

Martin Herbert, "Austin Martin White," *Artforum*, December 2022.

## ARTFORUM



Austin Martin White, *(last) Bacchanal ii (soundalarm) after B. Thompson*, 2022, jute, rubber, pigment, vinyl, spray paint, screen mesh, 96 x 114 1/8".

### Austin Martin White

CAPTAIN PETZEL

A writer could easily spend their allotted word count detailing the complex, multipart technique undergirding Austin Martin White's ten paintings—accompanied by watercolors and drawings—in his show "Last Dance." The Philadelphia-based artist presently eschews anything as conservative as, say, oil on canvas. Instead, his process involves first digitally collaging together imagery from a host of sources. He then uses a vinyl lathe retrofitted with pens and markers to steadily wear his confected scenes into vinyl before pushing rubberized paint through this template from behind. This

# Petzel

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results in brightly multicolored linear reliefs—easily mistaken for paint extruded from the tube—that glow radioactively against nocturnal backgrounds full of their own discontinuous textures. The surfaces also involve graphite, jute, and spray paint, hopscotching between matte and shiny, organic and synthetic. For these works, White chose imagery that evokes dance and violence, ranging from European ethnographic depictions of war dances in colonized countries to documentation of Detroit techno parties that took place as the auto industry collapsed. While a diversity of histories glints in the surfaces, tools, and imagery he employs (the colonial brutality underlying rubber extraction, to name another), White is simultaneously bent, it seems, on creative misuse, a kind of formal decolonization.

And then, of course, the show’s title invoked both finality and fuck-it release, which—aforesaid—pasts aside—located the show equally in the present and its omnidirectional terrible news cycle. While there have been last dances before, White suggests (one thinks, too, of the “party while the bomb drops” nuclear anxiety fueling pop music circa 1980—remember XTC’s “Living Through Another Cuba” from that year?), this could be the last of them. Yet we are at least dancing, or we could be. Accordingly, though these works are frequently hyper-apocalyptic in tone, their protagonists often remain unbowed. In *lyftoutofcrisis*, 2022, a leader or dignitary is being spirited away from a war zone inside a protective cylinder by his carriers. Soldiers scatter across a tropical landscape. Will they be fast enough to escape the giant orange fireball hurtling down from the empurpled night sky? Among the pyramidal cluster of human and animal figures in *(last)Bacchanal ii (soundalarm)*, after B. Thompson, 2022, some wail over the dead and dying while another toots a horn. In *Untitled (Massacre des Blancs par les Noirs)*, 2020, which stretches further what a “last dance” might entail, vivid orange-outlined figures wield clubs and machetes under a burgundy sky against looming palms in a brutal payback for colonialists. And on it goes.

The bugbear of maximalism—as espoused by White on formal and conceptual levels—the viewer might whine, is that it can be exhausting. Coming to grips with the artist’s idiosyncratic if purposeful method, widescreen historical inquiry, multiple evasions of cliché, and valedictory celebratory attitude to the present felt like watching every firework in the box go bang at once. And White, if you ventured upstairs, still had a bunch of spare-energy ballpoint drawings to show you, plus some densely layered watercolors. But this relentless excessing can be considered its own virtue, a makeshift apocalyptic poetics. What ought painting to look like, at this time of new fears and reborn old ones—revived nuclear forebodings, irreversible climate breakdown, far-right revanchism, disastrous wealth inequality, etc.—no letups, only an eschatological cliff edge to teeter grimly on or boogie off? Maybe like this

— Martin Herbert

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202210/austin-martin-white-89739>