

Witnesses and Luminaries

Lately, I have been cleaning cages at the monkey sanctuary. I rake out one of the enormous environments or I scrub the monkey toys, coaxing myself into believing that sitting with my feet in a kiddie pool full of nibbled Playskool is not underutilizing my skills. ("This guitar is for the monkeys. This school bus is for the monkeys. Oh, they must really love this sword; look how they've chewed it all up.") I do this less out of some generous sense of environmental responsibility and more in the selfish hope that one of the less aggressive capuchins will hold my hand through the cage. I suppose this seems at best indicative of a frustrated maternal need, and at worst of a pathetic social one.

But there is something unabashed and beautiful in the ease with which they, the simple primates, touch us, the genetically evolved and emotionally reserved. There is a tenderness, a cool tactility, and the vague feeling that somehow this little monkey deciding to hold your hand makes you ... well, special. This is particularly the case around Chi Chi, the retired circus monkey. She still dances sometimes, or sings, but ever since her long-term companion, Pablo, died, she mostly just watches television

One of my art-teacher heroes, Richard Carlyon, traced for us the recent history of "Painting and the Sublime." He told us about Caspar David Friedrich painting a small figure standing in front of a huge waterfall. The figure was overwhelmed and awed by it - by both how close it could be to him and how narrowly he was escaping it.

Years later, Mark Rothko would take this painted figure out of the image in an attempt to make the viewer in the gallery experience this awe firsthand. He wanted to change the experience of art from an illustration of a phenomenon to the demonstration of it, by allowing the viewer in real space to experience what we imagine the figure in Friedrich's painting to have been feeling. He did this not by painting a representation of a landscape, for that would only distract us with the artist's mechanical skills or with the irony inherent in the fact that this nature was painted. He did so instead by painting something that would evoke the same bleary-eyed, in-the-present, out-of-focus feeling that looking at fire does. He painted simple, soft-edged squares of color that disarm us.

"Look at the space between the colors," Carlyon would say. You can do this for only a minute or so before your eyes fog at the lack of a focal point. Soon, the edges of the color squares disappear, melting atmospherically into each other. Then the edges of the painting haze into the wall it hangs on. Stay in this space of open focus and the edges of the wall seem to soften, and then the edges of the room itself....

Why am I thinking of Rothko now?

We operate in a different time frame in front of the rightness of his paintings, just as we do in front of a sun-flicked river, the liquid light of fire, and possibly, in front of television. It is a trance-like zone of light and unfocused motion. It is the time of over and over again. Not repetition, but perpetuity. This is not about the real TV and its Withering content. This is about the metaphor of TV and what it looks like from a distance.

This is a long way around.

Patrick Moser painted his television for well over year before he turned it on. He treated it like a still-life, observing the lighting of the room around it, the subtle shadow of color on the windowsill behind it, the folds in the curtain, and the always-dark green screen. He would set it up in various places throughout the house and paint it again and again, for months. The other painters in his graduate program asked him, in the gentle way that self-assured students of higher education do, to please paint something else.

He said that he knew there was something there. One day after he had painted the room around it in its muted-as-always hues, he turned the television on and attempted to paint what was on the screen. He would try to capture the colors and shapes quickly, before they changed, but by the time he had mixed up the last color, the next one was on in its place.

It was a gorgeous dilemma, which led to an entire body of work. He would paint the duration of a rented movie, its palette determining his. His works became paintings within paintings. In the first, or outer painting, the furniture and objects are represented with a smooth veneer - these are the things we can hold. The second, inner painting of the TV screen is abstract and viscous, painted with a knife and urgent. The image from the screen the ephemeral stuff of the

experience - is a thick pastiche, becoming itself an object in its attempt to represent the event. Historically, Moser moves us through Joseph Albers and his square-within-square color studies, the abstract expressionists, and the color-field painters, including Rothko. We go blurry at their light.

All memorials should be this way. The paintings become portraits of the rented movies Moser was watching. These are not like film stills, which can only capture the artist's favorite fraction of a second, locking us in to one person's selection of memory - an image isolated and petrified. These are portraits of the movie in its entirety; compressions of them. They act as prompters or provocateurs for our own memorized images from the film. I can look at Moser's "Jaws on the Rocker" and remember my knees pulled up tight under my chin at the bloated body scene, and the false alarm at the beach, and the oxygen tank at the end of it. And I can imagine these brush marks not only as evidence of someone having painted this object I stand in front of, but also as evidence of him having shared the same mediated experience; jumping at the same shocks and squinting for the same (and different) reasons. The pervasive blues of that particular movie cast the rest of the room in the light of the ocean at night. All memorials should be like this, with no definable line, but a blur of the experience colored accurate to shared memory.

What are we looking for?

Brody Condon normally maps out with great specificity the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of his sculptural work. While some artists "think" through the process of making, he builds structures to give form to his already solid ideas. He has not sketched in years. He has a very impressive outline for the next several stages of his life. He works from an intellectual premise - a man with a plan. But in this case, it was not the idea, but the image of this body of work that came to him complete - a picture in his head to be realized before he fully knew its meaning. He filled the gallery with upright light boxes and placed in front of each, staring into it, a taxidermy cat or a deer or a pair of dogs. Historically, they give a nod to the cool detachment of the Minimalist movement, but they ground themselves in optical experience as solidly as the phenomenological works of Robert Irwin or James Turrell. The resulting pieces are mournfully familiar. Initially they are your cat in the window or the dog barking at the doorbell on TV or the deer in the headlights. That is the familiar part; the

mournful part is that very soon after that, they are us.

These are both dead things: the stuffed animal, the light box. But in relationship to each other, they become symbiotically animated. The light gives the animal a place to focus and therefore, sentience. The animal gives the fluorescent light the life of metaphor, of meaning beyond its physical function. And something about this standoff reminds us of our own desperately undefinable relationships with God and with Death and perhaps, in an argument I am even less qualified to make, with Nature and Technology. The animals stare in our stead at everything we are drawn to but do not understand. They wonder why she left, where he is now, what happened to the person you used to be, where do we go when we die, what ... are we doing here, but they wonder it all at once, without the refuge of words. The fact that they are merely stuffed and mounted shells only makes the answers to their questions that much more necessary, as the parallel between them and us is that much more compelling. We go blurry at their light. And we are back in the realm of Rothko and Friedrich, both putting a figure, in one way or another, before the questions that are too dire and too daunting for us to walk away from unshaken. And it seems a little less discomfiting then, that in the allegorical light of these questions, we look for some relatively small and glowing object to lessen the severity of our sentience; or that ever since Pablo died, Chi Chi mostly just watches television.

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