



The Idea of Painting as a Whole

By James Elkins, Ph. D.
E. C. Chadbourne Professor,
Department of Art History, Theory and Criticism
School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Vol 3, Yr 2008

The essay I am excerpting here is unpublished; it is supposed to be in a work in progress called World Painting. I say "supposed to be," because that project has been proving to be very difficult. The notion is to write about painting between 1900 and 2000, around the world, with special attention to local, regional, and national schools of painting that never traveled. I am interested in painting known only in its particular region or country: painting that has not been shown internationally, has never made it to a biennale, and is absent from art history textbooks published in western Europe and North America. In other words, average, ordinary painting.

It would be relatively easy, if a bit exhausting, to produce an encyclopedic survey of national and regional styles. It would be easier, but also exhausting, to assemble an edited volume of essays, each written by an expert in the art of a single region or country. But that kind of book would have a limited readership. It would not be read except by people who have a special interest in particular places, and it would never be used in place of the standard surveys of modern painting. What I am aiming at is much more difficult: I would like to write in such a way that the book would be of compelling interest to those modernist art historians who normally never look outside North America and western Europe (except for brief forays to Russia for cubo-futurism, and Romania for dada). The idea is to find a way of writing about "minor," belated, unoriginal, bourgeois painting, even including marine painting, flower painting, regional landscape painting, and flower painting, in such a way that it can take its place alongside the standard narratives of modernism in North America and western Europe. That is why the book is stalled. The following excerpt is from a draft of the first chapter.

My student Dorota Nelson's essay, which I have chosen to be published alongside my own in this issue of the University of Tampa Journal of Art History, was written for a seminar on art historical methodology. In it you will see some of the practical difficulties that are faced by any art historian—in this case the wonderful Polish historian Piotr Piotrowski—when they try to write about the art of their country in such a way that is become of compelling interest to readers in western Europe and North America. It's the inverse of my problem, but they are directed related.

"The question of whether anyone should persist in painting hangs over the practical and theoretical circumstances of art in general at the outset of the twenty-first century."
Charles Harrison (1)

Twentieth-century painting has an amazing conceptual and analytic messiness. Everything in it, so it seems, is open to question. Although it might not seem so to a painter who is immersed in the studio, every act of painting is an act of resistance against a number of ideas concerning the place and meaning of painting in the twenty-first century. There is the widespread metaphor that painting has died, or is dying, and for some observers that implies painting should be allowed to spend its final decades in a kind of peaceful oblivion. It can continue as a traditional subject in schools, as an avocation in old age, as a mouthpiece for governments, as a mirror for the rich, but it can no longer function as a critical voice in contemporary culture. From a different perspective painting's putative death is cause for renewed critical interest, because the moves that are available to painting have become so narrow that they are of compelling interest.

Any painting done at the beginning of the twenty-first century also implicitly resists ideas about the leveling of media. It is said that with the proliferation of advertising, television, the internet, film, and video—the proliferation is always named as a list, as if all media posed equal challenges and pertinence to painting—it is no longer cogent to assume that a significant portion of the expressive resources of visual art rests in painting. A Sunday painter, working on a dock in Nantucket, is not enacting a critique of the "post-medium condition," as Rosalind Krauss calls it, but a painter working in a post-minimalist manner and exhibiting in a major gallery will be seen as resisting the supposed leveling of all media, whether or not that resistance is intended. For some, again, that resistance had become interesting as it has become more desperate.

Painting's resistance to its own death is the first reason I have chosen to write about painting in particular. That source of investment is historiographic, by which I mean I am interested in the history of the discourses about painting's demise, the pressure they put on existing practices, their relation to the best defenses of painting, and their dissemination throughout the world. An historiographic interest is a fairly detached interest, in the sense that it isn't an interest that depends on judgments of quality or significance. Many paintings that resist the end of painting are not compelling as paintings. On occasion even resistance itself is uninteresting or problematic, for example when an artist takes a

radical stand for the sake of having a stand at all. Hence the historiographic dimension of this book is mainly a matter of finding out what has counted as resistance or acquiescence in different times and places, rather than a matter of taking sides.

My engagement with this material also comes from three other sources. The second springs from the fact that I was once a student painter. I have an MFA degree in painting, and I have continued to teach courses in which students paint—mainly by copying paintings in museums. Like thousands of other people, I experience my attachment to paint as a benevolent addiction: like a drug addiction, there is no permanent cure, and I have a lingering desire to work with paint, and to write about the dissimilarity between the experience of painting and most non-painters' accounts of painting. (Including, emphatically, art historical accounts written by scholars who do not paint.) Painting has a kind of non-verbal, bodily attraction for me, which I recognize as a liability when it comes to paintings that are intended to work against painting's physical presence. Yet I think it has to be argued that even paintings like Ad Reinhardt's, with their carefully disguised paint application, work by resisting the visceral pull of visceral paint. I sometimes prefer Robert Storr's accounts of Gerhard Richter to Benjamin Buchloh's because Storr tries to integrate a sense of the persistence of painterliness even in a practice immersed in history and memory. Like any addict, I cannot entirely predict or explain the workings of my addiction. I know that because paint itself draws me to it, I may overvalue the subject, the medium, and its history. Even so, I wonder whether my attraction—which has ebbed from the years when I was painting, when I wrote *What Painting Is*—is different in kind from any writer's attraction to any subject. I simply do not know. (2)

The third source of my investment in painting is a belief I hold about the ongoing importance of painting as an expressive resource. That belief is not always focused on fine art. Paintings in hotels are a good example of the low-level pleasure that paintings can give. When you check into a hotel, you may not even glance at the paintings, and if you do you may suppose that they are part of an unreflective business practice whose purpose is to make the rooms look welcoming—that is, to pitch them at the proper level so that customers feel they have arrived in a place that is luxurious and yet friendly. That is a very low ambition for painting, but it is ubiquitous: almost every city to which I have gone to research my book has greeted me first with hotel paintings, and only later with fine art. On a typical day, I might pass by twenty or thirty paintings in the airport, behind the hotel registration desk, in the hallways and foyers, in the room, in the hotel restaurant, and at the bank where I change my currency. (When I have the time and energy, I also note the artists and titles of as many as I can.) Sociologically speaking, painting remains an extremely important part of the social fabric.

The expressive potential of painting is of course greater when it comes to more ambitious painting. Despite the proliferation and leveling of media, I find visual art's expressive resources are frequently at their richest and deepest in painting. Often painting can continue to act as a synecdoche for visual art in general, even when the operation of that trope depends more on abstract questions of the unity of the artwork and its possible meanings rather than on any specific painting or painter who might exemplify painting—and therefore art—at any given moment.

The fourth source of my interest is painting's long history, which is present to some degree in every painting. In the twentieth century painting was persistently described as being like a language, and the metaphor is apt: painting can seem full of idioms, creoles and pidgins, regional differences, elusive syntactical structures, marks that are like linguistic signs, and fascinating etymologies. Every painting has traces of a long and fascinating history, just as every sentence in English echoes many before it. New media are more like Esperanto: their expressive possibilities are as shallow as their histories, and as limited as the community of their speakers. It is difficult to write clearly about how painting's expressive range differs from other media with long histories, such as sculpture and architecture: all I can say is that painting often, but certainly not always, appears to me as the most versatile and eloquent of the media. At the same time, there is no reason why a project similar to the one I undertake here could not also be made in regard to sculpture, architecture, or other major arts.

These are the four overlapping sources of my interest in painting per se: its persistent presence in the history of modernist media, despite the many announcements of its death; the pull of paint and the experience of making paintings; painting's expressive power both as a social phenomenon (in hotels, for example) and as an ambitious marker of the state of a culture's reflection on itself; and finally, painting's depth of historical meaning, which is apparent in the language-like forms that are traditionally seen in it. Together these four are my excuses for writing about painting, and not sculpture, film, or any of the other media of modernism and postmodernism.

The above excerpt will be the opening of a chapter. To see what happens next, you could have a look at the following essay I've published, which is also a sketch for one of the opening chapters of the book:

"Writing About Modernist Painting Outside Western Europe and North America," in Compression vs. Expansion: Containing the World's Art, edited by John Onians (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 188-214.

And there is also this essay:

"Two Forms of Judgement: Forgiving and Demanding (The Case of Marine Painting)," Journal of Visual Art Practice 3 no. 1 (2004): 37-46.

The second essay is about Nantucket-style marine painting, and also the large school of Leningrad marine painters. I was interested in what happens when I try to write seriously, with art historical attention, about marine painting.

But that is enough for now. The subject is potentially endless, and, I think, a fundamental challenge for the structures of art history.

(1) Harrison, "Painting and the Death of the Spectator," in *Ungemalt*, edited by Zdenka Badovinac (Vienna: Sammlung ESSL, 2002), 153.

(2) It may be worth saying a little about the difference between *What Painting Is* and this book. I know from experience how many painters prefer to shut out history while they paint, and even when they contemplate other people's paintings. I especially want to mention this problem because in my experience, readers of *What Painting Is* will be unhappy about this project. *What Painting Is* was an experiment: I wanted to see what would happen if I tried to describe what it is like to work with oil paint, as a painter, in a studio, where all that matters is the thickness of the paint, its ooze, its gloss, its unnameable exact tint. That book struck a nerve with painters who have felt disenfranchised by what they sometimes take as the over-intellectualizing of their art, or at least the over-emphasis on historical meanings at the expense of immediate feeling. Often my lecture invitations came from people who had read *What Painting Is*, and outside of the United States, the response was often disappointment when they learned about this project. That book and this one seemed entirely at odds with one another. Several people said that this project essentially betrays the other by (once again!) robbing the studio experience of its voice.

The University of Tampa © 2016

No article or images are to be reproduced, altered, sold in any other form, medium or support without the appropriate written authorization.