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Watching and Learning

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Watching and Learning

by

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Report

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Abstract

Watching and Learning

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Throughout the past three years I have explored paintings physical, material and conceptual potentials. This paper discusses the series of paintings that I have been working on for the past two years and the multiple winding paths of ideas and experience that has inspired the work.

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Circle/Sun

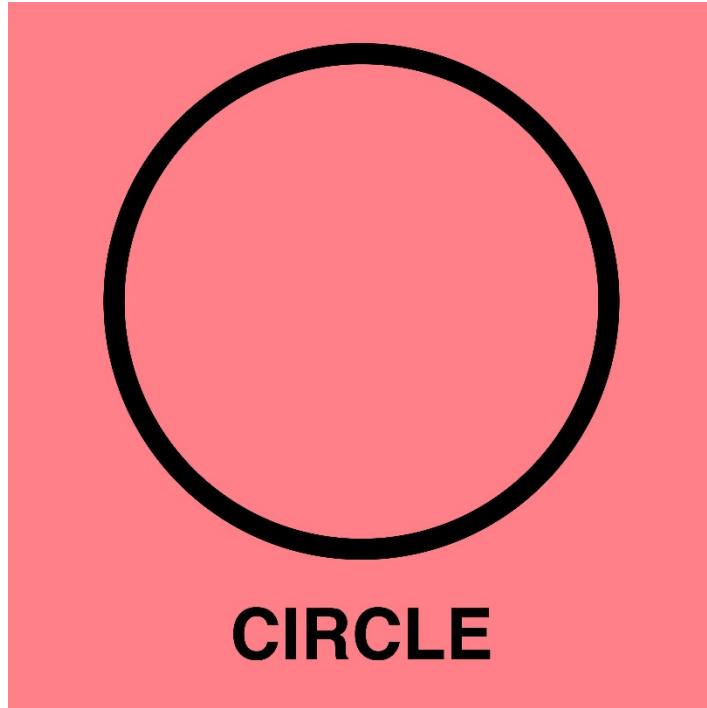


Figure 1: Flashcard from Children's Learning Game

"Ball!" No baby try again, look its A..."Ball Ball!!" my one year old daughter exclaims, her outstretched arm directing our gaze towards a printed depiction of the Sun. It is a yellow circle with graphic waving lines radiating from its center, a graphic denotation of heat. With no sense of illusionary depth, the image is flat: a symbol...a cartoon of the sun. "It's the sun," I point out the words underlining the letters "S-U-N". She looks at me for a second, then speaks: "Baa, ball, ball!!" she says again, smiling and pointing proudly at the flat yellow circle. It is not a yellow square or a triangle it is a yellow circle and a circle to this infant mind simply is the equivalent to a ball. A circle can serve as a stand-in for the sun, or a ball, a hole... or simply act as an image of itself.

Polyphonic



Figure 2: Paul Klee, *Ad Parnassum*, Oil on Canvas, 1932

A black line cuts through a painted field of dotted, flickering colors. The line shoots upwards toward the top center of the painting and then dives down toward the right; a graphic suggestion of a roof, a pyramid, or a mountain. An orange orb anchors itself to the top right corner. Is it the sun, an eye or simply a circle? The image remains without specific context, giving the painted elements more flux and play. The desire for “A Polyphonic Composition” was how Paul Klee described his strategy in making his 1932 painting *Ad Parnassum*, “the simultaneity of several independent themes”. Are the suggested images in the painting inspired perhaps from his travels in Egypt, his observations of local mountains, a cartoon of a house or simply and nonobjective composition that operates within a formal arrangement? When looking at the image one could come to the conclusion that it may well be about all

and none of those things. Klee was highly adept at making paintings whose meaning and context was never fully defined. Constant slippages and visual doublings occur when examining his layered imagery. *Ad Parnassum* leaves us with more questions than answers; a composition that's meaning seems to slip and bend the more it is studied.

Two Circles and A line



Figure 3: Virgin Mary Oil Stain, Clearwater Florida

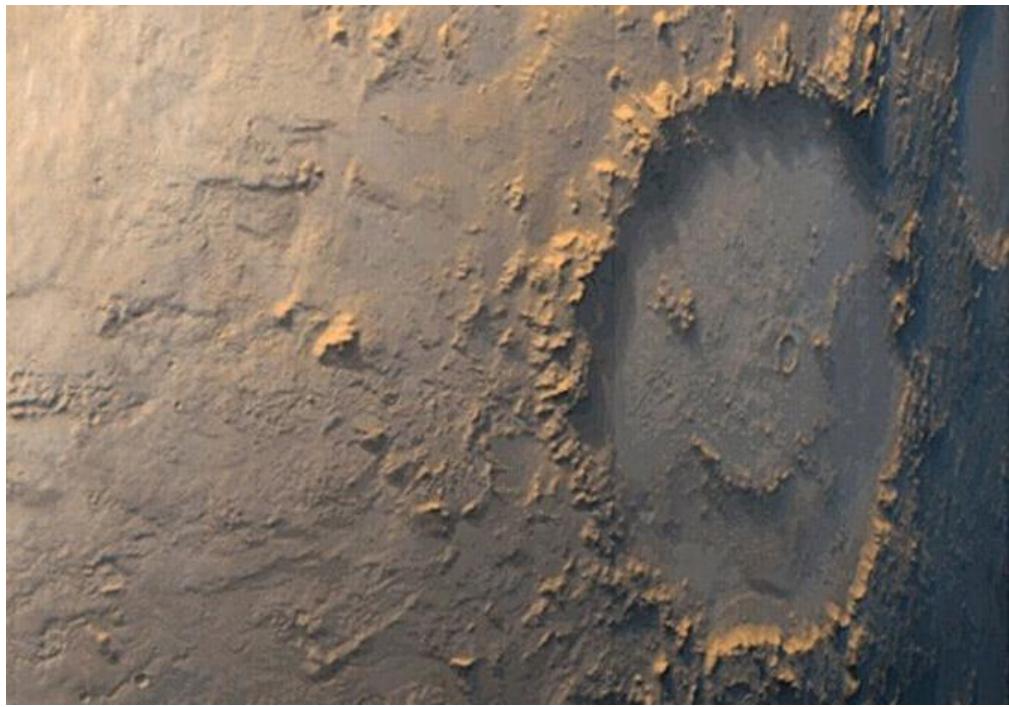


Figure 4: Galle Crater, Mars

All you need is a line and two dots and to make a face. The recognition of facial features occurs almost instantaneously, an unfiltered response to the slightest anthropomorphic demarcation or imprint. Our ability to discern faces and to understand the possible intentions behind another's face is a skill that has been hardwired into our evolution. To be able to recognize and analyze another's face quickly is a must for survival and communication. A side effect of this cognitive reflex is that the mind registers any face like stimulus as being related to the real thing. Pareidolia is the phenomenon behind this mental sorting of visual information. It is a mental process that orders random, unconnected stimuli into a recognizable sense of order. It is a form of Apophenia, a psychological process that finds meaning through unconnected points. Pareidolia is why we see a smiling face staring back

towards us from the Galle crater on mars, the Virgin Mary in an oil stain, or bodies and eyes peering from the side of rock cliffs.



Figure 5: Mark Grotjahn, from left, Untitled -2009/2010; Untitled- 2009/2010



Figure 6: Alexej von Jawlensky, *Grosse Meditation*, Oil on Canvas, 1936

For some time in my studio I've been hesitant to allow any suggestion of a body or parts of a body to emerge in my paintings. I found myself wanting to introduce elements that suggest the anthropomorphic but wasn't rooted in "figurative" painting. I felt that the

introduction of figurative elements would quickly narrow the reading of the work, making the paintings about the figures while the other elements would then serve as periphery to the main pictorial narrative. The key to grasping my dilemma came through two seemingly unrelated sources. My interaction with children's books and toys was important when making these paintings. I realized that if two circles and line is all you need to suggest a face, than any assortment of forms could suggest a number of other figurative elements. The mental process of pareidolia has become a mechanism to activate and structure my paintings. I see the loose suggestion of figurative elements as another form of visual gaming, a way to keep my paintings shifting and at play.

Flat space / It goes without saying



Figure 7: Phillip Guston, *Flatlands*, Oil on Canvas, 1970



Figure 8: Dried *Salvia Divinorum*

The sky is tinged purple from the mixture of clouds and glowing artificial lights that penetrate the night sky. I am sitting with my back to my house, facing my small garden of cactus, succulents and herbs. I'm preparing to ingest a strong dose of *Salvia Divinorum*, which will quickly alter my consciousness and stay with me for but a matter of moments. The dried plant matter smells of dirt and an unpalatable funk of earthiness. I inhale a pull of smoke from a water pipe, then another. Nothing happens for a second, and then everything around me goes flat. Things lose their sense of dimensionality, everything around me seems to be living in a world of two dimensions...all is facade. It's as if everything is pressed against an impermeable clear wall unable to push into dimensionality. Like strung together shadows, everything stands in front of my eyes naked and lacking description. Quickly things begin to expand, as if I'm placing my surroundings back into some spatial sense. I realize that everything seems unfamiliar to me, I have no words for anything. The flat place was just "there", a world existing with no words. As things become dimensional, I begin to put

together information through a series of abstract relations. I try to find some footing in this world, but I lack the ability to put what I'm looking at into words. I hear sounds that whiz by me like puffs of air or whispers. I have the sensation that I'm hearing though my eyes, as if my visual understanding of the surroundings is being crossed with my auditory system. I really feel as if I am hearing and seeing through the same portal of perception. The world stays suspended like this for what seems like hours but, in actuality, is only a five or six minutes. I notice myself slipping, a fleeting sense through my head. I am back in my yard, sitting on the same blanket. The hallucinations are now gone but a sense of confusion remains.

Falling

Color is a phenomenon that eludes the grasp of language. It is fleeting yet omnipresent, a part of experience at times seemingly separate. Does a thing possess a given color or is it simply a surface value having little to do with the nature of a thing? Is color an external or internal phenomenon? The experience of a color is at many times indefinable and confusing. Due to its inability to surrender to descriptive terms, color can deceive, like an artifice or a drug. If one looks as far back as Plato's writings one can see this negative concept of color in circulation. Plato described color as a *Pharm Akon*, a drug that is used to blind one from what is truly present. In relation to the art of painting, he viewed color as a drug employed by a painter to seduce and deceive a viewer. Painting with color was simply a game of trickery and not much else to this 5th century BC Greek philosopher .

Arguments about color's relation and use in painting continued amongst both scholars and artists well past the times of Plato. Many continued to feel that color was not to be trusted due to its inability to conform to concrete descriptions. Many artists and thinkers had taken the stance that in order for it to be utilized at all it must be contained. It was the argument that fueled the debate within the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in the 1670s in Paris. The arguments arose between those who sided with Nicolas Poussin's prioritization of line and form over color and those who sided themselves with Peter Paul Rubens unbounded use of color. The *Poussinistes* viewed color as a decorative element that pleased the eye but not the mind. To the *Poussinistes* color was simply an afterthought, a deceitful aspect of a painting that would draw one away from the "truth" and wholeness of form and line. Again color is viewed as a liar, a means to drug and confuse the audience.



Figure 9: Anoka Faruqee, 2014P-43, Acrylic on Linen, 2014

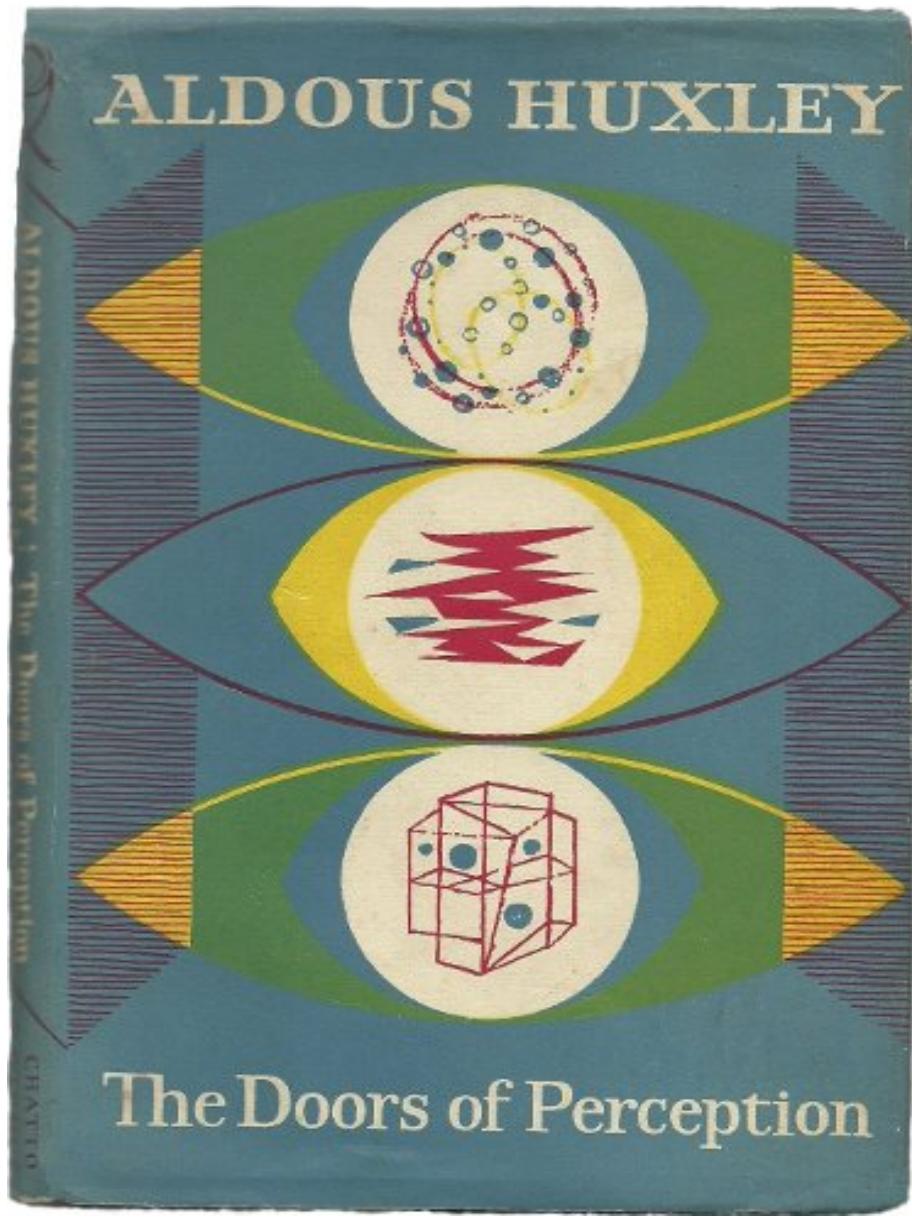


Figure 10: Cover of Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*

Moving into the 20th century, one finds the association of color with drugs in the writings of Aldous Huxley. After his experimentation with both mescaline and LSD in the 1950s, he was inspired to write both *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*. Much of the

descriptions recounted in both writings involve the author's relation to colors while in the throes of drug induced hallucinations. Both internally and externally Huxley perceived colors more intensely than ever before, finding them hypnotizing and intoxicating. His fall into color was thorough, and this experience remained with him the rest of his life. In *Heaven and Hell* Huxley describes the internal/external perception of color during one of his hallucinatory trips.

At the antipodes of the mind, we are more or less completely free of language, outside the system of conceptual thought. Consequently our perception of visionary object possesses all the freshness, all the naked intensity, of experiences, which have never been verbalized, never assimilated to lifeless abstractions. Their color (that hallmark of givens) shines forth a brilliance which seems to us preternatural, because it is in fact entirely natural-entirely natural in the sense of being entirely unsophisticated by language or the scientific, philosophical and utilitarian notions, by means of which we ordinarily re-create the given world in our own drearily human image. (Huxley, Heaven and Hell p73)

Colors ability to confuse, distort and fall beyond language is why I find its use so important in painting. Color has the ability to scramble the confines of meaning, a way to confuse and deny assimilation. Many of my memories are tinged with shades of colors, and my sensitivity to its effects has always seemed heightened. I've always equated my use of color in paintings to that of musical structures and rhythms. I find myself having a similar visceral response to color as I do to sound. I "feel" it and structure it directly, similar to the amassing of auditory masses in music. Music/Painting/Color can all be talked about in relation to textures, rhythms, harmonies, forms, chords, structure and dissonance. The nature of color

is never resolute; it seemingly springs forth from nowhere and crawls back whenever the lights go out.

“Pients!”



Figure 11: *Bush Meat*, Oil / Acrylic / Spray Paint on Canvas, 2015

My daughter runs into my paint-splattered studio, she is wide-eyed and looking for something to pull or grab onto. I swoop her up into my arms before she can get close to anything and try to distract her from wiggling out of my arms. “Look baby, paintings...” I say pointing at my studio walls. Paintings in all manner of completion hang and lean throughout the space. She extends her figure and says “pients”, her word for a painting. “Your right” I assure her as she nods her head in agreement. She calms down and looks around the room. “Ball!” she suddenly exclaims, pointing at a small unfinished painting that is wiped with purple and red paint. The painted form is more of an amorphous blob of color; close enough to a baby’s schema of a ball to make a match. I go to correct her, but really how could I? She giggles and points out the painting again “Ball, this, ball!” she says. I put her down and grab her hand and point at the small painting. “You think this is a ball?” I ask her. She looks up at me, then the small work, she nods her head up and down in affirmation. I laugh, pick her up and bring her out my studio, its lunchtime so we better go eat.

Playing Games

A child's cognitive development in the first years of life is an amazing process to observe as a parent, it's as if switches of understanding are flipping on inside their minds. For the developing mind Play is crucial. A young child's play is full contact, it's an extension of the child's cognitive and physical exploration of the world they newly perceive. Without play a child would have a difficult time sorting out their perceptual and cognitive bearings.



Figure 12: Fernand Leger, *The Card Game*, Oil on Canvas, 1917

In Fernand Leger's *The Card Game* figures are dissolving and reappearing as machine like interwoven forms deal and shuffle cards. This is a game of cards shown in play from multiple angles. The act of play is depicted but also utilized as a key to unlocking the painting itself. As in a game of cards a painting is always dealt in parts, only a fragment of the whole is revealed. This painting needs a viewer to play along.

The use of play has become incredibly important to the way I think about my own work. Play can be a means of understanding, questioning or subterfuge; A way to see what isn't there. Painting can be understood as a kind of a game, a playful manipulation of visual perception across a flat surface. My compositions are made up of forms and colors that rub against each other, paintings that act as visual puzzles or games. Play is a factor in both the making and reception of the paintings. A play of materials, colors and forms is what helps make the work, and it's the play of these factors that the viewer is presented with. I want my compositions to always be at play, paintings that are dealt in parts with only the suggestion of a whole.

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