

Petzel

“Face to Face: September 2025” *Impulse*, September 30, 2025.

IMPULSE

AUSTIN MARTIN WHITE



With the opening of his Petzel Gallery show *Tracing Delusionships* imminent, I found [Austin Martin White](#) in a familiar ambivalent mood at his Philadelphia studio in late July: the deliciously ominous inflection point when the labor is just about done and there's finally enough time to breathe and decide if you actually like the results. Satisfied or not, ambivalence befits his work's internal tensions.

Most paintings for White's show were near completion when I stopped by, with a few larger ones leaned against the walls for contemplation. Knocking back Bitburger 0.0's in the dog days of summer's heavy heat, he asks my opinion on a pair of them. A smaller piece stands upright on a table drying. Unlike more conventional application of paint to the weave of a canvas, White works from both front and back, pushing pigmented latex through his wide mesh from behind, leaving it spurting out at the viewer. It surges forth in little curlicue tendrils of color that are at once sumptuous and festering, both luscious and rotten. This gives the impression that his subject matter is more emanating from within the paintings than etched onto their surfaces, and a visceral feeling that it is happening in the present tense.

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White’s process (which also involves use of a computer-assisted plotter for making marks and producing templates to mask off unpainted areas) alters the relationship of his hand to the work, but never fully conceals it. I feel his touch most urgently in a few recent pieces, verdantly colorful scenes calling back to the history paintings of Bob Thompson. He pulls a Thompson monograph off the shelf for comparison and I see White in Thompson’s shoes revisiting the European canon. Another series he was finalizing suggests a contemporary parallel between us in these United States and 18th century architectural etchings of ruins by Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Neither reference point offers a peaceable vantage with each artist fixated in his own way on desolation: for Piranesi the aforementioned ruins, and for Thompson the Biblical slaughter of children in Bethlehem.

White’s are mostly very large works which can completely absorb one’s field of vision, permitting the viewer to inhabit them as one shelters in the aftermath of a catastrophe. You are in them reaping the whirlwind, which resonates with Piranesi’s personal maxim of “col sporcar si trova.” Translated literally as “you find it by getting dirty,” a more online audience might instead hear the “fuck around and find out” of T-shirts and coffee mugs hawked by increasingly militant far-right influencers. The US is currently finding out. It was, after all, a Roman client state doing the massacring in Thompson’s Bible scene, and then it was the wreckage of Rome that Piranesi surveyed. In White’s work—implied by the “Delusionships” of his title—our mourning is for the demise of a benevolent democracy that wasn’t.

— Joshua Caleb Weibley

<https://impulsemagazine.com/symposium/face-to-face-september-2025>

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