

## ON MONET

Paintings are like people, for the most part we pass them by with hardly a momentary glimmer of consciousness; perhaps we pick up the colour of a tie, a distinctive jacket or a sexy bottom that jumps out of the grey blur that is the mass of humanity that flows around us. And if we stop, we have to categorize: fun, boring; pretty, clever: labels, not even cardboard cut-out people. A few we gather around us, drawn by circumstance or some Elective Affinity; with familiarity we see differently, but not necessarily better; sometimes we see more, sometimes less as habit and expectation blinds us.

Just occasionally, with a shock of recognition, we are taken unawares and the reality of another bulldozes our defenses- the vertiginous possibility of a reality separate from our own washes over us: a brief clarity before a stranger or a mystic fusion of bodies in a Kirchner ocean of sensation where all distinction of self and other is lost.

It can happen before a painting.

But for the moment I am on a polite date: reserved and on my best art historians behaviour; asking the stock, polite questions, wondering what elusive chemistry first turned my head in this direction, wondering what we might have in common.

And I have not yet even looked at the painting; I glance at its surface: still, cool, dark, deep and watery and calming. Confusion of form, mark and longer child-like swirls- half human mark, half lily. Holding it all together two flowers of intense, complementary contrast and it becomes obvious, even in our brief acquaintance, that the key to this painting is in their placing, tonality and saturation.

They enter:

-*"Et Voilà!"*

*They begin to leave:*

-*"Je vais regarder de plus près"*

She steps forward and bends, bright red jacket shouting a discord with the

alizarin lilies, turns and walks out:

*-“C’est beau! Magnifique! Bonnard!- regarde-moi ça”...*

The silence settles back and we can converse again-.

It is only our second meeting and yet already a certain acceptance and familiarity had crept into our tone; certain dissatisfactions begin to niggle- the light that reflects and blinds the top corner. But, settling, my eyes seek below the surface and seek out the subtle balance of tone and colour, form and formlessness, flatness and depth that is the conversation of this work. The eye is pulled irrevocably to the higher of the two lilies which is of a greater saturation than the other, falling on a diagonal from bottom left to top right and almost on a golden section.

The connection with the top right is formed by the only highlight of the whole tonality in that corner: another diagonal is formed from the top left to the other flower by strong, directional brushstrokes. The surface begins to float into structure: four centres of organization: eight emerald green lilies forming a triangle in the top right-hand square. Three Monet-mauve lilies forming another in a smaller bottom-left. Two more green lilies giving a clue to the surface of the water on the middle-left. Colour moves from a palest blue-slate to mauve, through violet and emerald green to a profound green. And the flowers: the flowers live with touches of almost pure white and two almost imperceptible and magical touches of yellow at their centre. Hovering somewhere in the green is a vibrating, rusty orange. The patch of white is echoed in the same sharp touches, this time bluey-white, that refuse to stop being brushstrokes and almost break the profound illusion of water. The top of the painting, half-hidden by reflected spot light is predominated by a more yellowy green.

The whole surface is orchestrated by brushstroke patterns of seeming randomness, but carefully ordered from short vertical touches spread over the painting, the reflected willow of the title, to the circular lily pads; the scumbled top and radiating petals. Yet if one approaches the thick, physical sur-

face, it dissolves into a chaotic frenzy of gesture; a liberal freedom that only a Master can enjoy.

I begin to understand how the whole painting radiates from a point of attention- the eye taken by the brightness of a flower in the gloom cast by the shadow of the willow and how carefully and deliberately Monet had reproduced this sensation.

I suddenly realise too, that I am standing too far away. Monet's painting position was close and as I approach the relation of centre to periphery changes, yet, at the same time, the painting dissolves- physical energy and paint dominate- the green becomes ochre and purple becomes almost overbearing.

As I move back again, alchemy happens- brushstrokes fade and depth, perspective and cohesion takes over. The nebulous miracle of vision of our making sense of chaos happens: the disparate world of sensation takes on a unity through eye and brain in the same way as I watch an incoherent mass of sound slowly break down in to words and eventual meaning each year when I go to Spain. Structure from incoherence. Meaning.

Tired, I begin to fall back from this intense absorption; the lilies become again red, the frame re-appears and the picture is once more contained within a room. Here and now begins to assert its tick...

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How long is it? Four months later? She's still here; waiting, her time ageing more slowly than mine. I, still caught between a certain emptiness in the stomach (why am I always hungry, so aware of my physical nature in art galleries?) and a certain existential hopelessness before explanation- the thing in itself, me, Monet - historical context. The silence of time.

-Another couple make their entrance; this time a besuited back places itself directly between me and the picture; the grey doesn't clash as the red. The

ritual is repeated: approach; bend towards the label; peer at the painting (glasses are useful 'business' to fiddle with at this stage and this man, not possessing any, has to make do with squinting instead), back off and withdraw.

-We are a culture of sign readers; our shared cultural experiences are motor cars and television. We do not look: the meditation of pure sensation and undivided time is lost to us; we feel cheated without our jolt of signalled information and a sense of continual rush forward into the next thing- we must be busy, doing, important, part of our own centuries mythology; that of success. We need Aldous Huxley's Mynah Birds continually repeating the phrase 'Here and Now' because that is what we have forgotten-

Talk, talk; "Suivez-moi" and the eager teacher explains and connects: Impressionism was a term of scorn; Monet had an operations his eyes- look you can make out the roof of the building here- and the Initiates lap it up and take notes and bathe in the admirable enthusiasm of their priestess- and hardly once look at the painting. "Suivez-moi"...

What do we mean by 'to know'? What relation do we seek to the world? Where does this tenuous link of the interior to the exterior sit?

All is flux and change. The world that Monet went out to paint was never still; we are creations and created- forming the world in our image and formed by it: Knowledge organizes sensation creating form and meaning from a chaos of sensation. Yet at the same time it imposes the nature of its own structures dictating what and how we see: in an 'Ame's Room' we see two normal people as totally different sizes because we have learnt that rooms are square and lines converge as they go away in perspective the room 'tricks us' because it doesn't fall in with what we know. The condition of being human is in this dialectic; the original bite that took us from the state of innocence and created this separation between man and nature. It takes awareness and acceptance; a willingness to allow experience to flow through us, to develop another relation to the world around us, to heal this rent.

What we know affects what we see; sets the certain particular angle of our perception; yet without links from other experience we can make no stories and stories are what we use to make meanings. As a teacher I am a passer on of cultural 'stories', accepted meanings. Keys to belonging. There is a necessity for these structures to form meaning; without grammar and convention there is no language. Without tribal ritual, the acceptance of certain common ground of experience, there can be no deepening of our shared experience- things can mean anything, conversation cannot go on in a meaningful way and societies break down. What a society highlights in a certain work at a certain time changes with its own particular obsessions and idioms: all histories have their own history and Monet's contemporaries preferred Chassériau's academic clarities to Monet's daubings which border on existential questions that had not yet been formulated. Yet Monet was painting a world that is lost, from a stand-point that is alien to us and the Modernism that we perceive in them would be perplexing to Monet himself. If we wish to understand these paintings within their context, we must immerse ourselves in the context of another world that is not immediately accessible- as with language, its flavour and its nuance can only be picked up from putting together different fragments over a period of time: the development of the railway, the rise of a middle class, the growth of colour theory and physics, a rebellion against a fusty and intransigent system of art training and myopia. A period cannot be told but has to be pieced together and felt.

Yet, there is also the necessity to let go, to do away with one's prejudgement, to allow something new to enter into one's experience so one is not always seeing one's own expectations- like someone I knew who would go on about how he hated the French- but had never been to France or a girl whose fear of betrayal would not allow a close relationship so that, tiring, men would look elsewhere thus confirming her opinion and endorsing a pattern. Our tendency is to substitute information for experience; we reduce the world to Explanation and pass up ultimate authority to it, thus emasculating our ability to make a fuller response that recognizes other forms of knowing- a total engagement that will bridge the impossible separation between self and

other. That complex knowing that has more to do with the patchwork of a kaleidoscope and James Joyce than the nineteenth century novel with its ordered development and structural certainty.

Form, formlessness; creativity and structure: an endless dialectic that follows the same history of revolution, refinement, decadence and eventual overthrow in a new break with the past. It is the problem of creativity; we can only accept that which we can relate to, that which comes within the bounds of our experience and yet if we accept only what already exists not only is there is no change, but no renewal or advancement. Thus Impressionism was mocked, its works the target for jokes and abuse; its aims misunderstood. Change and growth are painful and uncomfortable- they challenge our picture of the world: what do we mean by 'to know?' How does one look at a picture?

What should I teach?