

# Aesthetic Investigations

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Introducing a painter's opinion into the discussion about visual perception and painting.

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**Abstract:** The artist's vision and painting have been a topic of numerous discussions in phenomenology and neurosciences. While philosophers study the issue from the aesthetic side, scientists provide purely physiological explanations. However, theory does not sufficiently describe practice. Despite both approaches coming to very fundamental conclusions, curiously they share a common misconception, which is the confusion of the intention in the process of creation with the interpretation of the finished artwork. I introduce the painter's opinion—which I have gained through practice—into the discussion, distinguishing the painting experience from the painting observation experience; distinguishing vision from cognition; and the manifestation of the visible on the canvas. I also propose the possibility of gaining a dignifying awareness of the self and of the perception through the painting, for both the painter and the observer.

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The radiation of the visible is what the painter seeks beneath the words depth, space and colour. (Merleau-Ponty 1993)

## INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of art has assumed the position of the observer when discussing art ever since the 17th century, as if it were only natural.<sup>1</sup> Following this direction, artists try to put themselves in the critic's position and contemporary post-medium art generally tends to reduce its physical body to

become literature of pure critical text.<sup>2</sup> For the plastic arts, such as painting, to which ‘physicality of the medium is integral to the emergence of a virtual meaning’,<sup>3</sup> even if theoretical enquiry is mostly made by non-practitioners of painting, their research attempts to acquire the outlook of the doer, by learning about painting techniques, sketching, mediums and artistic vision.<sup>4</sup> This has produced an extensive body of writing, aiming to apprehend and explain what is at stake in painting, what makes it perceptually so important, emotive, actual and special for both artists and spectators over time.<sup>5</sup> The urge for such an enquiry has probably been caused, besides the general expansion of knowledge in all fields in the 20th century, by the particular attack of art critics such as Greenberg, on the representational, realistic or figurative painting (whatever names are given to it).<sup>6</sup>

Each time somebody writes about conceptual art, they instantly feel the need to criticise the ‘ancient’ pictorial or medium based representation, as if in an attempt to justify ‘contemporary art’ and to point out the conceptual mountain which separates figurative from abstract art. In fact, contrary to what they suggest, the art of painting, including figurative art, does not belong in the past. It is practiced by many artists, there are art schools and academies and there is ample philosophical thinking about it.<sup>7</sup> Such important theorists as Merleau-Ponty, Virilio, Heidegger, Wollheim, Hyman and Crowther have approached the issue of painting, and some authors have come very close to conclusions which could describe the process of painting. What is essential about this literature is that—while it is searching for, and revealing some truth—it is not being aggressive towards the other arts, nor is it trying to compete with or diminish the other mediums or expressions. Furthermore, these sources provide us with an idea that realistic or figurative visual art and abstract art are not so distant in their concepts, but are quite often based on the same principles—a view with which most of the painters would agree.<sup>8</sup> This conclusion comes as some relief and thus I include it here to precede the following discussion, related to representational painting, which I practice more.

In making a painting, the artist is involved with a non-verbal way of thinking, which is a conscious transformation of the image seen into the referential image.<sup>9</sup> This process is self-sufficient and so dignifying that in my painting practices I never want to talk about it. However, as a painting teacher, I realise the need to find a way to transmit my knowledge to the students. My own education in an art academy was fruitful, but was a very long path, as prescribed by conventional schools, learning from my own mistakes, through painting models and through analysing and copying the old masters. This method has been proven fruitful over the centuries, but it takes a long time before the student masters what previous painters did, and becomes capable of looking for new ways of painting. Can the process of learning become faster and more efficient?

When I manage to express myself through truthful words, they seem to enlighten the student and suddenly raise his or her consciousness of the painting process, and this is immediately reflected on the canvas. However, I probably learn more from my students than they learn from me. Only when I face the need to explain something to the scholar through words, does my own knowledge, gained from the practice of painting, obtain a verbal shape and reach my consciousness. And the notions which I get are quite different from the words which I would use talking about how I do my paintings. Reflecting on such a duality led me to research the phenomenology of the perception of visual art, a subject which has received broad development since the 1960s. Therefore, my objective in this article is to make a small contribution into that area of knowledge and introduce some new perspectives from a painter's point of view.

### PRODUCT OR PROCESS?

First of all, it is important to separate the process of making a painting and the process of seeing the finished canvas.<sup>10</sup> Only after distinguishing the two does it become possible to discuss their common points. This is a small misleading notion which can be found in many authors who involve the viewer in the artistic intention. Although there is always a concern with painting a visually considerable canvas, this is not connected with the intention to please or affect the observer with the finished product. It would be more precise to say that the artist already contains the observer in him or herself and can practice a critical and contemplative attitude towards the creation. However, the painting process as such doesn't need a third party and if the other's opinion is seriously considered during the painting, such an act is already slightly corrupted.<sup>11</sup> So, if not the observer's appreciation foremost, then what is the moving force and motivation for painting? Due to the apparent fact that on most occasions the result of the painting activity is more physical and durable than the result of dance or singing, painting is perceived as having a product as a purpose. Yet it would be more precise to call it a purposeful production, which is less distinctive than the art of dancing. Loomis rightly notes that painting, like any other art, is not so much about the outcome but more about the exercising of knowledge which manifests itself as a dignifying urge for further enquiry.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, we cannot disregard the viewer in the relation to the painting art because after being finished, a painting as a product has an effect on the observer which can be no less inspiring than the process of creation. As I will develop below, painting is a simple visual experience, which nevertheless produces a considerable emotional resonance. Hyman points out that although the questions of painting and visual perception have been intensively studied by philosophy of art and by neuroscience, it is still a very insignificant interdisciplinary field, and most of the philosophers have as little acquaintance with physiology as neurosci-

entists with arts.<sup>13</sup> In this text, I will try to understand what is so special about painting and seeing the painting that makes people choose painting as a lifelong occupation and turns observers into art-lovers, by employing some achievements of phenomenology and physiology.

### PAINTING IS REAL

In *The Landscape with a Carriage and a Train* (1890) painted by Vincent van Gogh, at first glance the donkey and the cart it is pushing are very recognisable and look real, while after a more attentive look, we realise that all this subject is formed by three meticulous brushstrokes. The *Self Portrait with a Model* (1986) by Anders Zorn, one of the finest realist painters of the 20th century, impresses by the precision of representation, yet if we look closer, the mouth is suggested by one rosy brushstroke which has nothing to do with a shape of mouth, and the hand which holds the palette is also just a beige trace. Still, the appearance is perfect. Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'making the vision visible' comes very close to the truth, with the small difference that the author is convinced that there is some 'mystery' or 'invisible' elements in reality which the 'secret' skill of the artists manages to reveal. So what does the artist see? The artist sees the same as anybody else.<sup>14</sup> When a painter looks at the object or view, he/she is capable of distinguishing which part of the image is really seen and which is provided by memory.<sup>15</sup> The realistic skill of painting should then be understood as a transmission to the canvas of only the elements which are really seen.<sup>16</sup> Paintings deliberately provide us with what is truly visible!

While observing reality with all its details, movement and other distractions, the untrained observer would vaguely recognise what the eye really sees and would hardly distinguish it from what the mind accomplishes. Looking at a tree, our mind immediately suggests a verbal description of a tree of a certain type, age and size, amount of leaves and other details whose clarity will depend on the development and visual memory of the individual, but in general will be quite common to any person.<sup>17</sup> But what do we really see when we look at it? Depending on the light, environmental conditions and the surrounding elements, we would see a mass of colour, not even green in the spectrum, because the colours are relative to each other and in a different relation the same colour can look blue, yellow or brown with several flashes of a different colour which we will later recognise as trunk, leaves, birds or other details.<sup>18</sup>

If the artist succeeds in recognising and transmitting only the actually seen elements in his medium, the final picture works for the viewer in some way like the reality: the eye receives from the painting some indices and the mind completes the picture, just like with van Gogh's donkey. The painting becomes indicative.<sup>19</sup> When looking at the painting, the observer says that there is something special in that painting, most probably he/she wants to

say that there are indices in this painting and he/she was able to perceive them.<sup>20</sup> This process of recognition is pleasant in itself, but there is another important moment. While reality is complex, moving and chaotic for the vision, the painting presents a static picture, a constant moment which we can study and contemplate for a time enough to become conscious about ourselves. What we see on the painting is a mess of colourful brushstrokes applied to the canvas. At the same time we are able to recognise the reality there: objects, places or people. Receiving the indices provided by the artist, we imagine streets, faces and details.

The point is that looking at a painting we will note, or most of the times unconsciously feel, the tension between the image seen by the eyes and the image interpreted or completed by our memory and knowledge. In front of a painting, we apprehend a gap, a difference between the vision and the mind which is always inherent for our perception.<sup>21</sup> 'Painters have always known this [...] a "pictorial science" which does not speak in words but in works which exist in the visible just as natural things do'.<sup>22</sup> Represented on the flat surface of the painting, accentuated and elaborated by the artist, the same sensation becomes affordable for the viewer. For both parties, the experience of a painting leads to the spontaneity of visual perception and to higher awareness about the self.<sup>23</sup> This moment is when we feel our cognition and our vision and we have a chance to reflect on each of them separately and wonder.<sup>24</sup> 'The mind watching itself', as Ginsburg explains, is the enlightenment.<sup>25</sup> And such understanding alone can often become the inspiration and purpose for the painting. Loomis insists several times that in the process of going through a scholarship and studying to paint, the training of this capacity is the purpose. Later, when this habit is trained, the need of and the freedom for pictorial and philosophical interpretation of the referred sensation emerges naturally.

The inductivity of a painting should not be confused with the expressiveness of the brushstroke. Although the two can often come together, since the indicative quality in painting can be achieved only through practice and the expressivity of the brushstroke is obtained the same way.<sup>26</sup> If the painting contains the necessary indications—let's say, enough to recognise a boat at sea, which may be constituted by a silhouette filled with an exact colour, relevant to the light conditions, tonality relations, distance—the rigour of representation of the details becomes of less importance.<sup>27</sup> Even further, the more precisely indices were captured by the artist, the higher the accuracy of the viewer to guess the detail. But here emerges the question: if the painting captures what is really seen, then why are all paintings different, even those made from the same model, and the model is recognisable in each one? Although the problem of style, also much discussed in the literature, is not the subject of this article, it has its explanation in the visible.<sup>28</sup> Reality presents us with infinite possibilities of indices and their combinations. Through practice, each artist develops a habit or preference for choosing only specific features and that reflects in the artwork.

### ECONOMY IS GENEROUS

In connection to the above, it is worth mentioning economy. Economy in arts is more known from theater studies and poetry.<sup>29</sup> However, it is also applicable to painting. Economy in painting is not related to economy of materials (paint, canvas, strokes) as the use of these means is individual and changes from artist to artist. Economy in painting is exactly relevant to the economy of indices and so to the style.<sup>30</sup> ‘Don’t tell everything, give a viewer a possibility to guess something’ would be the good teacher’s recommendation to the students in the academies. And that is true, if the indications in a painting are abundant, this doesn’t provide the observer with the delight of recognition. As a simple example, when painting a roof of a house, how many tiles would it be necessary to represent to indicate its colour, its material? Perhaps, if the colour is mixed exactly in its relation to the surrounding, there would be no need to mention tiles at all? How many grass units should be depicted to give an idea of a field? Or maybe if the tone is taken precisely, even a plainly painted surface will transmit the sensation of a field? These are the technical questions which are constant in the artistic practice, but little talked about. Such challenges belong to the area of doing: observing and painting, when the hand is the instrument of the eye.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in the process of painting, the cognition happens on the level of image, avoiding verbal thinking or verbal imagination, which allows for the creation of new and often metaphorical representations.

### SENSE OR SENSIBILITY?

Then what is so valuable in this process of recognition of the picture which we see with our eyes from the picture which appears in our mind? According to Feldenkrais, children are naturally happy, and they are in the constant process of learning.<sup>32</sup> Knowledge and experience are still very small and a child’s brain actively creates new neurological connections out of everything she hears, sees or touches.<sup>33</sup> With time, a greater amount of established neuron connections reduces the motivation to learn. The elder people are more inside themselves; the spontaneity of their senses, such as vision, audition and others, will be compromised by memory, conviction and logic.<sup>34</sup> Take the most common deception our mind creates when we look around us: the sky is blue; the grass is green. In reality such a situation is nearly impossible, as each hour the tone of the sky changes and together with it all the colours.<sup>35</sup> The sky is blue and the grass is green is a verbal memory which we assume and which can easily substitute the visual picture which we really see. According to Feldenkrais, when the brain uses the same neuron paths all the time, individuals become exhausted, no emotion emerges. On the other hand, if we actively use our senses, if we pay attention to what we really hear or see, there is a constant wonder and spontaneity of reactions.<sup>36</sup> In such a condition the individual feels happier and more inspired.<sup>37</sup> Artists, for the most

part, are more alert to the things around them.<sup>38</sup> Whether artists are more 'sensitive' by nature can be subject to discussion, but it would be reasonable to say, that due to professional specificity, artists train their sensibilities and cognitive capacity of interpretation of what they see or feel. Loomis suggests that the result of cognition is the artistic expression, be it through painting, music or poetry.<sup>39</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have introduced some subjects which I believe deserve greater discussion. Much is written by philosophers and neuroscientists about painting and the visual perceptions connected to it, and their texts widen our field of possibilities. Yet, there are some moments in the discussion of the painting process which can be demystified by the artists themselves. That should be done not in order to diminish the painter's job, but to achieve a clearer vision of this complex issue.<sup>40</sup>

It is true that recently all artists, including painters, have been encouraged and even pushed to write descriptions or artistic statements to accompany their artworks. These statements often provide elaborate and inspiring material. However, most of these synopses, while made by the authors, nevertheless imitate the critics. Artists tend to give a philosophical or creative interpretation of the finished artwork instead of describing how they make it. The non-verbal specifics of the painting process prevents many good artists from expressing, talking about and sharing what they think while painting, how they make their visual observations and transform them into pictorial conclusions.

One of the important aspects of this process is the artist's capacity to distinguish between the image which we really see and memory's contribution to it. In this article, I have proposed that this capacity constitutes the basis for realistic painting. An awareness of our direct and cultivated parts of vision allows us to control our perceptions and reflect on them; and that complexity of sensation is one of the things which make people feel so special about painting.

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### NOTES

1. Agamben 1999, 2.
2. Crowther 2013, 58.
3. Crowther 2013, 5.
4. Hyman 2006, 82.
5. Hyman 2006, XVI.
6. Hyman 2006, 1.
7. Hyman 2006, 2.
8. Loomis 1961, 14,15; Crowther 2013, 92; Merleau-Ponty 1993, 147-148.
9. Hyman 2006, 68; Merleau-Ponty 1993, 146.
10. Hyman 2006, 74.
11. Hyman 2006, 80.
12. Loomis 1961, 142-144.
13. Hyman 2010.



14. Hyman 2010, 255.
15. Crowther 2013, 87; Chun and Wolfe 2008, 296.
16. Hyman 2006, 60.
17. Humphreys and Riddoch 2008, 206.
18. Hyman 2006, 31-35.
19. Goldstein 2008, 345.
20. Merleau-Ponty 1993, 133.
21. Stein, Wallace, and Stanford 2008, 710-711.
22. Merleau-Ponty 1993, 146.
23. Crowther 2013, 86-88; Goldstein 2008, 193.
24. Goldstein 2008, 2.
25. Ginsburg 1999, 1.
26. Loomis 1961, 140.
27. Virilio 1994, 3.
28. Crowther 2013, 86.
29. Hyman 2010, 260.
30. Loomis 1961, 65.
31. Loomis 1961, 25-32.
32. Feldenkrais 2002, 70-89, Goldstein 2008, 649.
33. Virilio 1994, 7.
34. Cleary and Pisoni 2008, 524.
35. Hyman 2006, 29.
36. Kaczmarczyk 2014, 168.
37. Chun and Wolfe 2008, 273-279.
38. Hyman 2010, 254.
39. Loomis 1961.
40. Hyman 2006, 1.

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