

Dian Parker

## White: Silent yet Full of Possibility

“As in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the most concrete of all colors.” Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Contrary to our intuitive sense, the color white is structurally complex. White contains an equal balance of all the colors of the spectrum. Artists and alchemists have struggled for centuries to create the purest white. In 400 BC, white was made from gray metallic lead, vinegar and cow dung. Despite discovering in the 1500s that this paint caused lead poisoning, artists considered it the most useful white pigment for its opacity, density and durability. Also called Spirits of Saturn, lead white was used in makeup from the 16th century until 1830, when it was replaced by zinc white, a safe, inorganic compound. It wasn't until 1978 that the United States banned the production of lead white paint.

Looking for a white that was nontoxic and chemically stable, titanium dioxide was first manufactured in 1916. This is now the brightest, most opaque white. The power of titanium white's pigment to tint paint is greater than both lead and zinc whites. The drying time is slower than lead white, but a lot faster than zinc white.

How does an artist know what color white to use? Even milk, the personification of “white” comes in different shades: 1%, 2%, half & half and whole milk. Today, some of the shades of white on the market are Silver White, Flake White, Pearl White, Transparent White, Bone White, Mixing White, Nickel Titanium Light, Flemish White, Unbleached Titanium, Titanium Buff, Flemish White, Alabaster, Strong White, Tin Buff, Iridescent White, Underpainting White, Eggshell White, Slate White, Chalk White, Chinese White, Berlin White, Vienna White. Behr's Ultra Pure White claims to be the whitest paint color of all the brands. Benjamin Moore alone offers 164 whites.

Warmer whites reflect yellows and cooler whites reflect blues. In my bedroom, for example, I painted the closet doors a warm yellow/white, and the door frames violet/white. The walls are a cool gray/white and the window sills stark white. The colors shift, reflecting the New England seasons—the lush green of spring and summer, autumn's red and gold, the blue blankets of snow.

“It was never my intention to paint white paintings. The white is just a means of exposing other elements. White enables things to become visible,” said Robert Ryman, who spent 50 years making white paintings. His *Untitled* (1960) was achieved by layering white over green and blue. John Singer Sargent cherished a clean white, using wax from a white candle to keep other colors from bleeding in.

White may symbolize innocence and purity, but without contrast white can be challenging for an artist to make compelling. Perhaps that is why Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Cy Twombly and Brice Marden tackled white paintings. Helen Frankenthaler, Cuban

painter Carmen Herrera, Anne Truitt and Agnes Martin also created white paintings, often blending in subtle, barely detectable shades of pink, blue or gray. The Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, who believed colors provoke emotion, used white like a pause in a harmonious melody—silent yet full of possibility.

In a black-and-white photograph or film, there is really no black or white but many shades of gray, called grayscale. Printmakers and etchers must be vigilant about protecting the white paper to survive each pass of the plate—the paper providing the most critical color. For a painter, it is difficult to make the first mark—“violating that beautiful white-primed canvas,” said Vermont painter, Harry A. Rich. He worked on *Untitled. 2015-2018* (pictured) for three years, using three coats of white glaze, which made the painting appear frosted. “I like to add titanium white to most colors to eliminate the plastic quality of the acrylic,” Rich said. “I think white moves the viewer around a painting more subtly than any other color. White is the common reference color. Other colors need it; it doesn’t need them.”

White *is* a color. It is complex and vexing for a painter whether mixed in, used in contrast or standing alone. Indispensable in art, white is an abstract enigma, ready to be tackled into a mighty tool.