

**David Hansen**

**Mnemosyne**

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thy eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

Matthew 6: 22–3

In the Chapel of San Brizio, in the cathedral of Orvieto, standing under Luca Signorelli's magisterial *Resurrection of the Flesh*, with its curly-haired muscle-boys and grimacing skeletons dragging themselves up out of the quicksand earth at the sound of the pitiless angelic Last Trumpeters, a young Midwestern American couple hears us speaking English and asks politely if we could please tell them what's going on in the picture. Not ten minutes later, at an exhibition in the *duomo's* library, a young Italian, explaining the iconographical program of the room's frescoes, not only speaks faster than I can easily hear and translate, but he also clearly assumes that we know the identities and attributes of each of the Four Doctors of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> We are all of us inside the same monument. We all, generally speaking, come from the same Greco-Roman / Judaeo-Christian culture. Indeed, we are all here—both as tourists and as exhibition attendants—to celebrate and participate in this common heritage of image and story. But something is not quite working. Somewhere between 1500 and 2000, between universal Catholicism and postmodern secularism, between Orvieto and Ohio, the original messages have been bled, scrambled, eroded, wiped.

I am reminded of the time when I was a young man, an art history student exploring Europe. It was 1977, and there was still a lively hippie road culture—amongst my companions at a squat in Rome were some fire-eaters who wore feathers in their hair and called themselves the "*Indiani Metropolitani*"—and in most towns it was usually possible to find somewhere to stay just by asking around in whichever piazza the local youth had made their own. I remember sitting by myself in the Piazza San Francesco in Ravenna, waiting to make a bid for a *posta per dormire*, and deciding to amuse myself by looking through my souvenir postcards. A couple of guys wandered

over and joined me in my little art-historical review. I remember being quite astounded by the depth of their knowledge: of churches and museums, of individual artists, even, but especially of the more arcane details of Christian iconography.

I should not really have been so surprised. After all, my own passage through university courses in Early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance art had been greatly facilitated by having grown up “churched”; I knew all the Old Testament stories from Sunday School. For many of my mostly atheist contemporaries, however, there was no meaningful difference between Jacob and Rebecca at the well and Christ and the Woman of Samaria; they had to learn it all from scratch. For the *ragazzi* of Ravenna, who had just been kicking a football around in front of the basilica of San Francesco, with its lovely submerged fourteenth-century mosaic floor, and just around the corner from Dante’s tomb, Christianity was not an issue, the Bible was not a text, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory were not intellectual constructs ... they just were. They had been absorbed since childhood, through family, church and school, through language and the physical environment, and had been totally assimilated into the teenagers’ worldview.

A couple of days after Orvieto, I am at dinner at the British School in Rome, talking to a grizzled historian about this whole issue of shared meaning, of common culture. She joins me in lamenting the loss of universally significant images and stories and notes, regretfully, that only last week somebody had clearly failed to appreciate the reference when she had used the line, “Well, he would, wouldn’t he?” I, too, fail to appreciate the reference.

Her unappreciated citation was, in fact, an oft-quoted line of model and escort Mandy Rice-Davies, giving evidence at the 1963 trial of Stephen Ward for living off immoral earnings, following Britain’s infamous Profumo Affair. The prosecuting counsel pointed out to Miss Rice-Davies that Viscount Astor denied having had an affair with her, or even knowing her. “Well, he would, wouldn’t he?” was her reply.

Until the last generation or so, cultural change has been quietly incremental. In the history of western art and thought there are occasional precious moments of sparkling inventiveness and genuine originality, there are often episodes of incursion or

importation, where foreign modes and manners are translated and adopted, there are odd periods of conscious anachronism, of historical revival, but generally speaking it is the immediately precedent and immediately local which determine artistic trajectory, which condition how each new work is made and understood. But now that the context of just about everything is plural and global and instantaneously distributed through satellite and internet, change and development, publication and reception are inevitably randomised. Works of art, quotable quotes from showgirls, individual bits of visual information, data, memes are no longer readily incorporated into a world view, because there is often no precedent concept, no remembered, meaningful text or image to which they can be grafted. Indeed it may be that the whole notion of a singular, coherent and continuous personally or communally integrated world view, whether our own private Idaho or a shared religious or political belief system, is now hopelessly unrealistic, or at best outdated, an old-school notion deserving of a wry smile or a quizzically raised eyebrow.

Ours is an extensive and expansive, impatient and amnesiac culture, where most things you might want to know (and many you don't) are immediately available through your computer or hand-held device. It is no longer necessary, or even desirable, to have a classical education, or a religious upbringing, or even an exhibition catalogue essay, in order to have ready access to art and its meanings. To venture another truism (they are on the rise), we live in an age of visual communication, in which commercial, political, cultural and personal messages depend as heavily on the image as on the word. Giulio Camillo's ambition or prophecy has been fulfilled, and scholars have become spectators, scanning our desktops or iPhoto Theatres of Memory with lexical mode in neutral but visual faculties in high gear.

How do we manage this architecture of sightseeing?

"Theatre of the World" constitutes an interesting microcosm. Here we enter an environment, or a series of environments, containing a prodigal and discontinuous array of objects from the collections of the Museum of Old and New Art and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery: Egyptian stone carvings; stuffed and mounted birds; First World War "trench art"; Chinese ceramics; parts of animal skeletons;

nineteenth-century European academic painting and twentieth-century modernism from America and Australia; African beadwork and woodwork; Aboriginal bark painting; natural history illustration; Melanesian shields, masks and drums; corals and shells; contemporary photographs and videos; Japanese ink drawing; geological specimens; teapots ...

So what does it all mean? Sidestepping both the chronological and material constraints of academic art history and the associated conventions of museum display, Jean-Hubert Martin and Tijs Visser offer an alternative protocol of access and understanding, one based on the intrinsic properties of objects. “Theatre of the World” is constructed in accordance with what Martin calls *pensée visuelle*, visual thinking, the hunter-gatherer’s instinctive or pre-conscious attention to similarity and difference in size and shape and colour and texture that has been the stock-in-trade of artists across cultures for millennia. It is about exploring a wide range of objects, from the treasures of two rich collections, and the deduction from that survey of a number of particular sets of visual stimuli, of thematic, material and formal affinities, complementarities. It is an initiation into purposeful, conscious pattern-recognition, a silent but meaningful nod to indicate the glinting eye of the bush-screened prey.

It is a fundamental human instinct that when two or more things are similar in content, size, form, colour and so forth, we seek to match them together in our minds, to create a visual set or class. Like the superb bower bird, with its courtship display of exclusively blue objects, we all relish the “ah ha!” reflex, the “this goes with that” of our wardrobes, the pareidolia of the ducky and the horsey in the clouds or the man in the moon, the victory in games of snap or Pelmanism. This exhibition is built on just such thematic and phenomenal similarities, the curator clearly delighting in the discovery of unlikely but harmonious pairings and groupings, the creation of new classes. A circular display of beetle specimens, as lovingly arranged by entomologist George Bornemissza, repeats in a New Guinean egg cowrie shell necklace. A Syrian chalcolithic house-idol or altar and Max Ernst’s bronze sculpture *L’imbécile* share both the base form of a truncated inverted cone as well as a kooky, surreal zoomorphism. The ochre and blood striations of Northern Territory painter Emily Kngwarreye’s *awelye* or body markings resonate delicately with the spiny rose crystals of crocoite, the mineral emblem of Tasmania. A thin, pointed Yoruba ritual

staff suggests both the narrowness and the dangerousness of the split in Gordon Matta-Clark's pulled-apart house.

What is interesting is that as soon as we have established similarity, we look for difference. As with the traditional procedures of connoisseurship and attribution, as soon as we have posited or constructed an "is", we seek an "is not", or rather an "is, but". It is in this constant process of sorting and classifying that we find our place and our way in the world. This is a pair of eyes, but they are on the wings of a moth, not the face of an owl. This is another cowrie shell, but it is a bigger one than that one. This is a human being, but he or she is not of my tribe. This is an ancient Egyptian coffin, but that is a modern West African one. This is an art museum, but it is not like any other that I have seen. Thus it is that by establishing a suite of sensory experiences, by means of *pensée visuelle*, visual thinking, the curator provides us with a framework within which we can bring to bear *pensée poétique*, *pensée critique*, *pensée historique*, *pensée politique*.

The pairing of a Chinese treasure hoard of hundreds of corroded bronze coins, and a canvas covered in hundreds of dead flies by British artist Damien Hirst—two black slabs—must prompt reflections on the nature and materials of art and the nature and materials of wealth; on the arbitrary ways in which exchange value is determined; on the precariousness of riches, whether in the biblical warning that "moth and rust doth corrupt and thieves break in and steal" or in the more recent lessons of the Global Financial Crisis and its continuing fallout; on the fact that you can't take it with you.

Look at the watercolours of John Dempsey, portraits of the urban poor of the 1820s, juxtaposed with Boris Mikhailov's 1990s photographs of homeless people in the Ukraine. In the Gospel of St Matthew Jesus says "for ye have the poor always with you"; but each location, generation and experience of extreme poverty is unique, and uniquely corrosive. For Dempsey, an itinerant English portrait miniaturist and silhouettist, his folio of "remarkable characters", the familiar beggars and street vendors of the various towns he visited, served to advertise his skill at taking a likeness and thereby generate work. Mikhailov's purpose is less practical, but it demands the same level of forensic detail, and documents the same blank, affectless stares. A radical, independent artist under the Soviet regime, Mikhailov's professional

and political alienation forged an oppositional artistic temperament. On returning home after some years in exile, he discovered that the collapse of Communism had led to widespread social dislocation. His portraits of the *bomji* (homeless) of his hometown of Kharkov are as bleak as they are slapstick, are at once portraits of “some creatures that were once humans but now are degraded, ghastly, appalling”,<sup>2</sup> and a powerful critique of post-Soviet Ukrainian capitalism.

Consider these three images from the show’s room of works on the theme of body as landscape: Fernand Léger’s *La bicyclette*, Brent Harris’ *Borrowed Plumage #2 (Stranger)* and Julie Rrap’s *Horse’s Tale*. All three share a visual language of circularity, of curvilinear, flowing profiles, with a truncated vaginal-lenticular-lanceolate form and a certain idea of hairiness. All have an arresting, assertive bodily quality, as well as a certain implicit dimension of sexuality. But each is abstracted in a different way. The Léger is closely related to another work from the same year, *La danseuse bleue*; in the latter the wobbly blue shape on the left—a motif which appears in other paintings of the period signifying variously hair, leaves, cloth, comet tails, statues, even the Mona Lisa—is inhabited not by a bicycle but by a smiling, curvaceous nude. Is there a joke intended here? The horn of *La bicyclette*’s crescent moon also has a mongrel derivation: as the handle of a pair of pliers, and as a straw hat, while the lipstick slash of scarlet on the right probably has its origins as a draughtsman’s compass.<sup>3</sup> In short, the painting can be seen to participate in that fantasy of mechanical sexuality that we see in the work of Francis Picabia, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp around the same period.

Despite the historical distance, the *bicyclette* can be seen, at least, to lean comfortably against Harris’ *Borrowed Plumage*. Harris’ work is one of the artist’s familiar “blobscapes”, elegantly composed, minimal but elegiac almost-abstractions of “a world of ragged edges, of transience and death”.<sup>4</sup> Beginning with black-and-white “bubble” works, his paintings moved in the 1990s through various abject grotesqueries, sexually ambiguous suggestions of bodies, limbs and organs to stylised but clearly legible religious icons, figures and faces in the 2000s. Here Léger’s moon crescent leans more towards its hat identity, as the circle becomes a brim around a head, the halo of a faceless Christian saint—John the Baptist or the Penitent

Magdalene—in a hairshirt or goat skin. Or just possibly the aureole is something else: an eye, a target, a sphincter, a wound.

Now we trot on to Julie Rrap's *Horse's Tale*. At first sight it appears so uncannily close to *Borrowed Plumage* (even to a certain parallel in the title) as to seem like a negative or after image of that work. Yet the two could not be more different. Against Harris' painstaking, fine, chalkily matt layers of oil we have a glistening cibachrome, against his subtle interplay of religious and somatic identities we have an in-your-face feminist sight gag; Rrap is the artist who gave us in this same series a *Cow Tongue Tie* and *O*, a neon nude with fly-zapper vagina, and later the signature image of naked, high-heeled feet. Here the horse's tail of the title drops not from the base of the spine, but from between the artist/model's legs, an uncanny motif as ambiguous as Léger's blue cloud, but in a more David Lynch kind of way, suggesting overgrown pubes, gushing menstruation, a long-haired baby crowning, a fly whisk inserted ...

It has been said before that meaning is not something contained within a work of art "like an ingredient in a cake".<sup>5</sup> Meaning is something that can only be discovered or constructed by the individual through close engagement with the work. It is something that is often found in the gaps: not in the title or image or material alone, not in the explicatory texts of art historian and curator, not even in the domain of pure form, but in the relation of these things to our personal desires and imaginings, knowledge and experience, thoughts and feelings.

In 1847, the Scottish academic painter Robert Scott Lauder, an artist whose reputation was to a significant extent based upon his various interpretations of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, exhibited *Dick Tinto shewing Peter Pattieson his Sketch of the Bride of Lammermoor* at the Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh. Won in a London Art Union draw by colonial public servant John Curwen Walker, the picture achieved high visibility in the colony of Tasmania: it was loaned to the Hobart Art Treasures Exhibition of 1858, one of the very earliest public exhibitions held in Australia, and would later enter the collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

It is a curious painting: part portrait (the Pattieson figure is in fact an image of Scott himself, the girl possibly one of his daughters), part genre subject, part literary

illustration, and part allegory. In this last respect it can serve as emblem of the present exhibition. It is, above all, a picture of the act of looking, with Pattieson examining a painting through a paper tube, a kind of improvised telescope.

The device is very much a sign of its times. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, the twin engines of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution produced a veritable explosion of visual inventions and diversions. There was astronomer William Herschel's Great Forty-Foot Telescope of 1789, and philosopher Jeremy Bentham's 1791 Panopticon penitentiary design. There were the theatre and fairground spectacles of the panorama and the *camera obscura*, the parlour entertainments of Magic Lantern shows, the shifting patterns of the kaleidoscope and the dancing figures of the phenakistoscope and zoetrope. There was the Picturesque tourist's smoked convex mirror, the Claude Glass, and artist's tracing tools such as portable *camerae obscurae* and William Hyde Wollaston's *camera lucida* of 1807. There were dramatic, Romantic torchlight or candlelight viewings of classical sculptures. And, significantly, "the Long Eighteenth Century" also saw the widespread establishment of those great seeing machines, public art museums.

But what is exactly is going on in the picture? Scott begins *The Bride of Lammermoor* with a prologue, in which the book's narrator tells how he first heard the whole tragic tale of marriage, murder and madness. His first-person character Peter Pattieson relates how a friend, the painter Dick Tinto, once showed him an oil sketch of an incident in the story, which Dick himself had heard while touring the Scottish Border country. The scene is described as follows:

[Leigh line space before this paragraph and indent, single line spacing]... Tinto produced his sketch with an air of mysterious triumph, and gazed on it as a fond parent looks upon a hopeful child ... He held it at arm's-length from me—he held it closer—he placed it upon the top of a chest of drawers, closed the lower shutters of the casement, to adjust a downright and favourable light—fell back to the due distance, dragging me after him—shaded his face with his hand, as if to exclude all but the favourite object—and ended by spoiling a child's copybook, which he rolled up so as to serve for the darkened tube of an amateur ...<sup>6</sup>

A child's copybook ... do you see? Sometimes, it seems, you need to look through the words.



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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> They are St Ambrose (mitre, crozier, beehive, book, three-tailed whip, ox); St Augustine (child or angel with a shell, transfixed or flaming heart); St Gregory (Papal tiara, crozier, dove); and St Jerome (Cardinal's hat, bible, lion).

<sup>2</sup> Boris Mikhailov, *Boris Mikhailov revisited (interview with Vladimir Bulat)*, [http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/boris\\_mikhailov\\_resources.htm](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/boris_mikhailov_resources.htm), accessed 10 January 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See (respectively) *Folies*, 1929 and *La danseuse rouge*, 1930; *Composition aux clés et au chapeau de paille*, 1929; *Composition au compas et à la coquille*, 1929.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Miller, *Brent Harris: The Face*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2004, n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Timms, *Getting to Know Mr Booth*, Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency, Melbourne, 1990, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor and A legend of Montrose*, Marcus Ward & Co., London, p. 25.