

What I Learned in Art School

Many of the essential things I understand about writing, or the writing process, came from my undergraduate training—a conservatory training, earning a BFA in studio art. It was during that time that I learned to see: to break down the colors inside each color until it became an automatic impulse; to keep judgments about what was in my visual field at bay and just look; to observe shape and volume and light instead of narrative; to allow a visual image to keep revealing itself; to be patient; to see formal balance or its purposeful disruption.

I was lucky to be in art school at a time and place where there was a palpable energy of exchange and excitement; where beginning and experienced artists worked and talked and worked in an urban environment of studios and rehearsal rooms and theatre spaces and studio classrooms and cafés and bars clustered within easy walking distance, in old brick buildings from the 1800's, some crumbling in the beauty of slow decay, connected by alleyways and secret back walkways where we would run into each other, often in pursuit of a particular material or idea or bearing the desire to discuss a recent discovery.

So, that early experience marked me as an artist, and the ability to see became indispensable in the making of poems, and in being awake in the world. Perhaps the most important aspect of being immersed in a culture of visual art training was that it gave permission: permission to see “with new eyes,” as Adrienne Rich says, to see as an artist, to see as “other,” which is to say, to see in ways not defined by the mainstream culture, to be

attentive to a shifting visual world most likely invisible to most people. And it not only gave permission, but required that I enter stillness, that I tolerate silence and the ability to wait.

To watch negative and positive space interact, the way an object that is a perfect Payne's gray will reverse to negative space; to experience my eye, as a viewer, being conducted through a piece of art; to make technique visible in order to forget it; to notice how one mark brought with it the requirement to rework an entire piece; to contemplate *frame*, as object and idea.

In hour after hour in drawing class, or working alone in my studio, I came to understand a work of art as both artifact/object and process simultaneously. By process, I mean a continual process, not just the physical process of being made, but the afterlife, the process that continues once the piece is "completed" or not being worked on actively by the artist, when the piece has become a dynamic entity of its own and moves into a second stage, of being acted on by the viewer, engaging a form of reciprocity directed outward, when the "gaze" of the painting is turned back on the viewer.

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The first four lines of any drawing are the edges of the paper, I heard over and over while standing before an easel in drawing class. A static frame: what does it yield? How does it contain the world? How does it contain what is being seen, circumscribe what is seen so that the image can reveal itself? How does it generate/allow/create minute ways of looking? Are the first four gestures of a poem the edges of its field? Of course, "field" is both a physical and a conceptual space. How does the frame stop time, still the image, create lyric

time—what we call a “lyric” moment, the time that freezes and then expands? How is the “field” a moment of lyric time?

Of course, we can’t speak of painting as all one thing, or of poems as all the same. At the most basic level, in painting, there is the fact of representational work, the illusion of three dimensionality on a two dimensional surface, and abstract work, the acknowledgement that it is impossible to recreate reality. And yet, both these kinds of work hold the seeds for the other: representational work contains and builds on abstract shapes and volumes, and can often be seen as abstract—not the landscape it depicts but a series of shapes and gestures arranged in a composition, as in O’Keeffe’s landscapes or Turner’s lesser known watercolor sketches. And abstract art calls into reference what it is not: that horizontal line is *not* a horizon, that gesture *not* a tree, so that what the image is not simultaneously appears in the mind along with what is seen—(which is similar to how metaphor works, really, the calling up of what *is* and what *is not* simultaneously) and the mind perceives the layering of image at lightning speed, before we can stop it. Representational and abstract work share the same challenges, have to face some of the same dilemmas: What is being allowed to enter the field? What combination of shape, volume, gesture will move the eye within the frame? What is the smallest gesture necessary to move attention within the field?

Is the space a poem explores the field of its possibility? Its page?

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Not color theory, but practice: that green laid against the rosy skin tone of the arm—made up of cadmium red light, titanium, ochre undertones—see how it makes the line of the body jump forward? *We make technique visible to forget it.*

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Paintings can be deeply interior and generate a certain amount of silence. And that silence is part of what a viewer enters when she stands in front of the painting. In ekphrastic work, the silence is shared between the painting and the poem, between the artist and the writer. Ideally, the writer makes a corollary act of perception, offered alongside the original one, in exchange, not imitation. But, of course, the painting doesn't need the poem.

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The need to inhabit an authentic interior space is fundamentally different than the need to speak. Increasingly, American poetry is about speaking, or has turned toward speaking and being heard as its source and impulse. We now have a lot of noise. And we speak of poetry as a “performative” act, or as having “performative” qualities. Which, of course, it does possess, and always has possessed. But the issue may be the degree of importance that the performative quality possesses. And increasingly, we are becoming schooled (and teaching young poets) to perform a kind of interiority—as a performative act or stance—rather than to inhabit an authentic interiority, or to tolerate and inhabit silence.

Is this a version of the young child calling endlessly to the parent, “Watch me! Watch me!”? Has our poetry become a version of: watch me think! watch me emote! watch me (fill in the blank)?

The issue of permission also may be central here: perhaps we have difficulty, as American poets, giving legitimacy to interiority, really. The culture tells us otherwise: *be active, be outward, be marketable!* Perhaps we have come to think of poetic process as an

enterprise primarily aimed at expression, and that assumption is supported by the most basic fact of permission to speak in our culture.

But these two differing impulses: the need to speak, and the need to inhabit interiority may be indicative of different working processes: I have something to say, or: I need to wander in the dark until I bump into something.

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The early afternoon sunlight slanted across canvasses propped in various states of completion, filtering columns of dust as the light travelled across the room. The visiting painter, in from New York, watched the art students at work on their paintings, and then said, “Painting is like stepping off a cliff, and asking for a little more red on the way down.”

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It seems to me that in making a poem about a painting, the painting can provide both subject and silence from which to speak: it provides the frame, and at the same time, offers companionship against the solitude of the blank page. The poet enters the drama of seeing and being seen—the gaze of the painting—and can share the painting’s simultaneity, its ongoing process, against the need to start up and start up again.

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Making paintings, or other art objects, is of course, intensely physical, and the aspect of physical embodiment is one of its principal pleasures, and frustrations. The artist works with tangible materials—canvas, wood, gesso, pigments—that don’t always perform as

expected. What happens when the cadmium yellow makes the mixed color too saturated, when the balance of pigment and medium is off and the paint won't dry? The risks are great. The body gets tired. The object exists in the world. It is not temporal, or its temporal process is so slow as to outlast the artist. There is great relief in the object-ness of it.

In “blind” contour drawing, often one of the first practices in learning to draw, the student artist imagines the pencil travelling down the contour of the model's body—arm, shoulder, thigh—looking only at the model, not at the paper, until she “sees” the pencil actually on the model's arm, and only then begins to draw, never looking at the paper and never lifting her pencil. The drawings, made up only of line, are often—at least, at first—lumpy, sprawled shapes that barely resemble a human body yet hold an eerie creature quality. Learning to see—inch by inch, drawing by drawing—the way the model's arm is foreshortened, the way the skin drapes across bone, the line from neck to shoulder. Moment by moment, seeing what is there, and then rendering it on to the page.

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Line, of course, is not simple. There is suppleness, movement, expressiveness. In good drawing, lines are not static. A drawing, especially a contour drawing, depends on the quality of line—its dynamics, its fluency. The movement within each line is also essential—its inner rhythm, its pace, its tautness or relaxation: those moments where the line bears down to curve into the inner elbow, to articulate the mechanics of the ankle bone by its density.

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In the studio, as the artist draws, the concentration generates silence, even if a radio is playing in the room. The drawing coming into being is silent, embodied, real. It exists. It is fiercely nonverbal. It has its own body.

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In painting, every mark is at once more permanent and more temporal: the painter paints over what was there. There is no way to save drafts. In working in the field, if one mark is made, the whole piece must be reconsidered. It is necessary to work over the entire surface again, because every mark changes everything else in the painting, shifts all relationships, redefines foreground and background, complicates the texture and movement on the canvas, redefines *surface*.

A painter friend of mine calls it a definition of form. She says all the marks have to make sense, they have to add up in some way, and the balance between the mark and what it is making—the larger shape—is always at play in a painting. And then, of course, the more marks, the more relationships at work, the balance between detail and whole at each moment on the canvas more complicated.

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The writer gets to borrow the painting's silence. The poem gets to borrow the painting's body.

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I want to return for a moment to the notion that to stand in front of a painting is to enter its gaze, an idea developed much more eloquently in discussions about art than my brief mention of it here. We can take in a painting in one gulp, as it were—part of its simultaneous quality arises from the fact that we can “see” it all at once, even though we may then look more closely, study its details in linear time. But nonetheless, we can apprehend the painting in a type of lyric time—whereas, of course, in a poem, we have to read one word at a time—its linearity is a fact of its form—and we can only apprehend it in linear time. That sudden-ness, that of-a-moment apprehension, is part of any painting’s power, and part of what allows the viewer to participate in its silence, to enter its interiority. So we stand there, pulled deeper and deeper into the painting’s world, entering its trance, and sometimes, another thing happens: we go through the painting, into another space entirely, one that is beyond words: a space of pure being, where time is stopped.