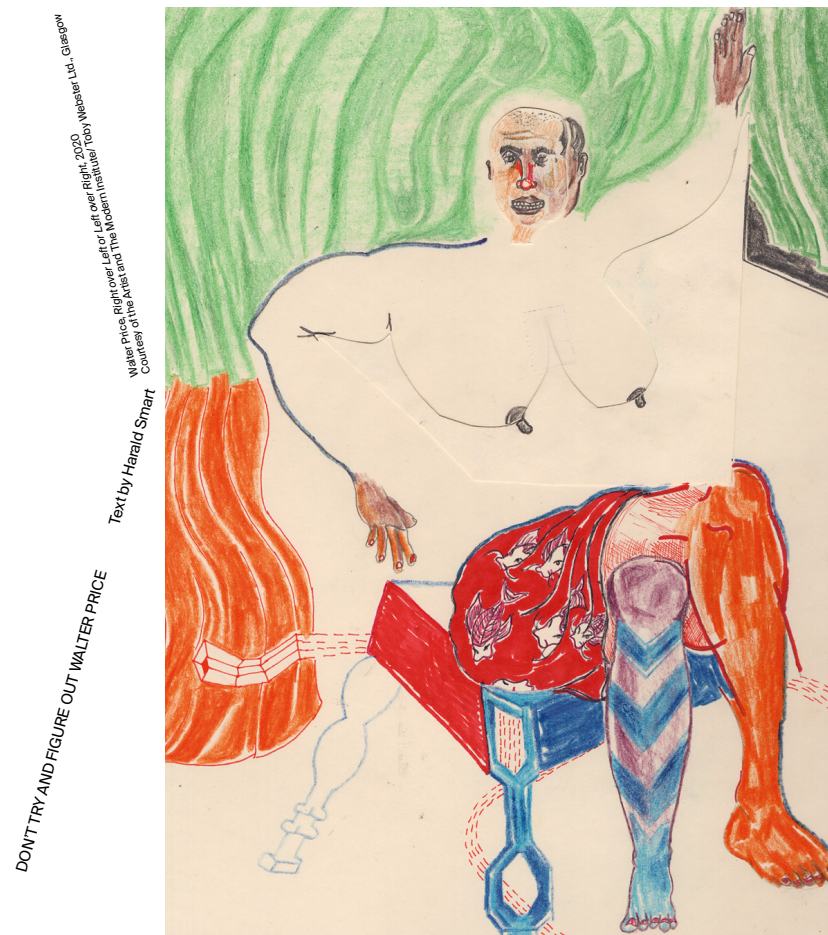


The works of Walter Price exist in a hinterland between abstraction and figuration, employing elements of both without succumbing to either. His paintings and drawings invite long, close looking as landscapes, body parts and diurnal detritus emerge from fields of liberally applied colour. Cultivating this mode of protracted engagement in viewers is a central driver of Price's practice, the culmination of extensive self-guided research on human cognitive functions and a lifelong dedication to shunning convention. Instilled in him by his Southern mother and sharpened in response to his four year stint in the Navy, this desire to "turn left when everyone else is turning right," provides Price with potent fuel for his endeavors. Determined to outwit viewers and critics alike at every turn, his multilayered canvases become deconstructed chess boards, combining disparate fragments and unexpected techniques to captivating effect.



Walter Price, *Right over Left over Right*, 2020
Courtesy of the Artist and The Modern Institute
Text by Harald Smart

Since moving to New York almost ten years ago, Price has gradually established himself as a leading talent in the contemporary scene. Affirming this rise last year, in what would be one of his final reviews, Peter Schjeldahl—the late, famously hard-to-please art critic of the *New Yorker*—wrote that Price's paintings "qualify as decorative in the way that climbing a Himalayan peak might be deemed recreational." Such lofty praise is rightfully bestowed given the opposing forces of maximalism and subtlety vibrating, bouncing playfully off of each other amidst all those painstaking layers of paint. Speaking to *Carcy*, Price reflects on his meticulous approach, the immense discipline it requires and the continual challenge of staying one step ahead of himself.



Harald Smart In Carcy's tenth issue, we talk a bit about Renaissance, so I was wondering if you could start by saying a little about what that word means to you?

Walter Price When I think about Renaissance, I think about change with a flair. So, I think about the Harlem Renaissance. That means I think about style, improvement; the attempt to shake things up with style.

HS When did you become aware of the Harlem Renaissance?

WP Probably about eighth grade, ninth grade... around then.

HS And were you already interested in becoming an artist at that point?

WP I've wanted to be an artist since the second grade, so yeah! At first I wanted to be a cartoonist. Then, later on, I wanted to be a tattoo artist, so I apprenticed at this, like, redneck biker gang tattoo shop in my hometown. I did that because I wanted to put myself into an environment that wasn't so welcoming, to see what it was like to work around these people who... Some of them didn't like black people. So that was an important experience.

HS Is that sense of discomfort something that you try to summon in your practice when you're approaching making things?

WP Yeah. I definitely play with that. I think it's important, because, you know, people who look like me always are kind of familiar with discomfort. Stares, people seeing right through you, not noticing you. When it comes to audiences, they might think it's easy to decipher what I'm trying to do, and just put it in a box. So for me it's about asking: how can I play with people's expectations of me?

HS What are some of the ways that you do that?

WP Well, without revealing too many of my secrets... one way I guess I do that is to play with composition. If you think of the rule of thirds, and where we place things in composition in order to be "successful"... I'll consider things like that and create compositions that reflect that unexpected feeling. If I think a writer or critic feels too sure about what I'm doing, I use that information to make another body of work that plays against that, or plays with it in a different way. You don't really wanna be "figured out" as a painter.

HS What I think I'm getting from that is that you're interested in leaning into uncertainty, pushing against established boundaries. Would you say that's fair?

WP Yeah, that's been my life.

HS Was that interest present in you during your time in the Navy, in that controlled environment?

WP Maybe it developed there a little bit. I think it was really beginning to develop when I was getting raised. I was raised by a strong black woman, she was a Gemini. She knew how to change her oil in her car, she taught my sisters how to do all that stuff. My dad was there, but she always instilled individuality in me. Maybe it became urgent for me to build on that individuality when I was in the Navy because it is so homogenous. So, I would always find ways for myself to stand out, whether it was with my work or the way I encouraged others; my uniform, the way I shaved...

HS Did you get away with it?

WP Yeah, because I actually read the rule books! There was a book on haircuts, and there was one rule that we could have our hair four inches high at the most, so I was one of the first people on my boat to start wearing a high-top fade.

HS How do you think being in the Navy affected your approach to being an artist?

WP I actually only went into the Navy because they guarantee paid education once you're out. But it instilled such a great discipline in me. Waking up early, thinking about out-working people, thinking about out-thinking people, but doing it in a way where you aren't overly competitive. When I left and moved to New York I started waking up at like five o'clock in the morning, and I would read articles about neurology. Through doing that I learned that when you cut a text or a sentence in half, it creates this challenge for the brain, so you're gonna look at it for longer and try to decipher it. So I started applying that idea to what I was doing. And that all really came from the military you know? Figuring out how to turn left when everyone is turning right.

HS What sort of space does drawing take up in your practice alongside painting at this point in time?

WP I think I'm a drawer. I always drew, I always doodled. Drawing involves less criticality I think, less competitiveness. For me it's the most important part of my practice, but when I paint I'm happier.

HS Are there any other media that you're drawn to?

WP I've been doing sculpture a lot lately, and in that I'm thinking so opposite from painting that I'm damn near being a different artist. I also play a lot of chess, and I'd say that that's actually a medium for me at this point as well. Because you're thinking about angles, you're thinking about your bad habits, you're thinking about memory. If you're too aggressive you can fuck around and get check-mated! So yeah I think chess is a good medium.

DON'T TRY AND FIGURE OUT WALTER PRICE

Walter Price, *Not an Attack Vessel (Pedestal Lady)*, 2018.
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

HS Do you feel that your work is ever led by particular cultural events or societal shifts?

WP If it was then people wouldn't see it. I could be talking about daily politics more than you could imagine but it's my choice how much I want to mention it. It keeps me political in a sneaky way. People who know more about me might be able to make some connections but it's very sneaky!

HS So it's kind of like leaving bread crumbs?

WP Hell yeah. Definitely bread crumbs. Because as a black artist, even just painting somebody black, it's like such a political thing, and then you get boxed in. Which is fucked up, because the reason why people are painting black people is because no black people are in the museums! So now it's kind of used against you. So that made me think, I'm not gonna not paint black people, but I'm also going to find ways to paint them that are funky and fresh for me. People are always going to be reading my work one way, because it's like an open book to them. But then I'm really over here saying this instead... Sometimes it can be like chess, it can be a trap! When I had my solo show at Greene Naftali gallery, it was so political, but I didn't see anybody talking about the politics! I was talking about race in the funnest way ever!

HS But nobody really picked up on it?

WP No, not at all.

HS How did you feel about that?

WP Good, because then it means I can talk about it, talk to you about it, and you can go and look at images from the show! It'll make a little sense, or a lot of sense!

HS Following on from what you just said, I wanted to ask a question about representation. In the context of your work, but also in a broader sense; what does that word mean to you?

WP I guess I think about the term representation in relation to galleries representing artists. Because really your first gallery gives you your first shot. So, for me, it was always about letting them know that I'm in charge! It's all

money tied up in this shit, and money can make you a bitch. It makes you scared to take risks and piss people off... As far as representation in my work, I'm a figurative painter that's striving to be an abstract painter. I think I've made some strong abstractions. So for me it's all about exploring these positions and not taking a stance on either, shifting between the two if I get too comfortable.

HS It's so interesting hearing you say that, because I was just about to ask you a question about whether you introduce any other challenges or limits in order to stimulate your approach?

WP Oh hell yeah. Recently I was like: "how can I make an abstract painting without using my hands?" I was thinking about how I'd really been working hard, and trying to think of ways I could work less hard and still achieve abstraction. I thought of a painting I did last year for the Greene Naftali show, which featured my own footsteps, which were a reference to marching up and down when I was in the military. It's about the beauty of cadence and rhythm. When I first started in the military I was always stepping on the back of the foot of the guy in front of me, and then after a few months we're walking miles in perfect rhythm, singing our songs. So that's what my new paintings are about.

HS Finally, what have been some of your career highlights so far?

WP Well I usually try not to think about this stuff but I have started to do it more in the last year. I feel like I've worked hard and I can celebrate a bit. So the first one was getting into the Whitney Biennial. So many people doubted me, shunned me and stopped talking to me. They wrote me off. So that was a big moment because I was in there with another artist who I knew doubted me. So I shut that down! And the second highlight was with the late Peter Schjeldahl, who died last year. He was a critic who wasn't always the nicest, but he kept it honest and was true to himself. And he gave me a beautiful write up in the *New Yorker* for my Greene Naftali show. He wasn't really writing much about young painters by that point, so it proved to me that I'm here to stay.



Untitled, 2019.

Colored pencil, graphite, oil pastel and collage on archival tagboard paper. 30.5 x 22.9 cm

