

Justin Troisi Artist Statement

“The eyes are the organic prototype of philosophy. Their enigma is that they not only can see but are also able to see themselves seeing. This gives them prominence among the body's cognitive organs. A good part of philosophical thinking is actually only eye reflex, eye dialectic, seeing oneself see.” Peter Sloterdijk.

This statement sums up my intentions for this series of work: To discover if I can provide the means for viewers to see visual metaphors ... and then to realize what they just did.

So much of interpreting symbols depends simply upon going beyond the obvious question of “what” and learning to also ask “why.” Going beyond the objective to the subjective, in other words. This is one of the ways in which a viewer can arrive at “the meaning” of a work of art. When one feels as though they have come to understand something about a work of art, the experience is more significant, more memorable.

Now, when I say: “the meaning of a work of art,” this is not to imply that there is one correct answer or message embedded into a painting or drawing. The message of a work of art is at the mercy of each viewer's particular subjectivity. All interpretations are valid. All interpretations are subject to reconsideration. Often the meaning of work is evolving and changing for the very artist that is making it.

The body of work, “Vision and Knowledge” is a group of paintings that visually demonstrate the importance of visual learning. As our dominant sense, vision has played, and continues to play an important role in how we understand our world. There are countless visual metaphors describing cognitive functions rather than sensory perception so deeply embedded in our language (and all languages) that the boundaries between vision and cognition are blurred. The phrase: “I see,” is most commonly spoken and heard as “I understand.”

My first means of tackling this theme of vision and knowledge manifested itself in a series of diptychs painted during my graduate assistantship that illustrate a famous platonic narrative.

“The Allegory of the Cave” by Plato, is one of the classical texts of the scopophobic tradition. Plato's distrust for vision is rooted in the distinction that he makes between objects as they actually exist in the world, and the very different manner in which our “Mind's Eye” perceives them internally. Is our vision purely optical? How free is observation from the corruption of preconception? The contemporary version of this ancient parable is “The Matrix”. While Neo is still inside The Matrix, Morpheus says to him, “You look like a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up, Ironically this is not far from the truth. “

Imagine, for instance: A dog. Do you picture a Labrador, a Great Dane, a Greyhound, or a Weiner dog? Chances are, you had pictured a non-specific version for a dog that perhaps had the traits of many breeds blended into one generic symbol for dog. Everyone's personal mental projection of the word “dog” is probably a little different and likely based upon his or her own experience with dogs. Some peoples' imaginary dogs were sitting; some may have been standing... mine was sleeping on a beanbag. However, everyone's mental image is very likely to contain certain similarities, most notably a reduction in specific identifying details. The same exercise works for most nouns, picture a tree or a table or a chair and one visualizes generic, non-specific symbols that represent our concept of objects that exist in the natural world. To verify this, glance at an introductory text used to instruct foreign language. One will find a very generalized vocabulary of nouns that are represented by these non-specific images.

According to Platonic theory, the objects we envision in our mind's eye are conjured from the realm of universals. Inversely, objects that are fabricated and exist in the natural world exist only as “versions” of the mental image for that particular object. Plato's assertions about vision,

thought, and their interconnectedness created ripples in the ocean of aesthetic theory that can still be felt today.

In his narrative, Plato uses language to describe visual metaphors for knowledge. The imagery in the story helps to illustrate the strong link between sight and language. Our ability to describe something is very closely linked with our ability to visualize it internally.

The “prisoners” in the “Allegory of the Cave” are subject to a form of limited vision. As the story goes, they have been confined to a dark, cavernous womb of a setting where their visual experience has been shackled. The only sight that they have ever seen are the shadow shapes being cast upon a wall of their cave by their captors. This infers that this is all that they know of reality.

One of the prisoners of the cave manages to escape the confines of his limited experience. Upon exiting the cave the prisoner is struck by the brilliance of the light of day. The prisoner sees that objects have color and texture and form and mass, he is profoundly affected by the illumination that it casts on all of the things in the world. Things could never again be seen the same. Suddenly he is faced with a challenge: How to verbally describe the newfound optical phenomenon. And, even if he told the other prisoners the truth, would they believe?

In this story, the light serves as a fairly obvious symbol for knowledge. The other symbol for the prisoner's education can be found in the very action performed when he steps out of the cave and into the light of day. The definition of education in a modern sense is slightly altered, the manner in which we educate has given almost an institutional quality to the word.

Education: 1) The imparting and acquiring of knowledge through teaching and learning, especially at a school or similar institution. 2) Training and instruction in a particular subject 3) To develop or improve a faculty or sense. All of these definitions can be found in a modern

dictionary. However, the etymology suggests that its very meaning is dependent upon its symbolic function within the “Allegory of the Cave. “To educate means “to lead out. “

The series of diptychs is a re-contextualization of “The Allegory of the Cave. “Certain actions being performed by the figures as they tend the still-life are intended to function as symbols for the acquisition of knowledge. In Plato's narrative, it was light that revealed the world to the uninitiated. In my diptychs, the figures are echoing this action by lighting the still lives. They also physically draw the draperies away from the objects that they shroud, revealing more of them. This action also has the potential to function symbolically, though it is more subtle. The objects are revealed to be plaster busts.

These plaster busts owe their heritage to the same Greek civilization that gave us the allegory. They are considered “classical” art objects. In addition to being art objects, they seem almost to fit into a special category of pedagogical art instructing tools considering how frequently they are used to educate artists.

The final diptych in the series shows the space illuminated. It reveals the setting as a classroom.

Upon concluding this series of diptychs, I came to realize that there was something more I wanted the work to achieve. I considered the actions performed by the figures, the revealing and the lighting, and I wondered if the more obvious symbol did enough to point the way to the meaning of the other action. I told myself that given the theme of the work, the viewer could get it based on context. Yet still I felt as though perhaps I had not included enough signs to point the way.

It was this that led to the next evolution of the work and changed the underlying purpose for making it. I asked myself if a painting could contain the capacity to teach viewers to read them better, to interpret the symbols within. In the past, paintings often functioned in an

instructional mode. There was a time when the literacy situation was reversed, most couldn't read the written word yet the iconography of painting was something that was understood. At this point in history, the church commissioned works of art and made most of the decision regarding their design and function. They served as proverb and moral instruction for the illiterate masses. So there is no reason to think that the images we paint today can't be read.

Upon starting the next piece, I drew a lot of my inspiration from Dutch Colonial art and some of the prominent themes of the era. Paintings made during this time were made in a time of great curiosity and world exploration. Exotic treasures and strange and fascinating natural wonders from around the world were being discovered, collected and displayed in museums. These collections soon became available for private citizens in the form of paintings. As well as professing a great fascination and sense of wonder towards the natural world, these works displayed a reverence for that which made the exploration possible: technology.

My paintings display more of a reverence for antiquity. The technology that I depict is now old technology. The entire painting really began by taking a look back to the earliest civilization and then trying to imagine how they ordered their world, how it was understood. It seems logical that this all began with observation. Operating under this assumption, I began to focus upon certain themes that seemed to compliment it. Objects relating to cartography and natural sciences began to dominate the space on the table top. There is also a tribute being paid to art history. The theme of death is also pervasive in Dutch art. The passage of time is often shown as a reminder of the transitory nature of life. They kept asking that philosophical question concerning the questionable human gift of knowing that you will die.

Before the ancients could map their world, they had to know the stars in the sky. The stars in the sky share a peculiar parallel with painting. The stars in the sky were grouped into constellations that represent anthropomorphic (though usually human) forms. Stories are told

about the cosmic events that are played out by these celestial characters. So by some stretch of the imagination, constellations function as the very first narrative paintings.

On the left side of the painting, one finds a globe with a star chart behind it. On a purely visual level, they associate because of proximity and similarity of shape. In a historic sense, one precedes the other and makes its existence possible. Resting underneath the base of the globe are some pieces of mail. With the appropriate stretch of the imagination, one could envision that mail as it travels around the globe, receiving stamps that document its travels. Directly above the mail, there is a stamper sitting on the table, this is just a sort of visual play on words, but it gives the viewer something else to connect, and it is very obvious, which is very important. Beneath the mail, on the table lies 39 cents in change. This was postage at the time it was painted, so I suppose in addition to relating to the mail, it also serves to date the work. To the left of the change, also protruding out from underneath the base of the globe is a sheet of musical notes containing the Bob Dylan song: “The Times They are a’changin.” This is another word- image association waiting to be discovered.

Musical notes are particularly interesting by themselves. They sit somewhere on the border of writing and imaging. Though they are elegant and calligraphic, they must first serve the utilitarian function of being read by musicians. Symbols that straddle both the realm of writing and imaging are particularly fascinating. Other examples would be Chinese symbols, cipher script, and Egyptian hieroglyphs.

I very much enjoy the inclusion of a tribute to music. “Harmony, Rhythm, Repetition...” These are words that one expects to hear in a design classroom talking about how to use elements in a composition. But are they not also the very same words that a student of music would expect to hear in their classroom? Music, poetry, drama, philosophy, and dance all borrow from the conventions of one another.

As a tribute to art history, the map in the painting is a provincial map of Italy in the late 1400s, during the Renaissance. If you look out the window, the landscape you see is from the background of an Italian Renaissance painting “The Madonna of the Orange” where the figures have been removed. The prominent philosophy on painting at the time was that a painting should function as a window through which the viewer looks out at the world. This view of how paintings should function was born of the Italian infatuation with linear perspective and the deep detailed spaces created with its use. Linear perspective was first introduced to western art practices by Alberti in “De Pittura.”

The small, single object paintings are intended to accompany the large piece as a means of guiding the viewer towards the main themes. They also intentionally repeat certain objects that appear in the larger composition to emphasize their importance. My hope is that viewers will ask themselves “why” is it painted twice. Just getting them to ask that question will hopefully cause a chain reaction of asking “why” in regards to the rest of the objects that appear.

Every object that is painted into the work is there for a reason. It has a relation to most, if not all of the other objects present. Ideally, if the viewer spends enough time in front of the work studying it, they will begin to see some of the connections. And, realizing that they have just made some connections will hopefully encourage them to continue to search for more.

By means of studio visits and listening to peoples' responses to the work in gallery settings, I have come to find that many of the connections I have put in front of the viewer are in fact realized. However, many of the connections that I have drawn between one object and another are missed. The unexpected reward is that I have found people looking at the work always seem to have made some connections that I did not.

The work began with a very lofty goal: to make a series of work with the capacity to teach viewers to better read paintings. Whether or not it really functions this way is debatable.

They do at least seem to prod viewers towards thinking critically and making connections.

All work that encourages viewer interaction and provides some avenue through which meaning can be found, provides, in my opinion, a more satisfying and memorable experience.



BASIC
STAR MAP

THE PITT LUNA



