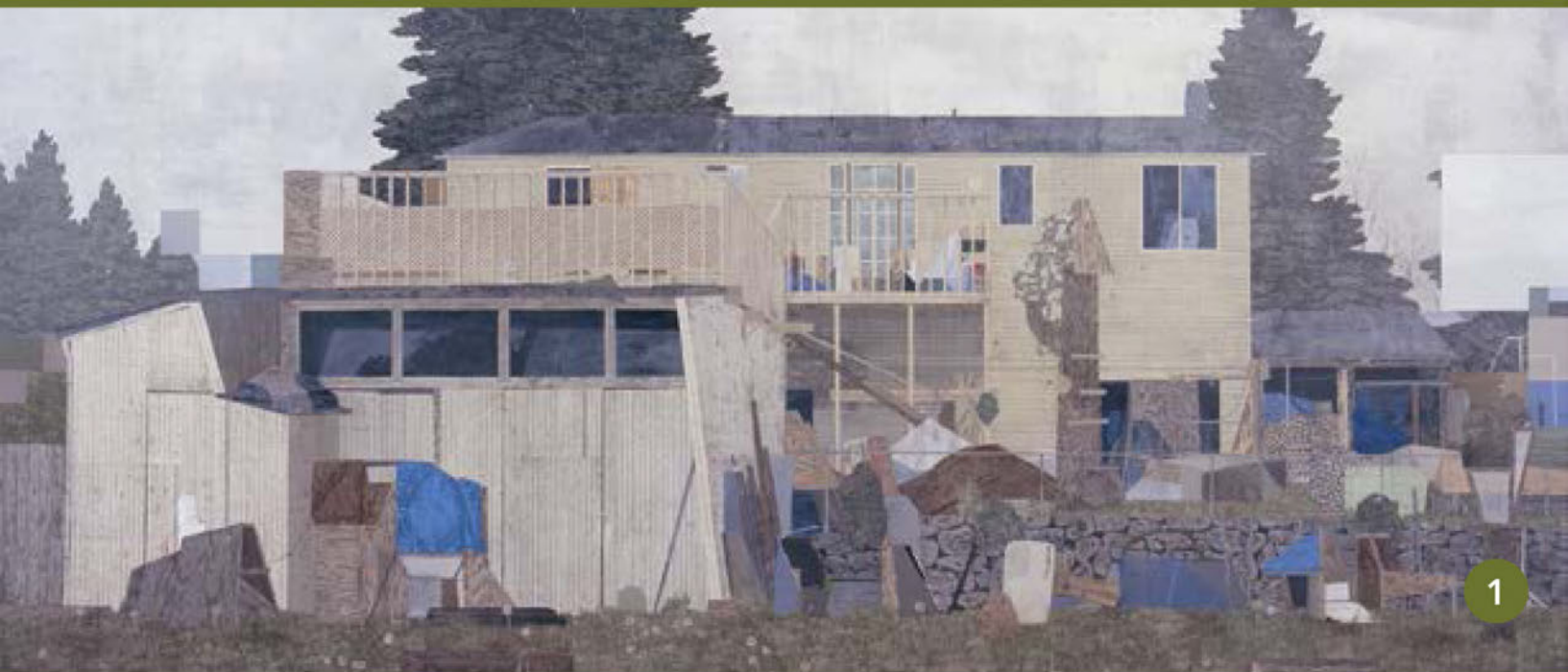


WHITING TENNIS

My Side of the Mountain



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by Jonathan Bucci

Seattle-based artist Whiting Tennis merges interests in folk and Pop art with Surrealism and postwar painting in his artworks. Through a combination of lonely forms, landscapes, and dilapidated structures, Tennis creates a world of his own with a distinctly American narrative that evokes the beauty, humor, and melancholy of everyday life. This sense of things, developed through a combination of sculptures, paintings, collages, and drawings, celebrates outcast beings and forgotten places. Derelict buildings found on city side-streets and country back roads, solitary animals and worn-out signs are all infused with empathy and personality to tell a story that is very familiar to the Northwest yet at the same time universally American.

Tennis has lived in Seattle on and off throughout his life, but settled there most recently in 2004. He was born in Hampton, Virginia, in 1959 and spent his early childhood in Buffalo, New York, visiting the Albright-Knox Museum often and surrounded by stunning examples of American architecture. In 1972, when Tennis was

twelve years old, his family moved to Seattle, Washington, when his father, an Episcopal minister, became dean of St. Mark's Cathedral. After graduating from Garfield High School in 1978, Tennis set off on a year of travel and adventure where he was exposed to a rich variety of experiences in both the United States and Europe. He worked at a cannery and then a logging camp on Mitkof Island in Alaska, surfed in Hawaii, hitchhiked and rode the rails in boxcars back and forth across the United States, and traveled Europe by train.

Tennis eventually enrolled at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1980. However, after deciding on studio art as a course of study, he transferred to the School of Art at the University of Washington. There Tennis worked closely with painter and printmaker Michael Spafford, and also studied with Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lundin, and Spencer Moseley, among others. After earning his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1984, he promptly decided to travel once again, heading to Spain,

excited to live and work in Barcelona, a city important to modernist masters Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Antoni Gaudí. Tennis set up a studio in Barcelona and had his first solo exhibition there in 1985.

Returning to Seattle in 1986, Tennis began exhibiting his art around the city and immersing himself in the burgeoning Seattle music scene of the late 1980s. Then in 1990, at age thirty, Tennis decided to make a move to New York City. He quit his band and moved to the East Village in Manhattan where he would live and work for the next fourteen years. It was here that Tennis began to explore history as subject matter through a series of paintings that looked at American history, beginning with the Civil War and progressing backward in time.

This early body of work established history as a strong interest in Tennis's art. However as he continued his creative exploration, Tennis began making artworks that were more personal in their approach to history. The histories of specific objects, as opposed to the history of a culture or country, drew Tennis to investigate found objects and weathered materials. These objects and materials, infused with their own stories of use and abandonment, are transformed by Tennis to reflect the contemporary world from where they came. This much more personal concept of history has become central to the majority of his work for the past ten years and is the focus of this exhibition.

Tennis constructs his narrative from images and objects that suggest discarded or used-up buildings and animals. It

reflects a vision of contemporary America as a place where lonely figures roam a landscape of timeworn or abandoned buildings and where the overlooked is beautiful. Many of his images and forms, including the zoomorphic (those that take on animal attributes), the anthropomorphic (those that take on human attributes), and the architectural, are derived from small automatic drawings or doodles. Automatic drawing is often associated with early- and mid-twentieth-century modernist movements like Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. This manner of working calls for drawings and marks to be made without consideration, and allows imagery to emerge freely from the artist's subconscious. Tennis embraces this approach as a means of generating ideas for some of his artworks. He fills sketchbooks with quick drawings—some abstract, some vaguely figurative—and uses these as starting points for larger, more complex pieces. An image may evolve into a sculpture or reappear later in a painting or collage, and forms like this often take

Fig. 1 *Bitter Lake Compound*. 2008. Acrylic and collage on canvas. 72" x 168". Collection of Portland Art Museum; Museum purchase funds provided by Northwest Art Council, The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Endowment for Northwest Art, Greg Kucera, and Larry Yocom.

Fig. 2 *Coulda-Shoulda-Woulda*. 2009. Mixed media. 43.125" x 72.75" x 5.25". Collection of Charles and Amanda Kitchings, Los Angeles, California. Photo courtesy of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College





Fig. 3 *Washer and Dryer*. 2009. Plywood and housepaint. 40.5" x 28" x 24.25" each. Courtesy of the Artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, Washington. Photo: Robert Wade

Fig. 4 *Study for Blue Hamburger*. 2007. Acrylic and collage on canvas. 24" x 36". Courtesy of the Artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, Washington. Photo: Frank Miller



on personalities when titled with names like *White Nun* (2006), *White Owl* (2007), *Eeyore Head* (2008), *Mastodon* (2010), or *Aardvark* (2011).

The characters or animals that populate Tennis's artworks are not direct likenesses but are abstracted versions, pared down to simplified forms constructed from repurposed plywood or collaged from hand-cut wood-grain prints, and exuding a sort of roughshod Cubism. They also evoke the awkwardness, menace, and humor that can be found in the work of other American artists such as Philip Guston and H. C. Westermann.

In Tennis's art there are also many references to architecture, and this subject surfaces in a variety of ways. It can be

observed in his figurative images, where a dwelling may also suggest an animal form. These dwellings emanate a personality and help advance the narrative in the work in much the same way that the mid-century regionalist painter Charles Burchfield did with his paintings of gloomy mid-western houses. By turning windows into eyes or rooftops into hats, both artists evoke a spirit from within the structures that elicits empathy through forms that are familiar and forlorn.

Tennis also creates artworks that depict structures that may be either invented dwellings or specific buildings. The invented places often take the form of a mound. In *Study for Blue Hamburger* (2007), a mound suggestive of a folk art inspired shantytown or overgrown child's

fort, is composed from what appear to be plywood, blue tarps, and green metal roofing, among other detritus. And in *Bitter Lake Compound* (2008), Tennis created a collage that depicts the backyard of a house in his Seattle neighborhood. In this piece, he turned what could be seen as an eyesore or junkyard into a beautiful array of rhythms, textures, colors, and marks on a heroic scale: the piece is fourteen feet long.

These dilapidated and quirky structures play an important role in providing a sense of place for his art. While both figures and buildings sometimes merge as one in a singular form, they seldom appear separately in the same artwork. These individual dwellings can be seen as both settings for the world that his figures populate as well as buildings with personalities all their own.

Faux painting and trompe l'oeil are used in a variety of ways in Tennis's work. The artworks made using these techniques blur the lines between reality and illusion as well as between representation and abstraction by appearing to be real objects, meanwhile tricking the viewer. Tennis has created a number of paintings and sculptures that appear to be genuine found objects, but that are actually fabricated artworks, such as *Blue Tarp* (2007), *Washer and Dryer* (2009), *We ... Cash* (2011), and *Dead of the Night* (2013). In addition many of his collages include a form of faux painting by incorporating woodcut prints made directly from wood grain. In these works, Tennis draws

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Fig. 5 *Aardvark*. 2011. Acrylic and collage on canvas. 40" x 30". Collection of Jeff and Brenda Atkin, Bellevue, Washington

Fig. 6 *White Nun*. 2006. Lumber, plywood, paint, and asphalt. 67.5" x 25" x 27". Courtesy of the Artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, Washington. Photo courtesy of Greg Kucera Gallery

connections between common objects and their cultural significance, while at the same time referencing postwar American artists such as Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly, Pop artists Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, and the field of Minimalist sculpture and painting.

The sculpture titled *Washer and Dryer* was exhibited at the Seattle Art Museum's Olympic Sculpture Park in 2011. It was installed in an intentionally haphazard manner, suggesting that it had been abandoned, as real appliances in our throwaway society may be dumped in a yard or left in a vacant lot. At the same time, however, this work maintains its own formal presence as essentially two white cubes, suggestive of minimalist sculpture. Both the work and its siting bring up the question of how to determine what art is and how beauty is defined, reinforcing Tennis's view that beauty can be found in the overlooked and commonplace.

Tennis is open about his creative process and several of his artworks emphasize that process. *Coulda-Woulda-Shoulda* (2009) is a wall sculpture that features 108 sculptured maquettes. In this piece, Tennis presents a large group of ideas that he has considered for sculptures. As the title suggests, some of these small, three-dimensional sketches were developed into larger sculptures, like *White Knight* (2010), while others may have served as jumping-off points for other sculptures. The piece even includes a maquette of a refrigerator that hints at *Washer and Dryer*, which was made in the same year.

In *Quilt Painting* (2014), he looks to the folk-art tradition of American quilt-making for inspiration, an art form grounded in using scraps from past projects to make something new. In Tennis's painting he has turned to old print proofs and doodles from past artworks as the material and imagery for the piece, collaging his own creative history into a new artwork.

By exploring imagery through a variety of media, Tennis allows his audience to observe as he nurtures a form through an intensely personal and sincere pursuit. This exhibition provides a unique opportunity to appreciate the depth of his vision, bringing together artworks ranging from abstract to representational and architectural to figurative, as well as influences from a wide range of twentieth-century art. Ultimately, both Tennis's work and the narrative he creates tell the story of a place where the new and obvious are ignored and the past, in all its rough and ragged forms, tells the true story.

Jonathan Bucci is Collection Curator at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.

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Cover: *Mastodon*. 2010. Acrylic & Collage on Canvas.
46.25" x 65.125". Collection of Grady West, Seattle, Washington.
Photo: Frank Miller

Back cover: *Dead of the Night*. 2013. Wood, paneling, paint,
and cord. 10" x 10" x 17". Courtesy of the Artist and Greg
Kucera Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
Photo: Whiting Tennis



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