

## ART AND THE ACTIVITY OF CONTEMPLATION

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It is difficult to imagine a society, in which the arts did not play an important role. They were the catalyst for the fusion of the contemporary thought, experience and technology in the making of objects of supreme cultural importance. Even technologically unsophisticated societies, fashioned the most intractable materials into valued artworks. The skills and technology evidenced in the making were often so advanced that, knowledge about how they were actually made still eludes us. From the time of the oldest remaining traces it is obvious that the arts were considered as the foremost vehicle for the expression of metaphysical speculations and beliefs. This notwithstanding, the major religions generally found the question of images problematic and Christianity struggled for a very long time with the problem of visual representation.

In Christianity the problem seemed to hinge around the question of their seductive worldly qualities diverting the spectator from their real function, of an expression of the transcendental. Springing from Greek ideals, which were imbued with the intention of realistic representation - we have only to think of Zeuxis's grapes - the Western visual tradition carried with it a concern for the literal representation of the world. Early theologians in their efforts to overcome the attractions of the body of sin, ended up also denying the body of flesh. Descartes' later espousal of a mind body split, enshrined the mental function as the only reality, at the expense of feelings and the sensuous, which I believe, eventually led to the breakdown of the relationship with nature and the environment.

The close connection of the arts to the transcendental owed little to the historical patronage by the established religions. Piety and devotion were important, but the unique capabilities of the arts - I will mainly be referring to paintings in this paper - as a mode of understanding and as an alternate mode of expression were more important. Both religion and the arts are concerned with an area of human experience that operate separately from the linguistically based culturally conditioned thought. The arts allow for understanding and thought

which are replete with attributes and characteristics denied to language.

However much it might be culturally constructed and determined, a painting is not a solely a text to be read. It is executed outside language with many aspects of human experience brought into play that are not necessarily functioning in linguistic discourse. Language is but one vehicle for thought, which has achieved in our society a position of pre-eminence. The constant questioning of the deconstructionists is but one recent attempt to avoid the manipulative, and controlling, grid of language. The efforts of Joyce, Beckett, Jabes and other writers to escape what Wittgenstein described as the "bewitchment of language" are but contemporary attempts in a process as old as society itself. The arts were the original mode of escape because of their otherness in relation to the strictures of language. Language was, in a sense, too much of the world to be a medium for spiritual expression. This I believe, explains the historical importance and relevance of the arts.

They were a method of investigating and communicating about an area that the logical sequential nature of language found extremely difficult. If we briefly consider the use of symbols, and they have many similarities with a painting, particularly with respect to their reception, we understand that their intention was to rupture the flow of linguistic thought. Symbol has a particularly wide meaning, but I am referring to those that have a paradoxical nature. The cross, for example, in one reading, alludes to a centrifugal movement to the four directions of space and equally to a centripetal movement to the centre. Aristotle and logic do not allow us to say "She is a man" but the statues of Shiva at Elephanta are quite comfortable with this statement. Here the intention is, I believe, to engender an experience that is not polarised by oppositions, which cannot be made meaning of linguistically and which does not yield a single detachable resolution.

Normally when we see an object, the fact is registered by our mind categorised and classified after which the information stored away in our short term memory. However when the process cannot, or is not, followed, in our case due to the paradoxical nature of the information or presentation, there is a hiatus of suspended resolution. When the normal rational sequencing of information is thwarted the information is not categorised but is left in abeyance, free to find correspondences with all areas of knowledge on any level. The state of being in abeyance is an integral part of the reception of the symbol and also, as I will show, of the visual arts. Roland Barthes gives an excellent

account of this state in describing the Japanese poetic form of Haiku,

Haiku does not make meaning of the subject [it merely] ... reproduces the designating gesture of the child pointing at whatever it is, merely saying that! with a movement so immediate (so stripped of mediation: that of knowledge, of nomination, or even possession) that what is designated is the very inanity of any classification of the object.<sup>1</sup>

Such correspondences and association are not only predicated by language; shape, colour or any other sensory stimulus can trigger associations. They cannot be willed and the process is not controlled by conscious thought. More importantly the process does not exclude the vast amount of sensory information that is gathered through our experiences and interaction with our environment. As the symbol is always an image, a visual image, the process and perception are inextricably linked.

When I talk of perception, I am not referring to Descartes disembodied eye, but a definition more akin to Baudelaire's belief that perception involved and embodied all the senses. Perception is our most essential and elemental sense and is our primary means of obtaining knowledge. It is inextricably linked to space as everything we see is located in space. Our experience of objects, the landscape both in a primary and secondary sense, is through perception and in space. We explore this space visually and physically, moving about in it, adapting to it, developing all the time our understanding of it and our attitude towards the world. It is through space that we site ourselves in the system, which is the result of the divers realities encountered. Through perception we reach out bodily and interact with our environment. Our understanding of the world is a bodily not a purely intellectual one.

As Merleau-Ponty the French phenomenalist philosopher points out, we know the world in a Biblical sense-carnally. Our understanding of the world is realised in the physical. An object that is perceived is encountered firstly as a meaning for us - "an intersensory style of being rather than a construction from sense data". These meanings are not fixed or pre-existing in the world, but are called into existence by the act of perception. To quote Merleau-Ponty:

Quality, light, colour, depth, which are there before us are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and

because the body welcomes them.<sup>2</sup>

This relation between the body, the world and the inner resonance, sites the meaning in an area inaccessible to language. The relation between the human and nature is a profound one. Nature influences the body on all levels in a relationship in which the body is largely a passive participant. Merleau Ponty also writes:

I find the experience of the perceived world a new type of relation between mind and truth. The evidence of the perceived thing lies in its concrete aspect in the very texture of its qualities, and in the equivalence among all its sensible properties--which caused Cezanne to say that one should be able to paint even odours.<sup>3</sup>

Through perception we leave the confines of the self to explore those resonances which are already within our body. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

I am learning to see. I don't know why it is but everything penetrates more deeply into me and does not stop at the place where, until now it always used to finish. I have an inner self of which I was ignorant.<sup>4</sup>

Intriguingly many of the accounts of saintly visions are given in very concrete, sensuous terms with an emphasis on colours, texture, etc., putting them into the category of images rather than just descriptions.

For the artist, pictorial space is a subject of immense concern; witness, for example, the energy that went into the development of perspective in Western art; it is possibly their primary concern. Now the body that is so important in our understanding of the world, also plays an essential part in the making of any artwork. Not the body envisaged as a series of functions, or an object occupying space, but a body that is a blend of vision and movement. A body imbued with feelings and experiences that tend to be lacking in abstract thought. Thought when seen as having its starting point in information passed on by the senses, is a distancing from the subject and from the immediacy of any direct experience. The acquisition of linguistic skills is towards logical, sequential thought structures and for the child, the word "cat" loses, as it develops, all connotations of softness and furriness that it might have had once. The experience of the cat's

softness and furriness is still there each time we look at a cat, even if we do not wish to consider it.

Much contemporary thought considers paintings as a text to be read and understood linguistically. This all encompassing theory seems to deny the existence of other modes of thought, but a child sees before it can think. However the question remains, what is happening to a baby before it acquires the cultural and intellectual processes associated with language? To imagine the child at this stage, as a maelstrom of primal urges and desires, although this might seem perfectly true to anyone with young children, assumes that thought is acquired much as language is and along with it. It would be true to say that even on the simple level of vocabulary the child's knowledge is far in advance of their vocabulary. Prior to the name, the child already knows the object and has had a repertoire of experiences with it, acquiring a large amount of knowledge about it, gained through perception and in its interaction with its world.

Now a painting is an object. It is a concrete thing that occupies a certain place in space for as long as it is in existence. It must exist in some sort of tangible form or another for it to be considered a painting. Similar to any object the physical presence of the painting establishes a space within which further levels of meaning and interpretation can be opened up. Schwaller de Lubicz wrote of images;

The image, the form is there concretely before us and it can expand, evoking within the prepared viewer a whole complex of abstract, intuitive notions or states of being - qualities, associations and relationships which cannot be described but only experienced.<sup>5</sup>

The process described here is similar to that proposed for the symbol and has profound ramifications for our approach to an artwork.

The existence of the painting is not only in the colours, tones, composition, subject matter etc. but is also in the materiality of the materials used paint, etc., itself. A painting is not only an image of some kind or another, but is also blobs of paint, colour arranged on a flat surface. The medium the work is executed in, is, as we have seen, integral to the artist sees and understands the world. Familiarity with the medium or materials used on the part of the artist, facilitate their understanding of the meanings encountered in perception. It further provides a manner for investigation of the conundrums that are subsumed within the shadow of meaning. For the artist follows a

process of thinking through making, which is mitigated and enhanced by a relationship with a specific medium. The skills developed and techniques used in the handling of the material are a very important element in the expressive, communicative and thinking process involved in the work and its reception.

Imagine for a minute, a Rembrandt or Bacon portrait that was painted with the paint quality of a Hockney or a Greek icon. The experience, insight and understanding that is the hallmark of both painters would be almost totally destroyed. The paint quality is inseparable from the artist, the work and the value it has for us. It also explains why a reproduction of the work is of a very different order to the original. The difference is frequently noted as far as dimensions, colour etc., but more the comment about the original are couched in terms of words like "power", "moving" etc. highlighting the quality of experience gained from seeing the originals. This experience is intimately connected to the tangibility of the work and the materiality of the medium used. The medium remains as a trace of the unrevealed body of the artist and as a trace of the thinking process undergone in the making of the work and the meanings that flowed from the artist's involvement with the process.

A painted image unlike every other art form, is visible and presented in its entirety to the viewer's gaze. Without the painting there before one, there is only a partial recollection of it and any real experience of the work is impossible. This is the case with mechanical reproductions and close to the position postulated by John Berger in his penetrating and revolutionary book, *Ways of Seeing*.<sup>6</sup> Berger emphasised the notion of an artwork being, in a capitalist society, first and foremost an object of trade. He stressed an ideological approach to art debunking many of our cherished beliefs about the artwork, as merely props to the maintenance of monetary their value. So the possibility of a constant meaning, spiritual values and authenticity were all "demystified", as he described it, as part of this process. The demystification of these values had largely occurred through the advent of the camera; mechanical reproduction and advertising, creating what Berger called "the language of images". No distinction was made between an original and a reproduction of an artwork with any real experience of the work lost in theory or ideology. So twenty years after *Ways of Seeing* George Steiner could write:

It is indicative of the stylistic and intellectual climate now predominant of the era of theory, that the personal

phenomenality of the encounter with music, literature and the arts is largely left inarticulate. Current critical theory in its investigations of significant form finds almost nothing to say of the literal facts of our experience of the poem.<sup>7</sup>

The work, together with any experience of it is lost in the welter of linguistic exposition and explanation. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that everything is alluded to except the experience the viewer has of the painting and the painting itself. A painting, as an object made over time and in a medium that reflects the body's realised meanings, is essentially considered the same as a mechanically reproduced photograph that captures a fleeting instant of time. Recognition is all that is demanded of the work: a recognition that is reminiscent of naming or categorising an object that permits it's entry into the provenance of language. The picture that is understood as a text is not one that has been experienced. Separation of the viewer from the subject sites the work in an area of purely cerebral understanding; diminishes the participatory element and hence the involvement of the self. In so doing control is handed over to the subject. The viewer being placed in the position of being a passive receptor of pre-packaged ideas, devoid of moral and ethical, and of course, spiritual dimensions.

What I am proposing is a manner of looking at artworks that seeks, as it were, to delay for as long as possible the intrusion of language into the process of absorption and familiarity with the work. A manner of appreciation of the work that is not a rhetorical one, but one based on a language that was founded in intuition. Deferring the certainty of classification, in this way, allows participation with all aspects of the materiality of the painting. Something akin to a non verbal inward meditation that allows the image to resonate in the body of the viewer, conjuring up all the intuitive states and most importantly allowing time for an experience of the work to be constituted. Keats describes this state when he refers to Shakespeare as being;

capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

Holding back the tide of acquired opinions, of cultural mores and structured thought, space is created for perception to operate in all it's subtle complexity and power. Not being seduced by the subject matter, but allowing the blobs of colour, shapes, textures and materiality of the

paint to evoke thoughts, feelings and emotions, together with another domain of understanding and knowledge. With the configurations of culturally conditioned thought held at arms length, infinitely more far reaching and diverse formulations become a realisable reality. Here we understand the value that art used to have, as the language that allowed even the uneducated people to read the stained glass windows and the murals in the churches. There was also an equality implicit in this language, for although we may not be all equal in intelligence, we are so in the intuitive faculty.

The process is heuristic, multi-levelled and owing to the diversity and quantity of the stimuli, is not limited to any single domain of understanding or knowledge. Meditation or contemplation of an image electrifies the consciousness, operating, as it does, at a level that is pre-verbal; what Levi-Strauss called the "logic of concrete quality". It permits the trust that we all feel in perception - after all seeing is believing - to function to the fullest, granting us the interval in time to take pleasure in the free flowing associations that occur and the intuitions that are potentially there to flash into the mind. Intuitions and associations so evoked are assessed and evaluated honestly in accordance with the dictates of the self. To participate in this process, is to tolerate the potential of the power of contact with the emancipatory aspect of art and to be a mode of emancipation or freedom; is the primary aim of art.

The evaluations made will not modify or change the way we see the world, but will act on our consciousness and stimulate it. This procedure puts us in a position of being a detached observer merely taking note of the associations, without aligning them to the already known, we are to a degree seeing our situation without being involved. The conceptual, perceptual and experiential range of associations embodied in the artwork ensure a random, unwilled association that involves all aspects of the self. The multi-levelled associations are evaluated free from the pressures of social constructs. The potential of direct aesthetic or sensuous experience to absorb, in this way, meanings and values is immense.

Contemplation said Nicholas Berdyaev is;

an active engagement of the viewer with the work of art. Such engagement requires an openness to the work and of an inward searching of ourselves.

The statement resonates with the concept of an uncategorizing gaze



that allows for a participation with and an experience of the work. In so doing the viewer ceases to be a spectator on the outside looking in, but partaking in what is being looked at. All that is required is a degree of charity and a willingness to contemplate the work in a state of not knowing. Before allowing the intrusions of culture to take over, give the eye the time to transverse the surface in pleasure, empowering the body, the feelings and thought as one, and in each other, to experience the work. The process is an active one and has the integrity of speaking from the position of speaking for ourselves, not from an assumed or given position. In this sense the gaze of the viewer is one that simply appraises and reflects the all-consuming calm stare of the child faced with a new person or experience.

*Sydney*

#### REFERENCES

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