

Illustrations for a Text That Does Not Exist

Doug Turman's Watercolor World

Rick Newby

Many watercolors and all sorts of other things. Most of it inside me, deep inside, but I'm so full that it keeps bubbling up.

—Paul Klee, upon departing
Tunisia, 1914

Trout of astonishing colors, classical figures of the whitest marble, Islamic star charts, geographers imagining new continents, Renaissance maps, fragments of Dante written in a gorgeous cursive, 1920s aeroplanes, mid-century Italian postage stamps, western landscapes populated by cacti, quotations from paintings by Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, and Charlie Russell, portraits of a weeping Meriwether Lewis, green peas, and footprints leading nowhere: What do these seemingly disparate images have in common? They all leap from the brush of prolific and prodigious watercolorist Doug Turman (who also happens to be an accomplished printmaker and painter in oils and acrylic).

One small Turman watercolor will include several of the images listed above (or others from Turman's vast repertoire). Turman, based in Helena, Montana, works this swarm of images into a composition that seems to tell—begins to tell—stops in the middle of—a lovely and humorous story. The story line may not be readily apparent, but somehow this doesn't matter. Like Persian



Doug Turman, Trout Dream #34, watercolor, 7 x 10 inches, © 1993 Doug Turman.

miniatures torn from the pages of the narratives they illustrated, or like Kurt Schwitters' self-sufficient collages, Turman's watercolors lead vibrant and very full lives, separate from any text.

Like the best modernist art, they are infinite, suggestive rather than explicit. And like the Persian miniatures Turman has studied passionately (he devoted his master's thesis to them), they form perfect patterns, brilliantly colored and harmonious. They are rich in allusion, but it is an allusiveness that is more playful than laden with meaning. These watercolors take us on delightful journeys, suggesting that their creator is a seasoned traveler who cannot help but share the sights he has encountered along the way.

Doug Turman is a peculiar sort of traveler. By his own



Doug Turman, Love Note #111, watercolor, 4 x 6 inches, © 2006 Doug Turman.



Doug Turman, Love Note #121, watercolor, 4 x 6 inches, © 2006 Doug Turman.

admission, he's "never been anywhere"—though recent sojourns in Great Britain, Germany, and Italy suggest otherwise. Raised in Missoula, Montana, in a family that might serve as model for a Norman Rockwell painting—"my father was the mayor, we had a dog"—this third-generation Montanan did leave the West for a few years, attending undergraduate school at Ohio's Oberlin College and spending some time in the museum world, working at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

But for the bulk of his adult life, Turman has lived and painted in the American West, in Arizona and Montana. "I do my traveling through my work," he says, and with a wry grin, he allows as how he may be one of the few artists (if not the only one) who

has work on all seven continents—he's even placed a watercolor at the South Pole Station in Antarctica.

And it is in his watercolors that Turman does his most adventurous traveling. These (usually) small and magical works somehow make visible a vast and richly textured universe, one that we recognize instantly as home. It is a dream home, to be sure—our best and most yearned-for habitation, where pleasure reigns and we are safe from sorrow.

Following the example of Matisse, Turman consciously—and no doubt out of a deep need—refuses in his art the negative, the ugly, the very real sadness that afflicts every life. His work has been accused of being escapist, "too rosy," merely decorative. But,

he counters, why not celebrate pleasure, the beautiful—so that the artist offers the viewer, as Matisse said, “an art of balance, purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter”? Just as Matisse was out of step with the other great modernists, because of his insistence on rendering the voluptuousness of life, so Doug Turman is a maverick, following his own joyous and quirky path.

Turman is no stranger to sorrow. His first-born son died in his arms, only three days after birth, of a rare genetic disorder, and that tragedy was, in Turman’s words, “in some ways, both the best and the worst thing that ever happened to me.” He found strength in the act of painting and in the steadfast love of family and friends, and though he suffered from clinical depression for a time—and through a divorce—his work continued to celebrate beauty, a beauty “tempered by grief.” Reassured that his belief that art should instill pleasure was not skin deep, was in fact something fundamental to his nature, he entered the discipline of painting even more rigorously, pushing himself technically, extending his insights into ever more articulate series of paintings.

The notion of the series is integral to Turman’s work, and many of the watercolors he’s created are linked—by repeated images, shared size, and reiterated themes. He began his first major series, “Love Letters,” in the mid-1980s. His smaller “Love Notes” developed alongside the “Letters,” and these postcard-sized images continue to proliferate (he has painted well over one hundred to date). His “Trout Dreams” series stands complete at thirty-nine paintings, each containing at least one trout—amid ceaseless streams, mysterious earths, spirals of constellations. Other Turman series include “Conversations with Paul,” an homage to



Doug Turman, Love Letter #34, watercolor, 6 x 8 inches, © 1995 Doug Turman.

Paul Klee, “master of the small painting,” and “The Geographer,” a tribute to a geographer friend who—like the artist—unifies the world “by human logic and optics, by the light and color of artifice, by decorative arrangement.” Turman has recently begun a new series he calls “Glimpses of the World Unseen,” and in an as-yet unnamed new series of watercolors, he animates a world that is more loosely painted and more melancholy in tone than any he has previously explored.



Doug Turman, *The Geographer: Writer's Block*, watercolor, 4 x 5 inches, © 1995 Doug Turman.

In the context of Montana art, Doug Turman refuses all the usual tropes—even more so than many of the state's abstract painters, whose works may still make oblique reference to the natural world. If landscape appears in a Doug Turman painting, it is more often

vaguely European, and especially Italian, than it is a portrayal of the vast panoramas of western river valleys or mountain ranges (those trout are an exception). Indeed, in some of his watercolors, he will X-out an identifiable Montana mountainscape, a clearly conscious negation of his homeland's traditions. And again play is Turman's watchword, as he takes beloved historical figures—in, for example, his large-scale oil, *Lewis & Clark Lost in Montana*—and turns them into objects of a sly and seditious satire.

Perhaps the Montana tradition to which he is closest is that embodied by Rudy Autio, the great Montana ceramic sculptor (and fellow Matissean). As art historian Harry Hamburg has written, the images Autio traces on his massive and energetic sculptural forms delineate “an uncomplicated world of pleasure that is beyond our grasp, and perhaps exists only in imagination and art.” And Rafael Chacón might be speaking of the feeling we encounter in Turman's most recent watercolors when he writes that Autio's figures “probe the complex relationship between an Arcadian vision of the celebration of sensual beauty and an almost baroque sadness about the transience of life.”

Sometimes working with obsessive precision and sometimes with extreme looseness and daring, Doug Turman is a master of his chosen medium. It is only through his playful and densely textured sensibility that he creates works—these miniature fables, histories, and romances—that we can read almost as we read a text. Every Turman “Love Letter” or “Trout Dream,” every “Conversation with Paul” or session with “The Geographer,” takes us to another place (that hitherto unseen world), where things form a perfect pattern, and we can escape—joyous as carefree travelers—from the “troubling or depressing subject matter” of our daily lives.



Doug Turman, Conversations with Paul #4, watercolor, 7.25 x 5.5 inches, © 1994 Doug Turman.



A jazz drummer as well as a visual artist, **Doug Turman** is represented by Lorinda Knight Gallery, Spokane, Washington; Shack Up, Bozeman, Montana; and Jest Gallery, Bigfork and Whitefish, Montana. In addition, he is proprietor, with his wife Mary Lee Larison, of Turman Gallery (www.turmangallery.com), a leading contemporary art space in Helena.



Doug Turman, Glimpses of the Unseen World #4, watercolor, 9 x 7 inches, © 2006 Doug Turman.