

Seeing Painting (Bauhaus) 2017.

Recently I visited an art museum in Melbourne during a trip I was on with my parents. Together we meandered through different rooms containing art works from the gallery's permanent collection. The curatorial display in the museum was considered and themed, with an array of art representing a variety of mediums and periods, from 15th century Ming vases to Andy Warhol's screen printed self-portraits from the 1970's.

As a Painter who spends most days in a studio (either my own or that of a university where I teach), it's refreshing to experience works that are transparent with the makers conceptual intent. In particular and possibly not surprisingly my visual engagement with painting is delayed and extended. It's like I'm having a conversation with someone familiar: the marks of the artists' brush on the surface of the canvas becomes an intimate dialogue of reassurance and knowing.

We each walk with ease and flow through the rooms, but I notice my pace far exceeds that of my parents. I wonder if this 'rushed' speed is rude, and if my gallery visitor etiquette could appear conceited. My parents take their time, focusing on certain intricacies of specific works and occasionally engaging in verbal reflection together. In comparison to their leisurely interactions I find myself mostly pushing time, keeping 2 or 3 rooms ahead of them.

This brings me to think about my manner of gazing. A moment of guilt has me wondering if I might be disregarding the artists' technical expertise and abstract rigour, their storytelling and purpose. I inconspicuously stroll back a few rooms and witness them looking up to the enormous 1670's painting *The Immaculate Conception*, by Spanish artist Bartolome Esteban Murillio. Each was dwarfed by its scale and wondering of its narrative. This scene was an artwork in itself; a moment worth capturing through the lens of my phone's camera, promising a visual memory to revisit at a later date.

I continue on with my viewing, capturing similar curated moments. Through the aid of this digital technology I was able to 'see' painting in a new way, where the individual works come together to form a curated whole. The Bauhaus works,

consisting of a cabinet, works on paper and an earthenware pot, reminded me of how Painting exists in multiple forms and how specific artists think outside the traditional picture frame, transferring painterly intentions towards the design of space, objects and architecture. The same too for the view captured of the Renoir sculptures, placed atop plinths on the gallery floor in front of the giant 1872 painting *Moses bringing down the tables of the law*, by John Rogers Herbert. Here I reflect (with tongue in cheek) on American Abstract painter Ad Reinhardt's statement where 'Sculpture is the thing you bump into when walking back to view a painting.' There was also that perfectly crafted 18th Century cabinet, intricately inlaid with mother of pearl and topped with exquisite, hand painted jardinières. I became conscious that my engagement with these artworks held equal value between the firsthand experience of viewing, and seeing the works documented through the screen.

In the presence of art, (being with the art in the gallery space) the viewer is taken on a journey by the maker; prompted to notice the physical and emotional environment in which the work was made. This notion of presence is concentrated by knowing that memory will be needed to recall the experience of seeing. In addition to memory recollection, the gaze is turned inward towards detailed nuances, such as painted brush strokes of blended pigment and finely joined timber, as well as the craftsmanship of shaped steel and chiselled marble. When in the gallery, the viewer is guaranteed a more complex and multifaceted reflection, becoming involved with the work as much as left wondering of the artists ideas and beliefs.

For the digital recordings of artwork the image and the works' crafted parts are somehow flattened and the vista becomes a seamless whole; a curated picture magnifies multiple possibilities of interpretation, subsequently neutralising historical references. It is via the screen that a general gaze supersedes the detailed, visual experience and the endless potentials for an imagined reality become magnified. In Joseph E Aoun's 2017 publication *Robot-Proof: higher education in the age of artificial intelligence*, the idea of human literacies are encouraged towards a digital era where a current generation of learners are taught to master robotics, as opposed to the learner being mastered by them. The computer and digital technology can analyse data and organise complex networks, which Aoun calls 'systems thinking', but argues, computers cannot

decide what to do with that information. Critical and imaginative thinking is possible in humans only and Aoun believes we should use these attributes to our advantage. I realised my 'viewing' was changing not only the way I was seeing, but also offering new ways to interpret. The screen was presenting a space for imagined potentials, illuminating new possibilities for painting.

Back in the museum, to slow down and witness the artworks first-hand gave them a detailed presence not otherwise captured digitally, yet here it was; seen through the screen of my phone, painting existed as more than pigment on canvas, with the flattened image offering a curated prospect of fractured time and blended orientations, I could see the endless capacities of how painting could exist in space, both physically and conceptually. Rosalind Krauss's idea of 'Painting Expanded' had just evolved beyond the conceptual or physical, I was seeing painting through an extension of my imagination. The variety and merging of artefacts flattened and fractured, exposed painting in a new totality, challenging the viewer in regards to how it can be interpreted and how it continues to evolve. If I could capture the installation of the work with my brush I could paint my response to both the firsthand and also digital experience. Hopefully from the selection of images taken I could paint a work that revealed a multi-layered presence (offered by the flattening of space and fracturing of time), incorporating a new dimension to viewing; of thinking about and seeing painting.

I returned to my parents, obsessing over the exquisite intricacies and craftsmanship of a hand-embroidered jacket, apparently once belonging to Louis IX. This was definitely a moment I'm pleased I could engage with directly. It was also special to share the moment of delight with my parents. I'm not sure if it's a generational thing, (where those who aren't reliant on a digital/visual platform to communicate on a daily basis, v's my tendency to depend on it), but for now I'll paint my digitally captured moments and see if my faithful paint brush and canvas can slow both me and my viewer down. Perhaps through painting I can engage with an audience on an ontological level, where the marks from my brush and the framed composition provide insights into new possibilities of how painting has historically existed and evolved into a valuable, visual dialogue. Either way, I intend to make a work that invites the viewer in, to stop and engage, even just for a moment or two. Maybe they will also want to capture my

painted scene through their camera for later viewing. The possibilities of it being scrolled past are high, but there's always a flipside chance it could be paused and zoomed in on. The point is, the ancient practice of painting and its autonomous attributes can still contribute to contemporary arts discourse.

My trip to the museum made me aware that we are critical thinkers and if we are to advance in a world dominated by a milieu of digital media, then we need to use this technology to our advantage. It also illuminated the fact that painting can sit alongside of, and work in with its fellow digital art forms. Today, painting is a medium that allows the artist to consider the world around them whilst offering the viewer a way to not only see painting, but as any good art should do, make us think critically about our time space and place in new and imaginative ways.

Dr Tarn McLean (PhD Visual Art)

.