

The Idea of Landscape: Feeling and Form

My aim is to borrow from the (visible) world nothing but forces—not forms, but the means of making forms. Not history. Not décor. But the feeling of matter itself, rock, air, water, vegetable matter—and their elementary properties.

And acts and phases—not persons and their memory.¹

Paul Valéry

Movement is nature's only obligation. In the cosmos, on the seashore, in the accumulation of leaves turning back to earth, movement revises and edits the natural world. For the artist, it is the feeling..., the sensation of nature's movement in all of its colors, smells, sounds, textures and shapes that forms an indelible image in his imagination. Joan Mitchell would often say, "I carry my landscape around with me."² Considering her rich vocabulary of image-poems, it is understandable how the sight of a tree or field intensified in her imagination. The outcome on paper or canvas represents the borrowed forces Valéry describes.

How a landscape unfolds in one's imagination is constrained by the margins of memory and perceptible sensations. The honeysuckle vine blowing against the purple/blue light of a thunderstorm can leave its traces; yet the richest portion of these sensations does not exist in the visual world. There is a language of abstraction like in music and within its alphabet words form poems and these poems describe the sensation of a moment in a landscape that when revisited has vanished. The concentrate of poetry is a response to that loss. Its fullness envelops by an accumulation of words that dovetail into one another. For the visual artist, it is often the accumulation of precise mark-making that leads to a poetic. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke often uses the word, "suddenly," - suddenly through these accumulations light appears and the artist has then discovered his *resonances*.

Light as form, refracting through the leaves or *lens* of a holly tree was for Alma Thomas the aperture that shaped her vision of art. Her mark-making coalesced into forms that have a deep feeling *of something* or as the French term so much better describes, *de quelque chose*. Perhaps a more apt English translation would be to consider this idea of suchness.

Thomas describes her epiphany:

so I sat down right in that chair, that red chair here in my living room, and I looked at the window. And you can see exactly what I saw, right before my eyes, from where I was sitting in the chair. Why, the tree! The holly tree! I looked at the tree in the window, and that became

¹ Valéry, Paul. Monsieur Teste Bollingen Series XLV. Trans. Jackson Mathews. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. 73.

² Munro, Eleanor. Originals: American Women Artists. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982. 246.

my inspiration. There are six patterns in there right now that I can see. And every morning since then, the wind has given me new colors through the windowpanes.

So that tree changed my whole career, my whole way of thinking.³

In Plato's Phaedrus, a work that within its landscape setting provides a dialogue between man and earth, Socrates states, "For sight is the keenest of our physical senses, though it does not bring us knowledge."⁴ Rendering an image is not the same as drawing it. The artist's gift is a language that synthesizes a vision into what is felt as art. Concisely expressed in Michael Lugering's book The Expressive Actor, "Language allows us to give form to our thoughts, and our body enables us to give form to our feelings."⁵ It is in fact a wordless language that makes abstract art possible.

Art is a dialogic form albeit a silent one. Lee Ufan, a masterful painter and draughtsman describes one *working* form of dialogue:

When I am drawing a picture, before I know what's happening, I notice that it is the picture which makes me draw it. Then, again, I start drawing and in a moment it is again the picture which makes me draw, and so on and so forth, and going on like this, while I bring forth the picture, the picture brings me forth, and stirring and stimulating each other, a work is produced.⁶

Artists comprehend this meditative correspondence between eye and hand, hand and paper and the act satiates. Inevitably the hand is drawn back to the blank sheet of paper to begin this dance again.

The dialogue described above is one of *hand-work*. There exists on the picture-plane another dialogue that is perhaps the most significant. In music it is referred to as counterpoint. In art, this visual counterpoint is found in great works from Botticelli's "*Primavera*" to master works of Islamic calligraphy. Counterpoint in the natural world is so prevalent that it is most always overlooked. Consider the syncopation of hemlock needles balancing each other. Their musical staff, a simple line in space, branches out from a beginning point to an ending point and in the course of this beginning and ending a vocabulary of movement is established.

The counterpoint of Johann Sebastian Bach's music is not without its reflections and designs denoted in the trees and fields, waters and cosmos. Refined and given form on paper, Bach's counterpoint expresses a universal grandness and intimacy all at once. Such scores form a template

³ Munro, Eleanor. Originals: American Women Artists. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982. 194.

⁴ Plato. Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII. Trans. Walton Hamilton. London: Penguin Books, 1973. 57.

⁵ Lugering, Michael. The Expressive Actor: Integrated Voice, Movement, and Acting Training. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2007. 14.

⁶ Ufan, Lee. Selected Writings by Lee Ufan 1970-1996. Ed. Jean Fisher. Trans. Martha J. McClintock, London: Lisson Gallery, 1996. 50.

that when overlaid on a forest reveals the pattern of trees. His music *feels of nature*. Artists knowingly and unconsciously synthesize the values of shadows, rhythms of trees and temperature of colors, creating in their best works a reflection of forms that humanize man's external experiences.

The composer Toru Takemitsu recounts reading through Claude Debussy's score, *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun,"* and discovering within it, notions of a landscape that held for him the sensual means that fundamentally created that very sensual work:

It was spring, and the wind was still cold. I had with me two scores by Debussy, *Prélude à "L'Après-midi d'un faune"* and "*Jeux*." The score for the prelude was a piano reduction in the composer's own handwriting. The notes were in soft green, rose, and brown ink, on a fine quality yellowish paper. A number of changes had been made, with marginal notes in fine pink lines. Although a score is, in the usual sense, a hypothetical plan, as I looked at the composer's marks on that score they took on a vivid life of their own. I wonder...were those handwritten symbols that appeared as half-erased stains on the paper really only hypothetical?⁷

One can image Takemitsu's description befitting one of Cézanne's watercolors that exists on the cusp of the fleeting visual world and within the realm of Debussy's landscape score. Traversing the auditory to the visual world, Takemitsu describes that progression that many artists articulate when searching for the means to express an emotion of sound with color and weight.

The "exactness of weights of feeling is everything in art,"⁸ according to Robert Motherwell. One of the drawings that the natural world offered Motherwell was the beauty of sea spray rebounding into the air off a sea wall at high tide. As an ephemeral graphic against the sky Motherwell sought to find in his drawings and prints equivalences to that "*Jeux d'eau*." With ink and tusche he steadied his feelings into forms that carried the breath and balance he felt and saw.

Gazing granulates one's vision. The armature of a leaf, its branch, sways to create an ensemble of movement that in turn occupies one's circle of sight and within itself circles inward in the imagination. Gazing at a tree, at its infinite circles of swaying and its light making, one begins to perceive and feel the *affect* of invisible forms that threaded together form the matrix of the visible. Running down hill, momentum in pursuit, the landscape underfoot falls into vision, airless and jumbled. The montage of cinema or the artifacts visible in digital video share a similar sensation within their own language.

⁷ Takemitsu, Toru. Confronting Silence: Selected Writings. Berkeley: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995. 83.

⁸ Motherwell, Robert. The collected Writings of Robert Motherwell. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 189.

Jean-Luc Godard, a poet, painter, essayist and alas, a novelist *of* cinema (when one considers the grand work *Histoire(s) du cinema*), describes the moment of discovering a landscape in one of his most poetic films and perhaps most beautiful, *Eloge de l'amour*,

When I think about something, I'm really thinking of something else. You can only think about something if you think of something else. For instance, you see a landscape new to you. But it's new to you because you mentally compare it to another landscape, one which you know.⁹

Having similar thoughts about *paysage*, Gaston Bachelard states:

Dreams come before contemplation. Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is an oneiric experience. Only those scenes that have already appeared in dreams can be viewed with an aesthetic passion.¹⁰

Acutely aware of the twenty-four frames that run through a 35 mm movie camera every second, Godard has considered the psychological, aesthetic and philosophical implications of movement with sound and image intertwined. As with Johann Sebastian Bach, Jean-Luc Godard's counterpoint delivers on its promise to complete a feeling and idea with thoughtfulness, reminding one of the importance of the gaze.

The blink of the eye, the interstice between each image-frame on celluloid film is a breath held in. It is the afterimage that fills the interstice. For Godard, the blank pages of celluloid spaced perfectly between the images in *Eloge de l'amour* is that new landscape remembered. As if describing Godard's film, Paul Valéry states,

Great art consists almost entirely in creating time, - a delay laden with emotion (which has to be controlled or compensated by means of the rhythm-)¹¹

Even in drawing it is time that the artist creates..., layers of time that exist on the page and in the feelings and thoughts of the viewer.

The idea of landscape, that free falling splendor of sensation that artists unearth in the cosmos or in the ripples of a river lies at the core of human experience, the fabric of experience. Artists experience their environments differently. Intensities and perceptions vary. Regardless, it is the outside space of the imagination that entices and for some artists the richest soil to germinate is there.

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⁹ *Eloge de l'amour*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. France/Switzerland: Manhattan Pictures International, 2001. 35mm, DV, 98 min.

¹⁰ Bachelard, Gaston. *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Trans. Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1994. 4.

¹¹ Valéry, Paul. *Cahiers/Notebooks II*. Ed. Brian Stimpson. Trans. Rachel Killick. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000. 63.