



***Two Clowns in White Face*, Marvin Cone, 1935
By Stephen Cone Weeks**

The front door of 1721 5th Ave. S.E. in Cedar Rapids Iowa opened directly into the living room. When we stayed with my grandparents, Marvin and Winnifred Cone, there were always visitors. I can still feel the excitement – when the doorbell rang – of running from the kitchen or my grandfather’s studio through the dining room into the big room and watching my parents and grandparents greet their friends. I stood to the right of the door. There on the wall above me was *Two Clowns in White Face*: part of the happiest days of my childhood.

Two Clowns in White Face is almost perfectly square, a shape which intensifies the frontal directness of its central figure, a clown holding a small monkey. This figure, brightly illuminated by a diagonal shaft of light, and looking out through a mask of paint into the space beyond the picture, occupies the left third of the painting. He stands on a stage-like platform, a curtain at the back and spectators in front (their backs to the viewer) accentuating the theatrical setting. A crescent moon in the night sky above the curtain suggests a circus side-show performance. The master of ceremonies is on the right side of the stage. With arm outstretched, he bows and motions towards the clown. The open palm of his hand is in the exact centre of the space between the two figures.



Looking back at myself as a child, I know I sensed that the painting was not really about a clown. I remember someone – possibly even my grandfather – showing me the picture and drawing my attention to the painted face. I remember feeling puzzled, but smiling indulgently.

My awareness must have been heightened by the fact that although we were grandchildren visiting grandparents there was somehow more to it than that. When we arrived in Cedar Rapids our picture was taken for the Gazette; the visitors – even to the perception of a seven-year-old – were interesting people; the paintings on the walls mirrored objects found in corners and on tables: a plant, a jug, a statue of Buddha. Objects were not objects, they were still lifes. My grandfather was not a grandfather, but a painter. It stood to reason that the clown was not a clown.

In fact, I was afraid of my grandfather. At the dinner table my sister Winnifred and I fought over who sat beside my grandmother – by far the safer place to sit. In the end we took turns. Sitting beside my grandfather was somehow uncomfortable. I was never sure who he was or what he would demand of me; I always felt challenged.

Childhood memories: Marvin Cone juggling three oranges, something we were told he had learned to do in Paris. A package from him with an envelope on which was written: “Stephen, to be opened in private”. It contained plastic spiders to scare my sisters with (They scared me more than anyone else; I never used them). Marvin Cone reading to us from *The Adventures of Jimmy Brown* by William Livingston Alden and laughing diabolically at the story of a boy who causes trouble by hiding inside a snowman and speaking to people sleighing past. At night, when we had gone to bed, Marvin Cone liked to come up the stairs (which creaked) calling out: “I am Oz the great and terrible, who are you and why do you seek me?”

Oz the wizard, Marvin Cone the painter: two rather formidable characters.

At the end of his book *The Wizard of Oz*, Lyman Frank Baum exposes the great wizard as a man hiding behind a curtain. A disappointment, perhaps, but necessary for the philosophical message behind the story which is, basically, that we all carry within us the truth we spend our lives pursuing.

I am unable to look at *Two Clowns in White Face* without thinking of *Les lictours rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils* by Jacques Louis David, a painting Marvin Cone will have seen in the Louvre when he was in Paris in 1920. The similarities are striking. Figures on the right react to a scene on the left. A hand linking the two scenes catches the eye and forms the psychological centre of the painting. A curtain behind the figures creates a kind of stage, limiting the space and thereby intensifying the activity therein.



Jacques-Louis David, *Les licteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils*, 1789

The light in David's painting cannot be followed comfortably along its diagonals. The eye is waylaid by three intensely illuminated female figures; our attention caught, we notice the women are reacting to a scene in near darkness on the left. A shift takes place as we cease to be guided by light but by a psychological tension within the painting. Our eye moves to the left of the canvas. A corpse is being carried into the room, *les licteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils*.

Marvin Cone's light is equally capricious. The diagonal light falling on the clown draws only momentary attention to his face and then leads down to something apparently insignificant: the white cross of a pair of suspenders, the floor of the stage, a child's shoulder. Bewildered, the eye turns to the dark shadows in the folds of the curtain and jumps to the motioning hand in the middle of the picture. Our attention becomes psychological rather than visual as we follow the gesture back to the two clowns in white face.

Jacques Louis David's three female figures symbolize the three states of grief: the shock of the first daughter, the helpless faint of the second, the mother's accusatory gesture. Nothing this dramatic or specific takes place in Marvin Cone's painting. Here the hand belongs to an emotionless figure, whose sole purpose is to direct our attention to an enigmatic clown holding a small, white-faced monkey.

There is a German word for which I know no adequate translation: *Versatzstueck*. It means dummy, in the sense of fake spines of books on a shelf, theatre scenery, or cardboard cut-outs. The figures in *Two Clowns in White Face* are *Versatzstuecke*. The spectators, the master of ceremonies, all are unreal, there solely to create a sense of theatre or to lead the eye. The only real person is the masked man.

One is reminded of the Platonic idea that everything visible is a veil that conceals the truth. The curtain at the back of the stage – the curtain which creates the stage – hints at this philosophy. Marvin Cone was well-versed in the history of painting. Curtains with folds as in *Two Clowns in White Face* go back much further than Jacques Louis David. They are found in the deepest recesses of art history, used through the centuries to define or imply a space, to suggest an activity behind it, or the possibility of a performance before it. The veil of concealment makes that which it hides significant, special, even holy. In the end, the veil itself can carry the message: the image of Christ, for example, etched indelibly on the cloth

held aloft by Saint Veronica in Hans Memling's depiction of her. Memling was one of Marvin Cone's favourite painters.



Veronica: *Vera Icon*, the true image. The only figure in *Two Clowns in White Face* whom I, as viewer, perceive as true – as not being a *Versatzstueck* – is masked. We conceal ourselves in order to be who we are, to open up the full potential of self. It is the nature of painting, however, that behind the painted mask there is canvas, a primed surface, nothing. This nothing, is essential to Marvin Cone. The veil itself has become the message. He was a master of his technique but wrote that he saw no point in using paint to imitate nature. He applied paint to hide (to veil, to mask) the limiting specificity of reality thus opening up the much vaster, much more mysterious, and terribly empty space of existence itself.

In a letter (1735) John Keats wrote: “...(it) struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason....”

It is the mysterious, the undefined, the non-specific, that Marvin Cone pursues: cut-out figures represent the idea of – rather than real – spectators; landscape is abstracted to the point of becoming essence of – rather than a particular – cloud, hill, or farmhouse. His empty and abandoned rooms possess infinitely more possibility than if filled with furniture or people. A forgotten framed portrait of an uncle or aunt hanging on the wall is simply another mask.

I do not believe that Marvin Cone gave as much analytical thought to his paintings as I have here. I rather think he stored away the hours spent in the Louvre in 1920, his extensive knowledge of art history, and “used” it subconsciously. He filled his paintings with layers of meaning without the layers themselves being the intent. The driving force was his sense of being at one with himself when painting, and the aesthetic pleasure he experienced when composing his canvases.

Keats goes on to say “...This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.”

Greasepaint hides the face, allowing those interacting with the masked person to behave differently, perhaps more openly. Marvin Cone's paintings hide the specific, thus closing the door to painting-based interpretation. The viewer must exercise his own negative capability and enter the unbearable void. The clown in white face stares into the space in which we stand. He has already attracted the gaze of those gathered in front of the stage. The fateful gesture of the hand is meant for us.

Images (all Cone images © Estate of Marvin Cone):

Marvin Cone, *Two Clowns in White Face*, 1935

Marvin Cone, *Drawing of Stephen*, 1957

Jacques-Louis David, *Les lecteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils*, 1789

Hans Memling, *St. Veronica*, ca. 1475

Stephen Cone Weeks

Grandson of Marvin Cone, Stephen Cone Weeks was born in London and grew up in Canada, the United States, and Germany. After studying drawing and stained glass in Germany, Weeks returned to Canada where he received his BFA in drawing and lithography from the University of Windsor in 1976. A German Academic Exchange Service scholarship made it possible for him to study under Rolf Sackenheim at the Art Academy of Düsseldorf, where he became a *Meisterschüler* in 1978. After graduation, he worked entirely on paper until 1994 when he began creating his complex, narrative drawings on glass. A grant in 2007 enabled him to do his short-film project *the curtain of can't*. Stephen Cone Weeks lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany, and has had a summer studio at Lake Como in Italy. More information on the artist and his work can be found at www.stephenconeweeks.de.