

JAMES BISHOP

(1927–2021)

Molly Warnock



James Bishop with his painting *Hours*, ca. 1963, American Center for Art & Culture, Paris, 1963.

IT MAY BE THE NEAREST THING to a monochrome James Bishop ever made. *Closed*, 1974, is just slightly smaller—by a few inches—than the six-and-a-half-foot square format the painter adopted as his standard from the mid-1960s through the early '80s. And like much of the work from that period, it situates him within a broadly “reductivist” tendency in postwar American art, running roughly from the less-gestural iterations of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting through Minimalism. One notes in particular Bishop’s self-professed inclination for the square as the most “neutral” form; his scaling of his canvases to the standing human body; the seeming impersonality of the paintings’ facture; and even, with *Closed* especially, a deliberately obdurate quality that, like Minimalism, seems determined to keep us on the surface.

And yet in other respects *Closed* resists the implacability of Minimalist objecthood. The warm chestnut color exerts a surprisingly magnetic force, beckoning the beholder to come closer. In the upper half, articulations gradually appear: Simple, barlike elements compose two large quadrilaterals, each subdivided in turn into four more squares. Limned with unsteady lines,

this faint scaffolding pushes forward slightly in our vision, never quite disentangling itself from the rest of the field. Chromatically, too, the smooth, encaustic-like surface proves more complex than it appears initially. Built up in overlapping layers of at least two differently colored oil paints—the undercoat registers as a cool teal undertow—the luminous skin is surprisingly variegated. The color does not sit flatly on the surface but seems to well up from within.

I don’t say that *Closed* now stands open. But we are invited to feel our way into it.

BISHOP, WHO DIED this past February in Dreux, France, at the age of ninety-three, liked to say that artists should never be seen or heard—“except, of course, opera singers.” Publicly, at least, he lived his maxim. Even in the years in which he exhibited most frequently—from 1966 to 1987, when he showed in both Europe and the United States and crossed the Atlantic regularly—the Missouri-born painter largely eschewed interviews and wrote remarkably little about his art. Provided ample space to describe his “proposed activity” on the individual grant application he submitted to the National Endowment

of the Arts in November 1973, he mustered just three words: “To continue painting.”

All of this can suggest a reclusive, even withholding personality. It is true that he was not easy to know, living well outside Paris in the little town of Blévy. Letters typically went unanswered, and he had a tendency to let the telephone ring. And yet he enjoyed many friendships, often dating back decades, and he took great pleasure in forming new ones. In private, he was warm and garrulous, frequently remarking that he talked too much and had been a chatterbox from early childhood. He liked hearing and telling jokes—witness that quip about opera singers. He had once considered becoming a journalist and followed local and international politics and current events closely, combing through the English- and French-language newspapers and journals that sat in enormous stacks on the dining table in his home. Above all, he had an immense curiosity about other people, both those he knew and those he didn’t. He often said that his favorite books were incredibly detailed biographies, the sort that told you all about how and with whom so-and-so spent their time—every little thing about their days.



Left: James Bishop, *Closed*, 1974, oil on canvas, 73½ × 73½".
Below: James Bishop, *Untitled*, 1993, oil on paper, 9½ × 12".
Right: James Bishop, *untitled*, 1980, oil on canvas, 76 × 76".



But he had an equally keen sense of privacy. Reading a friend's obituary in the *New York Times*, he felt certain she would have hated it, that she would have been horrified to see certain facts of her life set out in print. That was the thing about dying, he observed: One loses control of one's story. Even now, writing these lines, I find myself hesitant to speak of him in personal terms. As I have come to know him over the past seven years, I have felt sometimes that I understood him very well; other times, not at all.

All of Bishop's painting is about the ways in which we stand toward one another, our openness and closedness to one another. Even, I find myself tempted to say, the kind of accommodations we are or are not willing to make for one another. These things shift over time and also, perhaps, as a function of age. Viewed as a whole, his work traces an arc: from an initial assertion of authorial selfhood, through the relative subordination of that self to external givens, to the renewed awareness and acceptance of something like individual idiosyncrasy. This may sound simple. It is not.

IN THE FIRST ARTICLE I ever wrote on Bishop's abstraction, published in this magazine in January 2014, I focused on the fundamental transformation of his work around 1966, when he systematically adopted larger dimensions. Prior to this turning point, the painter had consistently opted for pictorial structures that both acknowledge the givens of the painterly support—that could *almost* appear deduced from that support—and assert a degree of subjectivity in the face of those con-

straints. By contrast, with the move to the more expansive, human-scale formats, Bishop began to deploy simpler, more banal scaffolding. Idiosyncratic images gave way to broadly shared facts of human embodiment: facingness, headedness, bilateral symmetry. The paired quadrilaterals of *Closed*, like those of so many other paintings with brown fields of the early-to-mid-'70s, underscore this emphasis on the common, dramatizing the emergence of two like figures within the same ground. The thresholds between squares become especially charged, registering as seamlike divisions that are also, crucially, lines of congress produced through the mutual overlapping of paint from adjacent areas.

Around 1980, one discerns another, no less decisive shift in Bishop's art. The white paintings that he began making at the turn of the decade announce his withdrawal from the comparative physical immediacy of the preceding canvases in terms of both color—white proving “more theoretical” than brown, in the artist's view—and formal vocabulary. Save for a few exceptions, the ensuing paintings abandon twinning and adjacency in favor of single structures—a square, a peaked house form, an element recalling a sawhorse—centered on the painting's bottom edge. Doubling is confined to the most minimal of framing forms—typically, a triangular bracket in each of the upper corners. In a way, these frames serve to underscore the unicity of the canvas, its one-to-one relation to the beholder. But that relation now turns on a seemingly unbreachable solitude.

In retrospect, both the white paintings and the handful of gray ones that chronologically overlap and follow

them effect a transition from Bishop's work on canvas to the paintings on paper that occupied him increasingly from this moment and that took over completely after 1986, when he made his final painting on a cloth support. Executed in oils and pencils in a limited palette dominated by various grays, browns, whites, and creams, the compositions are disarmingly modest in their dimensions and use of seemingly throwaway supports. Few of the formats exceed eight or nine inches in either direction; many are considerably smaller. Some he called collages, though, as he also noted, they were mostly just cards with another little bit of something—usually a single scrap of painted or differently textured paper—glued to them. Looking at them feels, as the artist once put it, like gazing “through the wrong end of a telescope.” The forms, or what pass for forms, appear very far away, like the sitters in Giacometti's late portraits.

It is here, at these extraordinarily reduced dimensions, that the artist shows his hand again. Drawing had always been the backbone of Bishop's practice, a legacy of his conservative training at Washington University in Saint Louis. In this last phase of work, he draws both by omission or subtraction—through the reserving or controlled revelation of quasi-figural areas of the white support or underlying paint layers—and through the addition of ruled and freehand lines. Deploying a now familiar but continually evolving vocabulary of intersecting and abutting bars and just-off geometrical shapes, but combining them in newly eccentric and asymmetrical architectures, these compositions reclaim something of the oddness and recalcitrance of Bishop's early '60s canvases. They ask us to meet him anew, on distinctly different ground. □

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