



*Wisteria #2*, acrylic on canvas, 30 X 40"

# Wisteria

## Color and Light

### Peter Agrafiotis

#### Peter Agrafiotis' Wisteria Paintings

One obvious advantage the visual artist has over writers is that the audience can perceive of the whole all at once. Not adequately, not with enough appreciation—but at least there can be the illusion of instant comprehension: the parameters of the painting: the use of color and light; the narrative, if there happens to be a narrative. The disadvantage should be clear enough, too: quick misperceptions that are difficult to overcome, since first impressions tend to stick; such immediate reactions to surface may miss the psychological element entirely—or the viewer may just project upon the canvas, having no time to be persuaded by an authorial voice. Generally speaking, painters don't paint in the guise of anyone else, the way writers often select narrators who tell a story from a point of view that may not be the author's, at all. Sometimes authors even concoct unreliable narrators. Though the reader is vulnerable to the teller of the tale to begin with, some authors have been delighted to increase that vulnerability by,

quite simply playing a game (Andre Gide; Ford Madox Ford). Though I realize I am speaking in rather vague terms, my reason for addressing this subject at all is to underscore what I think are the distances from which a reader or viewer is always, at the very least, one remove from what is transpiring—though both authors and painters have to give the audience reason to think they are being complicitous, that they're involved in the project, that no matter where they stand (or how little they have read into the story), they're both inside and outside the work of art. Among my own favorite ways of luring the audience in is this one: to appear to be simply stating something, though as the work transpires, chronological time may temper that initial perception, or other characters may step forward to complicate any seemingly simple perspective.

Peter Agrafiotis' wisteria paintings are, I think, deceptively simple. Physically beautiful, they at times owe a discernible debt to Maxfield Parrish, or, other times, seem influenced by Japanese block prints. As always, there are radiant colors and plays of light and shade; they're fun, as well as being striking and, in most cases, inviting. They're a lure, flashing gems that hypnotize or instantly dazzle, yet the things they suggest are not simply paraphrasable. Almost devoid of any ornamentation beyond the almost geometric forms they depict, it's easy to assume that you can fill in the story, even without many details. To see what an accomplishment this is, consider the fact that wisteria is hardly a convenient American symbol, at all. I suspect that few people, if they've seen it, know its name. Yet the gnarled stems suggest that this is a rugged plant that has made it through time, while the fragile flowers seem almost anachronistic. It's inherently complex, and romantic, and strange, and I think that the various uses to which the artist has put the wisteria suggest that while we're in this odd world that's slightly out of time, there's also a psychological dimension: we can intuit the feeling of stories that aren't exactly told; we can guess at certain alarming qualities inherent in the way the stems twist with snake curves as they wind up the trellis; we can see their reflection in a fairy-tale golden window and realize that both things are tempered by the presence of the other.

Taken as a group, they're rather shocking. The color seems to come right at you, confrontationally—yet you're looking at beautiful flowers in bloom, only lovely flowers. And the quagmire of stems, too, can seem to have a life of their own, yet of course you're only looking at the stalk of a plant, a pleasant, if slightly obscure, plant. Though they're obviously variations on a theme, I don't think there's one theme: these are hardly the equivalent of socialites' faces on Warhol silkscreens; rather they suggest infinite variety and, for me, a complexity that isn't meant to put the viewer at ease, ultimately. They seem to be animated versions of states of mind, sometimes with homages to particular painters, sometimes merely acknowledging an awareness of the context in which the contemporary painter is painting. The close-up view is uncompromising, and makes the background more palette than representational space. It keeps us aware that these views of wisteria are in some ways interchangeable with the way jewels may be mounted, and the light plays suggests a faceted quality, a sculptural element, that seems to radiate from the blossom, itself. As when shown a sparkling ring, we're invited to approach and to stare, to consider something in a limited context, and to see that as it varies, we project onto it differently. Agrafiotis is not really an unreliable narrator, but he is a prankster, of sorts, tantalizing and then providing little by way of clarification or implicit analysis as the elements of the paintings take center stage and just remain there, glowing in a sad/mirthful/ambiguous luminosity.

— Ann Beattie  
Author

