



*Autumn de Forest above during her painting demonstration at the Butler in Youngstown, Ohio*



*Autumn de Forest,  
Drive, 2014,  
acrylic on canvas,  
48" x 60", age 12*



*Autumn de Forest, Little Girl, Big World, Pollock, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 108", age 12*

## **The Tradition Continues**

### **Autumn de Forest at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio**

**by Steve Rockwell**

Autumn de Forest found painting in her "White Room" before she understood what painting was. From her artist statement we learn that Autumn has "been going to the White Room forever," a place she calls her unconscious, but one she can't describe beyond that "it is not here, in this world." It is from the White Room at the age of five the artist began speaking to the world in paint. Those first utterances might never have been captured were it not for the support and encouragement of Autumn's parents, Douglas and Katharine. As it was, the provision by the artist's

mother to her daughter's interest was generous, replete with large canvases and a quality set of acrylics.

Nine years and well over a hundred of those canvases later, the 14-year-old artist has become to her peers somewhat of an elder stateswoman of art. Seated attentively with their parents at Autumn's Saturday afternoon painting demonstration this past April at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, were a number of potential child artists. The charisma of the artist in her presentation was evidenced by her poise, confidence, and an easy loquaciousness. As she said

the next day at the reception of her exhibition *The Tradition Continues*, "I love talking about my work. I give my paintings a story." Autumn has gone from a five-year-old "messing around and having fun" to clearly having found a way of translating the objects of her imagination onto canvas.

While children her age were scribbling in notebooks, a diminutive Autumn was filling outsized canvases. In tandem with the upscale of her paint surface has come the exponential expansion of her social and public arena. Almost from the start, donating artwork to charities and supporting humanitarian efforts have come at Autumn's insistence. These have taken the form of public art installations involving the re-building efforts of the New Jersey Shore, The Red Cross, and Habitat For Humanity. Innumerable

interviews, profiles, and appearances for the major television networks and print media has positioned the “advanced child prodigy” as an ambassador for the importance of keeping the arts in the schools. Autumn was the youngest artist ever featured at the National Art Education Association’s annual convention, along with elder art legends Peter Max and Chuck Close. Last November, her contribution to the arts secured her a private audience with the Pope in Rome. Three of her works are now part of the Vatican collection.

Autumn’s 2014 painting *Little Girl, Big World, Pollock* is ironic on multiple levels. For a little girl, the artist has seemingly managed to cast a long shadow over that big world. Similar in composition to Autumn’s painting is a 1962 Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover titled *The Connoisseur*, featuring an older man viewing, what looks like a Jackson Pollock painting. According to the Norman Rockwell Museum, to achieve his “homage” to the artist, Rockwell had taken the trouble to rearrange his entire studio in the manner of Pollock, by working on the floor. The same would have to have been true for Autumn. Drip paintings à la Pollock have to be done on the floor. In the end, it doesn’t matter who paints like Pollock, no one else can occupy the place in time and history that Pollock himself occupied. Autumn’s *Little Girl, Big World, Pollock* painting succeeds as a postmodern statement in its delineation of the unique moments in the history of art that separate her work from Pollock’s.

Comparable ironies arise in two versions of Autumn’s, *Drive*, one from 2015, reproduced in her exhibition catalog, which is a somewhat more polished version than the 2014 painting depicted here on page 42. The Butler *Drive* painting was positioned at the end of the exhibition corridor, a placement that ended up simulating the exhibition space as a road. The tilt of the italic text of *Drive* was suggestive of speed. The blunt-serifed “I” of *DRIVE* was precisely placed over the horn of the steering wheel, as if to say, “Beep!

Beep! Please get out of the way! I am too young to drive.” The desert road with vanishing point echo the empty landscapes and wry wordplay of California artist Ed Ruscha. Autumn’s *Drive* may well signify a testing of the limit that a girl her age may convey in art through her particular lived experience, even as life events of the artist seem to be accelerating at a successively greater “speed.”

Where her more technique-based abstract work allow a sense of play, *Little Girl, Big World, Pollock and Drive*

exemplify the extent to which the burden on Autumn as an artist falls on the searching out and defining of the edges of her artistic identity within a larger adult world. If she inhabits, as she has said, a “candy store” in which she has free run, being “self-taught” admits to a partition between the walls of her world and its outside. *Autumn Rose* (2010), painted at the age of eight, is an example of the artist’s joy in the tasting of styles, techniques, and flavors within the walled privacy of her imagination.



*Autumn de Forest, Autumn Rose, 2010, acrylic and resin on canvas, 48" x 36", age 8*



*Autumn de Forest, Laguna, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 72", age 8*

The exhibition title, *The Tradition Continues*, points to Autumn's rich artistic lineage. Besides cousin George de Forest Brush, who was known for his paintings of the American West, art has been woven into Autumn's genealogy through her great, great uncle, Robert Weeks de Forest, a former president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Another cousin, Roy de Forest, had been a pioneer in the California Abstract Expressionist Movement. Hudson River School painter, Lockwood de Forest, makes up yet another family branch.

Autumn's expressionistic *Shadow Play* (2012) is both tentative and assertive, explorative in nature, being forceful and mature in its courage to leave out detail – a playful cypher of a youthful self that awaits definition over time. For now, Autumn, in bee-fashion, buzzes from Rothko to Motherwell, Pollock, to de Kooning, Warhol to Dali, and back again. The honey she gathers is for a future blossoming, for seasons yet to come. The springing of Autumn's career so early in her life, places time distinctly on her side.



*Autumn de Forest, Shadowplay, 2014, acrylic on paper, 60" x 48", age 12*