

## *Adrian Piper Over the Edge: An Introduction*

by Robert Del Principe

The work of Adrian Piper has been described in many ways—groundbreaking, visionary, radical, political, confrontational, didactic, and belligerent, to name a few. However, it's fairly safe to say that, until now, the word "psychedelic" was not often used. Now, in *Adrian Piper Over the Edge, LSD Drawings 1965-1967*, a joint exhibit at the Emi Fontana Gallery and online at [adrianpiper.com](http://adrianpiper.com), the word "psychedelic" is precisely what comes to mind. *Over the Edge*, a series of paintings and drawings executed between the ages of 16 and 18 and collected and shown here for the first time, provides the rare opportunity to reintroduce the early work of an artist established in the art world over thirty years.

The works comprising the LSD series are clearly different in style from Piper's more well-known conceptual work. They are, to begin, representational paintings and drawings. However, they also have many stylistic and thematic elements in common with later work, and they uncover some artistic and cultural influences that are redeployed in the minimalist and conceptual aesthetic Piper adopts from 1967 onwards. The paintings, strikingly colorful and verging on the phantasmagoric, bring together an unconscious amalgam of expressionism, cubism, op art, and 60s album cover art in an exploration of the boundaries of perception. In the *Alice in Wonderland* paintings, *LSD Third Eye*, as well as the drawings for *Over the Edge*, there is an incorporation of a funk psychedelic aesthetic that later resurfaces in the 80s *Funk Lessons*. Piper, moreover, displays a serious concern for spatial relations that informs her later works and thinking. The drawings, intricately detailed, display an elegant natural draftsmanship that is present, though often overlooked, in later works such as the *Vanilla Nightmares* series and the *Donald Kuspit Extermination* fantasies.

And, of course, there's the LSD. LSD, if anything rational can be said of it, alters our immediate (and arguably, long-term) perception of the world. Piper's work, both artistic and philosophical, has always been preoccupied with the problem of representation generally, with immediate perception — what she calls the indexical present (the concrete immediate here and now) — and with the concepts that determine this perception. This is perhaps clearer in later work, but the early paintings and drawings reveal her emerging preoccupation with the indexical present. Here the breakdown, veiling, and unveiling of perception, represented with mosaics, disintegrating layers, and broken shapes and body parts, expose Piper's nascent awareness of the importance of the concept and its role in determining our experience. The influence of LSD, both real and in the use of what is now viewed as prototypical psychedelic imagery, highlights the failure of the conceptual framework of perception and the revelation of possible alternate realities. In this light, then, the early paintings and drawings can be understood as representing a first step, an "awakening," to a lifelong examination of the power and fragility of the concepts that determine our experience.

Beginning in the late '60s and early '70s, Piper's concerns with perception find a broader theoretical vocabulary in her philosophical work on Kant. The fundamental intuition of Kantian epistemology set forth in the *Critique of Pure Reason* goes something like this. Human experience and knowledge is founded on a set of universal categories and concepts inherent in human subjectivity that structure and unify experience, and therefore

make it possible. There is thus a fundamental conceptual framework through which we experience and understand the world, and this set of concepts is necessary for us to have unified experience. An experience that does not fit neatly into these categories cannot be understood in a coherent manner. Naturally this raises many philosophical dilemmas, the most important for this discussion being the origin of these concepts. Are all of our concepts innate, or are they acquired? Is our thinking fixed, or can we learn to think in new ways? For Kant there are two kinds of concepts: a priori (pure, universal), and a posteriori, i.e. those based on experience. While the pure concepts are hardwired and unchangeable, prior to experience, the a posteriori (empirical) concepts are culled from experience, and therefore, potentially flexible. They in fact allow us to have and understand particular, empirical experiences. However, they are open to modification based on these experiences.

For Piper, Kant's philosophical analysis becomes a point of departure, and it serves to theoretically ground her preoccupation with immediate perception. She seizes on his fundamental idea that there are conceptual thought processes that shape our experience, and deploys it to examine the concepts that constitute our experience of race, ethnicity, and xenophobia. Race is not a fixed a priori category, and it is not biological or genetic. Rather, it is an empirical concept that is open to modification. Racism, then, takes place at the concrete and immediate moment of perception, and more specifically, through the concepts that determine our perception. Moreover, the very possibility that these concepts are mutable and not fixed is a source of hope, providing more resolve for her mission to challenge the concrete experience of racism.

These concerns become more forcefully articulated in her later political works, such as the *Mythic Being*, *Funk Lessons*, *Cornered*, *Pretend*, *Ur-Mutter*, *Black Box/White Box*, where she incorporates audio, performance, video and iconographic imagery to explore the immediate here and now of perception. The viewer, in turn, is confronted with everyday images and language that have become ingrained in our consciousness and that refer to the concepts that underlie our everyday experience of race, racial stereotyping, and xenophobia. Similarly (but more recently) in *The Color Wheel Series* (2000), Piper employs the vocabulary of the Western rationalist tradition and the Vedantic philosophical tradition in Hinduism as a tool to peel away the *koshas*, or sheaths, which are layers of illusory impositions that cover the true self. From the standpoint of Western Rationalism, Piper draws on the examination of color as a secondary quality that is inherent in the perceiver, not in the object itself. Like the disintegrating and distorted layers covering the subjects in the LSD paintings and drawings, color is imposed upon perception by the perceiver, not inherent in the object itself.

It is, of course, somewhat paradoxical that these early works, in drawing on the illusory, non-rational experience of LSD, help to reveal Piper's emerging theoretical and aesthetic concerns with the mechanisms of rational thinking. Nonetheless, the LSD paintings and drawings mark an important moment in Piper's artistic career. Understood as an awakening, these paintings and drawings, the subsequent turn to conceptual art in the late 60s, and her ongoing philosophical investigations, all combine to support Piper's goal of presenting, confronting, and ideally, modifying the concepts that create our reality. By drawing on a myriad of cultural and intellectual influences—including 60's psychedelia, Lewis Carroll, a longstanding yoga practice, and her philosophical work in the Western Rationalist tradition—Piper makes the implications of her social and political attacks on racism and xenophobia clear: color, and race, are not biological or genetic, but impositions upon the "true self." Whether one accepts this notion of the true self or not, Piper's work produces an unavoidable recognition of the concepts that determine our individual experiences, and shows an unwavering hope that these concepts can and will be changed.

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