PAINT, PAINTERS AND PRIMARY PERCEPTION

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DECLARATION

I, Rhett Brewer, declare that the following thesis PAINT, PAINTERS
AND PRIMARY PERCEPTION has neither in whole nor part been
submitted for a higher degree to any other
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines various painter's attempts to find, in their chosen medium, a meaningful representation of nature.

It proposes the idea that despite the best efforts of some of western art's most gifted artists, this has remained an elusive goal so far and this is likely to remain the case in the future.

The paper concludes with an examination of Postmodern theoretical discourse and the effects it has had on painters who may want to attempt to make a meaningful statement about nature with their art. It goes on to make a case that despite the difficulty of the task, there are some very sound reasons why any painter wishing to attempt it, should do so.

Some associated issues are raised in the course of the investigation:

1. An investigation of perceptions of nature.

2. The role of language in shaping our perceptions of nature.

3. The inability of language itself to capture a satisfactory recreation of the experience of nature.

4. An examination of Paul Cezanne's attempts to record nature using his empirical optical method.

5. An examination of Barnett Newmans's attempts to recreate the experience of nature through the use of symbols.

6. The work of the phenomenologists with regard to nature and painting.

7. The problem of aesthetics.

8. The apparent reluctance of many critics and theoreticians to take the importance of nature, as a vital and indispensable starting point for some artists.
INTRODUCTION

We must surrender the idea that this perfection that we see in the mind, or before our eyes is obtainable or attainable. It is really far from us. We are no more capable of having it than the infant that tries to eat it. But our happiness lies in our moments of awareness of it.

The function of artwork is the stimulation of sensibilities. The renewal of memories of moments of perfection.¹ - Agnes Martin

This paper is a result of some time that I spent in Greece travelling, writing, thinking and talking about painting in 1994.

In a country that has all but eradicated most of its native animal and bird life I felt oddly aware of nature, open to my sensations in a new country. It was my tabula rasa. I remember sitting in an olive grove in Crete and listening for hours to the erratic rhythms of the cicadas and wondering if there were any artists or musicians who may be capable of creating anything as complex, as subtle and somehow as profound as this strange surging pulsating chorus.

Similarly I tried to document the rhythms of the sea and the patterns of light on the stony Cretan hillside. I tried Realism and Abstraction. I created methods, used patterns, made diagrams. I applied everything that I had learnt in the past 25 years and every time nature, even this depleted nature, outstripped my efforts with ease.

I was a long way away from the politics, pressures and theories of academic life. I was thinking about what caused my interest in painting in the first place.

I began to think about not only what painting could do, but also what it couldn’t do.

When I began painting in the early 70’s there was a prevailing style of painting which went under various names, Super Realism, Hyper Realism, Photo Realism to name a few. Some paintings were well made and well conceived and may still be interesting to look at, but most of them have not stood the test of time and remain stored in the basements of public galleries, a relic from another decade which was, like our own, fond of novelty. The fashion soon ran out of steam. In retrospect it was probably too slick, too cool, and too mechanical to last.

At the time, as an untrained enthusiastic amateur painter I was one of the general public who, probably for the wrong reasons, found these works attractive. I soon set about making similar images myself. To me these works were real. I thought that they looked the way that things really looked and, as a young man, I thought I knew what real, reality, and Realism meant.²

Another reason that I enjoyed some (but not all) of these works was that I thought that many of the artists showed real skill. This was the sort of skill that wasn’t apparent to me in the work of Jackson Pollock for example. I thought, at that time, that Richard Estes was a much better painter than Pollock. On a technical level I still believe that, although Pollock has made some very beautiful paintings which, in their own way, have contributed just as much to my growing definition of real and he is generally considered to be a more significant artist.

²I believe that one of the results of the ageing process is that we tend to loose our ability to attribute glib definitions to words and concepts like these. Much of this paper will reflect an attempt to grapple with these terms, both from myself and the people that I choose to write about but perhaps it is appropriate that no single definition emerges.
When I began my training I started to gain an understanding and a real enthusiasm for Mondrian, Rothko and Newman. To me, once again I thought that what they were trying to do was to create the real or make Realism of a kind. Art School had successfully challenged my thinking on what is real.

Today I can understand and appreciate many different painting styles. As a teacher it is my business to do so but I still have my preferences. I like work that makes demands on the viewer's sight and their patience for, and joy in looking. Jan Van Eyck and Agnes Martin maybe odd bedfellows but for me they are both wonderful painters. The work of both artists rewards the viewer for making a sustained and repeated examination. I believe experience can be awakened in differing but important ways by carefully detailed representation or by subtly rendered fields of colour and line. The demands that these forms make on the act of seeing allow us to come alive through our eyes. They may be separated by 500 years and they may have a completely different idea of how to represent nature but they are both part of our ongoing western culture and for me at least, they have something very important in common. The looking is important, the work has visual weight and substance. They are complex and subtle, on a visual level compared to the work of many other artists, perhaps from the past, but more particularly from our own time who may place more importance on the vicissitudes of a prevailing theory than on the execution of the painting. The artists I prefer make works that do not merely function as snapshots or postcards where the message or content is written on the back (or to be more specific, in written form as a complex and encoded catalogue essay) and is more likely to receive attention than the image itself. This attitude is widespread in contemporary art and it has the unfortunate effect of reducing many artworks to the status of illustration. I prefer works where the act of seeing, or perhaps more accurately - the sensation of seeing is
accorded a primary role. The artist deploys, and expects of the viewer, a
visual intelligence which I believe, not only exists, but is a necessary
complement to a cognitive response based on conceptual or cultural
familiarity.³

But just how powerful can art be? How good is it at bringing us a real or
profound experience? What is a real experience anyway? Is there an
alternative or alternatives to ordinary everyday consciousness - other
realities which may challenge, enhance or deaden what we think of as real?
I believe that we don’t become artists simply by accident. I suspect that
many of us have formative experiences, perhaps remembered, perhaps
forgotten, where we may have experienced a glimpse of another reality, a
tantalizing other consciousness where the act of seeing was essential to the
experience and it has set us off on a lifetime quest to try to make some
sense of it. The child is father to the man.

I want to examine the thoughts of some artists, writers and philosophers
who have said something about this and I want to examine what this means
to someone who may want to begin with a profound encounter of nature,
experienced visually as a departure point for a creative life. An artist who
may attempt to make paintings about what is real.

³I do not wish to suggest that all images that are visually complex are visually intelligent, or indeed
intelligent at all, indeed I believe that many images which are accorded the status of being conceptually
sophisticated, or intelligent, are in fact visually impoverished, and therefore robbed of some of their
potential power.
THE HEDGE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GARDEN

On a morning in May 1953, in the presence of his wife and a research scientist who was conducting a study of the chemical reactions which occur in neurotransmitters, Aldous Huxley, the British novelist, satirist and social activist, in his own words ‘swallowed four-tenths of a gram of mescaline dissolved in a glass of water and sat down to wait for the results’.

The events and observations that followed were recorded on tape and then written down by Huxley in an essay he titled ‘The Doors Of Perception’ in a reference to a quote by William Blake;

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.

In a foreword to the current paperback edition, J.G.Ballard describes the book as Huxley’s most important work of non fiction. It has survived the cult status accorded to it by the L.S.D. sub-cultures of the 1960’s and 1970’s and it remains, one of the most lucid, accessible and articulate accounts of the nature of human consciousness available to the contemporary reader.

Huxley had long-standing interests in Science, Art and Philosophy. His grandfather Thomas Henry Huxley was known as “Darwin’s Bulldog” for his work as a tenacious populariser of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection in the sceptical scientific community of 19th Century Britain. On his mother’s side of the family there were two well known Victorian novelists. It was into this intellectual climate that Huxley was born. Huxley

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5Ibid (opening quote frontpiece)
himself had considered science as a career before he went on to become one of the century’s most important English novelists. Many of his works share *Brave New World*’s scientific themes.

The insights into the nature of ordinary things during his mescaline experience caused Huxley to reflect on the rather selective and limited nature of ‘normal’ consciousness. His expectation was that the drug would introduce him to a ‘world of visions’ - the subjective inner world, but what happened was just the opposite. It was, in his own words the world of objective fact that was revealed to him in a completely new light. He began to see things with a new intensity. When looking at a vase of flowers on his table he says

> I was seeing what Adam had seen in the morning of creation - the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence

When asked if it was agreeable his reply was ‘neither agreeable nor disagreeable, it just IS’. 6

This would suggest that at least while he was temporarily in this ‘world of objective fact’ he was able to escape our dualistic way of thinking.

He then goes on to make a point about the Platonic doctrine of forms. Pursuing the idea that the flower just IS he invoked the word *Istigkeit* or IS-ness which Meister Eckart used in relation to Platonic philosophy but claimed that ‘Plato seems to have made the enormous, the grotesque mistake of separating being from becoming and identifying it with the mathematical abstraction of the idea”. This is a reference to Plato’s parable

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6 ibid, p.7.
of the cave which appears in his Republic \(^7\), where we are presented with the idea that the forms of nature are mere manifestations of another world of perfect forms—the dual plane of reality, according to Plato. Plato describes a metaphysical world denied to all but the most advanced thinkers who have managed to escape the wretched world of appearances (the "cave") or, in terms of his theory of knowledge, the lower orders of thought i.e. 1. Imagining and, 2. Belief, and moved out into the "Sun" and thus discovered the true source of existence and appearances which is the abstract world of perfect forms and concepts. This effectively sets up a dualistic way of thinking about the universe which was subsequently pursued by other western philosophers.

Of these lower orders of thought Plato attributes the lowest, Imagining, i.e. the belief in the world of appearances, to be the realm of artists, that is, people who place great value on the importance of vision. He singles out painters in particular. But it is into this world of appearances that Huxley finds himself discovering a new, and more profound understanding of existence. He had no reason to attempt to place a value judgment on the flower that he was observing because that would have reduced it to a concept, an abstraction, and robbed it of its unstated, but visually apprehended meaning. "It just is", he said.

This statement seems to attack ideas that could be argued to lie at the very foundation of Western philosophy and places Huxley on a collision course with much of the philosophical beliefs that contributed to the evolution of post Platonic rationalist discourse. To those acquainted with Huxley’s work it would come as no surprise that his ideas on the nature of existence had become more closely aligned to the East than to the West.

Huxley was, among other things, a student of Eastern Philosophy and his later works make frequent references to Buddhist and Taoist texts. One of the authors he was fond of quoting was the Japanese monk and Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki.

In his book *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Suzuki says about words-

> The Zen masters have the saying "Examine the living words and not the dead ones". The dead ones are those that no longer pass directly and concretely and intimately on to the experience. They are conceptualized, they are cut off from the living roots. They have ceased, then, to stir up my being from within.⁸

This statement places a higher priority on lived experience over “conceptualized” understanding. Suzuki suggests that we should listen only to the “living words”. In Zen Buddhism this can mean nonsensical riddles or language which is aimed at confusing the listener and thus rendering itself useless as a tool for understanding experience. The listener has to resort to the “living roots”, they are thrown back to their senses. They are directed back to Plato’s world of appearances which is, in the East, invested with a far greater importance. It is seen as a starting point for discovery, not a starting point for deception.

On examining his flowers, Huxley was reminded of the term ‘Sat Chit Ananda’ - Being-Awareness-Bliss’. For the first time I understood, not on a verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what these prodigious symbols referred to.⁹ These moments of sudden understanding are referred to in Zen Buddhism as a Satori and are the eventual expected outcomes of the strange riddles that Zen masters

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impose on novice monks who try to use reason to achieve an understanding of the nature of existence.

Huxley quotes from one of D.T.Suzuki’s essays

Novice - "What is the Dharma-Body of the Buddha?"
Master - "The hedge at the bottom of the garden" \(^{10}\)

Or perhaps on this sunny May morning in 1953, the intense experience of seeing the vase of flowers on Huxley’s table. Huxley felt a pity for Plato.

He could never, poor fellow, have seen a bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged; he could never have perceived that what a rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were - a transience that was eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence.\(^ {11}\)

Huxley saw what he believed to be the hidden nature of things not just in the obvious beauty of a flower from nature but in the manifestation of ordinary everyday man-made things as well. He said:

I looked down by chance and went on passionately staring by choice at my own crossed legs. Those folds in the trousers - what a

\(^ {10}\)ibid p. 8
\(^ {11}\)ibid p. 9
labyrinth of endlessly significant complexity! And the texture of the gray flannel - how rich, how deeply mysteriously sumptuous 12

Huxley assumed that is what artists are congenitally equipped to see all the time and this would explain their ongoing obsession with painting drapery. I want to say more about this later but for now I would like to propose that whether artists are “congenitally equipped” to see that way or not, the act of painting drapery or water, or clouds or whatever - in a convincing and "realistic" way - takes a considerable amount of practice and therefore, many hours of quietly and patiently, doing it. This act becomes a kind of meditation in itself, which is capable of altering ones perceptions of nature.

But did Huxley have to take mescalin to gain a more complete understanding of the significance and astonishing presence of the things he saw every day of his life? Perhaps not. There are many accounts of similar experiences by people who meditate, or have gone without food for long periods, or experienced a severe fever. Huxley claims that mystics, like artists are congenitally prepared for such experiences. He also postulates that schizophrenics have these sort of revelations at the onset of their illness but eventually lose access to their ‘heaven’ as their ‘hell’ takes over.

He makes the point that the chemical compositions of mescalin (a derivative of the Peyote cactus) and adrenaline are very similar but he draws no direct conclusions. We are left to make our own comparisons between his account of mescalin and our own recollections of an adrenaline inducing experience, eg a car crash where time seems to freeze, and objects seem to take on a greater significance. The point of this is that there are many ways that the brain’s chemistry can alter and alternative versions of ‘

12ibid p. 17
reality’ may be revealed. These glimpses of alternative realities may cause some people to try to achieve a greater understanding of their experiences through religion or meditation, or it might direct them into painting from nature like Cezanne or Morandi, or, in the most obvious way, to experiment with mind altering drugs.

Further into his essay he attacks another cornerstone of Western thinking - Christianity or at least Christianity as manifested in the non mystical authoritarian tradition. He cites Lallemand a seventeenth century theologian who declared “We should feel wonder at nothing at all in nature, except only the incarnation of Christ”. 13 This, Huxley said, represented an ingrained cultural attitude towards nature in the west. He blamed this on the “Doctrine of the Fall” and contrasted it sharply to the Buddhist and Taoists tendencies to look beyond the “Void” to the “Ten thousand things” of objective reality.

If Christianity and Greek philosophy were the sole causes for human beings, other than artists, mystics, and schizophrenics, to be denied an understanding of the “suchness” or “Dharma body” of objective reality then we could reasonably expect the average Asian person to be in a permanent state of heightened awareness but this does not seem to be the case. Huxley provides a reason for this muffled awareness which is apparent in all people in all cultures. He says that it is something that reduces the full flow of perception to a ‘measly trickle’. 14 It is language.

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13 ibid p. 30
14 ibid p. 12
BREAKFAST AT DENNY’S

In a recent edition of *Artforum*, Dave Hickey, the American art critic, fiction writer and Country and Western performer wrote about the shortcomings of writing as a means to express the “enigmatic whoosh of experience”. He confesses that as a young man he set out to become a writer but he was handicapped with a

profoundly defective idea of what writing does and what it entails

He said that he was

primarily interested in that which writing obliterates; in the living atmosphere of all that is shown, seen, touched, felt, smelled, heard, spoken or sung

He wanted to

celebrate the ravishing complexity and sheer intellectual pleasure of simply being alive in the present moment forever after

Time and disappointments finally taught him that

Writing, even the best writing, invariably suppresses and displaces the greater and more intimate part of any experience that it seeks to express

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16 Ibid, p. 80
17 Ibid, p.80
18 Ibid, p.80
19 Ibid,p.80
He now concludes that

all the volumes of Proust were nothing, qualitatively, compared to the twenty minute experience of eating breakfast at a Denny’s (Diner) in Mobile--and that the more authoritatively and extensively I sought to encode such an experience, the more profoundly it was obliterated from the immediacy of memory and transported into the imaginary realm of remembrance, invested with identity, shorn of utility, and polished up as an object of delectation.

For Hickey neither he nor the best writers were capable of capturing the full weight of experience in the medium of writing. He makes a point of listing all of the experiences that our senses provide and states his frustration at trying to capture the total experience and failing. He acknowledges that words tend to drag the lived experience towards a kind of abstracted classified concept with value ‘invested with identity’. Reluctantly the young Hickey had to acknowledge the shortcomings of his chosen means of communication and arrive at a compromise. He says "so the choice (as it presented to me in the intellectual jargon of the sixties) was either to stop writing or to divest my writing somehow of its autonomy and timeless authority". Hickey then says that by accepting its limitations and practicing his craft he was able to go on and make a good living out of it after shedding the "ludicrous mantle of auteur". 21

Aldous Huxley was another writer who owed his existence to his ability to practise his craft but he was similarly inclined to acknowledge writing’s shortcomings as an adequate reporter of lived experience, but he went  

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20 ibid. p.80
21 All quotes taken from Hickey, D., p.80.
much further. He proposed that despite all the obvious benefits that language has brought to human beings, it is actually responsible for dulling our experience of the world, and as such has brought about a profound loss to our lives. To clarify the point Huxley quotes the eminent Cambridge philosopher, Dr C.D. Broad:

...we should do well to consider much more seriously than we have hitherto been inclined to do the type of theory which Bergson put forward in connection with memory and sense perception. The suggestion that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main eliminative and not productive. Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment.  

This rather extreme and somewhat provocative statement does raise some interesting questions about consciousness. The human brain is not only a vast repository for words but also anecdotal information, images, deductions, the associations of sound, smell, touch, taste, and many combinations of all of these things plus more. This information must be available to us at all times. We feel anxious when memory fails us. Recalled information supplies us with connotations and symbols which allow us to act in ways that are appropriate to a given situation, but it does encourage us to operate on a relatively abstracted plane of existence. Our

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senses become less critical, our perception is dulled and we lose some of our curiosity. Huxley puts it this way

‘Every individual is at once the beneficiary and the victim of the linguistic tradition into which he or she has been born. The beneficiary in as much as language gives access to the accumulated records of other people’s experience, the victim in so far as it confirms him in the belief that the reduced awareness is the only awareness and it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things.23

In his book The Phenomenology of Perception Maurice Merleau-Ponty states a premise that Bergson, C.T.Broad and Aldous Huxley would probably agree with.

The world is already there, before reflection as an inalienable presence,.....all efforts are concentrated on re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world and endowing that contact with a philosophical status.24

The return to things themselves is a return:

to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks and in relation to which every scientific schematisation is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie, or a river is. 25

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23 ibid p. 12
25 ibid Merleau- Ponty, M.,1962, Phenomenology of Perception, , , p.IX
Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is the philosophy of ‘being there’ amidst essential phenomena, he defines it as the ‘study of essences.’

To a phenomenologist, language and abstract concepts proceed secondarily from the concrete, self evident nature of the things which surround us, but unlike Huxley who seemed to lose himself (his ego) in the all encompassing "suchness" of the Universe as he perceived it on that morning in his home, the phenomenologist seems to place supreme importance on the mind / body as it moves through space and relates to the things around it. Husserl called phenomenology a

‘Descriptive psychology” or the return to “things themselves”. He said all my knowledge of the world is gained from my own particular point of view - my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them. 26

Husserl’s ideas were developed by Heidegger who introduced the term Dasein which roughly translates from German as “being there”, Dasein is a word not only for “man” but for the state of man - being, reflecting, aware of his own death - not just another object in the Universe but the source for engaging phenomena (that which reveals itself). He goes on to say that Dasein is not just the source of existence perceived, but that Dasein radiates its presence in a “wide field”, so that when we use a hammer, or drive a car, it becomes an extension, a part of Dasein. He said

The world is not a way of characterizing those entities which Dasein is not, it is rather a characteristic of Dasein itself 27

26ibid,Merleau-Ponty, M, 1962,p.VII.
27Stumpf S. E., Socrates to Sartre, Mc Graw Hill, Sydney, p.464
Husserl once said that we create the horizon with our gaze. As a painter who is often engaged in the act of selecting objects, deciding my vantage point (the composition), and then spending hours relating to it, as well as relating to the objects that I choose to interpret my subject with, that is my brushes my medium, the size and weave of my canvas, I cannot help but have some empathy with this idea. But it remains for me just that, an idea; another interesting concept for, and an addition to, the dialectic of philosophical speculation; interesting, but unconvincing. It presupposes that we are only capable of placing ourselves at the center of things and makes the case that everything else is only relevant to our perception of it. It is, in that sense, pre Copernican. It assumes that our perceptions are entirely independent of ideas and beliefs that we may hold. It rules out the possibility that we may occasionally be capable of seeing the world free of our egos and catch a glimpse of unity and flux. It evokes in me suspicions of a pervasive anthropocentrism which has influenced Western humanist philosophy from at least Descarte’s time.
BEING THERE

Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees. For the painter, we might say, the watchwords of knowledge and action lose their meaning and force. Political regimes which denounce "degenerate" painting rarely destroy paintings. They hide them and one senses here an element of "one never knows" amounting to a recognition.\(^{28}\)

With this statement Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his essay ‘Eye and mind’ not only provides some insight into his own perception of a special status for “the painter” but suggests that similar beliefs run deep in the psyche of civilizations. The attitude of the painter at work is different from philosophers and writers who, he says, must "take a stand" and make appraisals. Writers use a language which is capable of stating good and bad, this and that, but painters work with images which he says "draws upon this fabric of brute meaning in a state of full innocence".\(^{29}\)

He speaks of a protective attitude that we hold for “the painter”, we do not hold it against Cezanne that he lived hidden away at L’Estaque during the Franco-Prussian War”. Perhaps this says more about the intellectual class of French society and their respect for ideas, than attitudes of people in general. But it does indicate an attitude towards artists as being of a separate species, with special insights and powers.

Merleau-Ponty implies that somehow the artist’s concerns are beyond good and evil (without being obliged to appraise what he sees).\(^{30}\) This attitude is


\(^{29}\) Ibid p. 123

\(^{30}\) Merleau-Ponty seems to be suggesting that artists, or at least the artists he was interested in, were beyond Platonic duelism and therefore stuck in the Platonic “cave”. This much is consistent with Plato
reminiscent of the holy fool or idiot sage as portrayed by Peter Sellers when he played Chance Gardener in the film *Being There*. This is someone who is to be sheltered and protected from the rough and tumble of ordinary life because by doing so they provide us with special or even divine insights into our world.

This predisposition also relies on the assumption that all artists are motivated by a similar type of interpretive style i.e. predominantly visual and analytical, not conceptually driven nor actively engaged in social or political discourse. I know from my fifteen years of teaching in Art Schools that this is far from being the case although it may have been truer in Merleau-Ponty’s day (his major essays on perception and the painter were written in Europe between 1945 and 1960 and he did after all tend to use artists like Cezanne and Giacometti as references for his theories). 31

In spite of these reservations I would still say that Merleau-Ponty is about as close as a philosopher can get to being a friend to “the painter”. He did after all spend a considerable time looking at paintings and he took them seriously. This is not surprising given the fact that the observational painter and the phenomenological philosopher both rely heavily on vision as a starting point for their work. This is unlike the many philosophers from recent times who, exert a powerful influence in many contemporary artist training institutes whose interests lie more in politics, linguistics, social theories, theories of sexuality and anything but the act of looking at and saying something useful about an actual painting.

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31 Cezanne and Giacometti both relied on a prolonged visual examination of their subject in order to make a painting. Regretably this practice has lost its central role in training institutions.
Merleau-Ponty provided major essays about the acts of looking at and making paintings. For that reason I believe his thoughts are more likely to be relevant to a painter who is interested in visual phenomena. Although Merleau-Ponty wrote about painting, his subject was always the phenomenology of perception. In ‘Eye and Mind’ he sets out the principles of the phenomenology of perception and relates them to the painter who stands in front of his or her subject.

"The painter takes his body with him ... indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint" 32

So he implies that the morphology of the painter affects the work more than we may at first assume. He talks about the painter’s body moving through space amidst the field of objects with a head that moves and two eyes that move creating a moving binocular field. He says that the body is really an “intertwining of vision and movement”, inseparable. This concept is central to the philosophical movement which has come to be known as Phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty helped to develop this school of thought by applying the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger to painting in particular. The accounts of Joachim Gasquet’s interviews with Cezanne were of particular interest to Merleau-Ponty because of Gasquet’s accounts of Cezanne’s unique and emphatic practice and rhetoric. Merleau-Ponty uses this phenomenological method to make some valuable observations about the painter and his ability to make objects which may resonate with the experience of others.

Here is an example of how Cezanne’s methods of painting a subject was so utterly dependent on his own physical apparatus, his own state of being - in - the - world, or Dasein as Heidegger would have called it.

32ibid p. 123
Cézanne’s powers of observation became so sharp that he found a method to challenge linear perspective which was a method which had dominated painting and drawing for over four hundred years, Merleau-Ponty explains

By remaining faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective, Cézanne discovered what recent psychologists have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one. The objects we see close at hand appear smaller, those far away seem larger than they do in a photograph....

To say that a circle seen obliquely is seen as an ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception, what we would see if we were cameras.33

This articulates an important break in the convention of rendering what we think of as visual perspective which was, in fact, far more mechanical, and it paved the way for cubism, which in turn, led to other forms of abstraction.

Cézanne was not, and could never be, simply a physical body that paints. He had also a fine mind which, was capable of "appraising" what he saw. But it is fair to say that at least, while he was making a painting, his mind was primarily used for the task of what he called “organizing sensations”.

He spoke of the eye as being a producer of sensations and the brain as being the organizer of these sensations -

there is, in an apple or in a head, a culminating point, and this point - in spite of the effect, the tremendous effect: shadows or light, sensations of color - is always the one nearest to our eyes. The

edges of objects recede to another point placed on your horizon.

This is my great principle, my conviction, my discovery.34

This is where Cezanne applied his method using a limited pallet (6 Reds, 5 Yellows, 3 Blues, 3 Greens and Black ), many of which were repeatedly used for specific spatial purposes; eg he often used blue to indicate several outlines around a piece of fruit and these lines would blend and overlap the descending planes of color which were used to represent the volume of the form. Within these shifting outlines were a simulation of our own binocular field of vision, and our own shifting vantage point. In Cezanne’s Doubt Merleau-Ponty quotes Cezanne -

the outline and the colors are no longer distinct from each other. As you paint, you outline; the more the colors harmonize, the more the outline becomes precise .... when the color is at its richest, the form has reached plenitude.35

Cezanne developed and tested these methods over a lifetime of devoted practice. He believed that the basis of his practice was reason applied to continuing observation. He was not interested in expression for its own sake as he matured as a painter. It is for these reasons that his work could be referred to as being empirical in its intentions.

Cezanne was not impressed by painters who might attempt to achieve a sense of poetry in their work although he admired it in language. In a conversation with Gasquet, Cezanne produced a favorite quote from Balzac and read it to him -

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A tablecloth white as a bed of freshly fallen snow on which the places were laid in orderly array, crowned with honey colored rolls, he says - All my life I wanted to paint that, but ... If I paint “crowned” I’m done for ... do you understand? and if I truthfully balance and relate my places and my rolls as they are in nature, you can be sure that the crowns, the snow, and all the excitement will be there. 36

It would be difficult to find a painter who, among other painters, would be more highly respected than Cezanne. The sincerity of his wish to make Impressionism "something solid, like the art in the Museums" is evident in his paintings and in the records of his conversations. But what did he feel about his ability to paint what he really saw? To create something that was just as vivid, as meaningful as experience?, as nature? It seems that his stated goals and his held beliefs were at odds with each other, and he was obliged to live, and act out a great compromise.

He certainly made his intentions clear. In a conversation with Emile Bernard who had referred to his ideas of the Classical artists Cezanne said -

Cezanne - "They created pictures, we are attempting a piece of nature."

Bernard - “But aren’t nature and art different?”.

Cezanne - " I want them to be the same." 37

He went on to say of nature -
"The artist must conform to this perfect work of art. Everything comes to us through nature, we exist through it, nothing else is worth remembering."\textsuperscript{38}

Cezanne was well aware of the difficulty of the task, and it seems that he held no illusions about his prospects for success. He was obliged to conclude that art, even the best art would always be dwarfed by nature. When he was in Paris he would go to the Louvre every day to see if he could learn from the paintings -

We find in them a comfort, a support, like a board for a swimmer...But as soon as we’re painters, we’re swimming in real water, in actual color, in full reality. We’re grappling directly with objects. They lift us up .... A sugar bowl teaches us as much about ourselves and our art as a Chardin or a Monticelli. It has more color. Its our pictures which become lifeless copies of nature. Everything is more iridescent than our canvases, all I have to do to have the most beautiful Poussins and Monets in the world is to open my window.\textsuperscript{39}

Cezanne likened walking around in a museum to being inside Plato’s Cave. He said that he would like to engrave on the door of the museums -

\textbf{NO ADMITTANCE TO PAINTERS - SUNLIGHT AVAILABLE OUTSIDE.}\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38}ibid p. 62
\textsuperscript{39}ibid p. 223
\textsuperscript{40}ibid p. 223
Cezanne’s final evaluation of his success was modest. Merleau-Ponty supplies this quote from Cezanne which was recorded just one month before his death at age seventy six.

Now it seems that I am better and that I see more clearly the direction my studies are taking. Will I ever arrive at the goal, so intensely sought, and so long pursued? I am still working from nature and it seems to me that I am making slow progress. 41

At the end of Cezanne’s Doubt Merleau-Ponty summarizes-

But he himself was never at the center of himself: nine days out of ten what he saw around him was the wretchedness of his empirical life and his unsuccessful attempts, the debris of an unknown celebration. Yet it was in the world that he had to find his freedom, with colors upon a canvas. It was from the approval of others that he had to await the proof of his worth. That is why he questioned the picture emerging beneath his hand, why he hung on the glances other people directed towards his canvases. That is why he never finished working. We never get away from our life. We never see ideas or freedom face to face. 42

Judging from the things that Cezanne said about his experiences of looking at objects and feeling the sun etc, he did catch his glimpses of freedom. His problems began when he tried to find a satisfactory way to record it.

Throughout Cezanne’s Doubt Merleau-Ponty returns to his theme of the agonized, neurotic, genius. This may or may not be true but it does

42ibid p. 75
reinforce a mythological stereotype of artists, and I doubt that it is relevant
to Cezanne’s achievements. It would be difficult to imagine a serious text
on the work of a leading scientist, for example which would feel the need
to include anecdotes on the scientist crossing the road to avoid
conversations. We do know, from the information that Merleau-Ponty has
given us that Cezanne had some fairly clear objectives for his painting. He
wanted to make an art that was inseparable from nature. We also know that
at the end of his life he felt that he was getting closer. However we can
assume that he was never able to achieve his ambition because he died
shortly after saying that he was slowly approaching his goal. If Cezanne -
arguably the greatest painter of modern times, who held this specific ideal,
was unable to achieve it then was this goal - perhaps the holy grail for
many painters, achievable at all ? There was at least one other painter who
thought so, but it would require us to think about nature in a very different
way.
GODDAMN BATIK

Half a century after Cezanne’s death, and at about the same time that Merleau-Ponty was writing his views on painters and the way they perceive nature, on the other side of the Atlantic ocean another artist was working from nature in a very different way.

Barnett Newman was a painter, sculptor, writer, teacher, polemicist and amateur ornithologist, who, like Cezanne, held strong convictions about the artist and nature. He said -

... in his desire, in his will to set down the ordered truth, that is the expression of his attitude towards the mystery of life and death, it can be said that the artist, like a true creator, is delving into chaos. It is precisely this that makes him an artist., for the creator in creating the world began with the same material, for the artist tries to wrest truth from the void.43

Unlike Cezanne who tried to create nature by applying his optical empirical method Newman worked from chaos as an unapologetic metaphysician. Newman did not attempt to find his truth by looking at nature and trying to render it. Instead he tried to develop symbols which had the potential to resonate with the experience of others on a more abstract symbolic and subliminal level. He wanted to evoke notions of metaphysical truths which could arguably be said to correspond to the ideal forms and concepts of reality (the first principles) as outlined by Plato. Newman wanted to paint the big subject: Time, which was inexorably connected to Space, Creation, and Existence. Although he was careful not

to place too much importance on literal interpretations attributed to his work, he preferred to direct people to simply look at the paintings. He did however write the following in some notes that Thomas B. Hess found and recorded in his book *Barnett Newman*

My paintings are concerned neither with the manipulation of space (referring to conventional pictorial space) nor with the image, but with the sensation of time. Not the sense of time, which has been the underlying subject matter of painting, which involves feelings of nostalgia or high drama, it is always associative and historical...44

Unfortunately Newman’s account of time stopped there but Hess picks up the idea with -

He probably would have gone on to raise the issue of “timelessness” - one of his high ambitions for art, but I believe that Newman, whose many interests included modern physics, also would have defined time in Einsteinian terms as the essential, defining measure of “space” 45

The methods of Cezanne and Newman may differ, but their goals, in wanting to work with nature, as nature, are oddly similar.

The goals, and the thinking of a Rationalist and those of a Metaphysician differ in many ways and their co-existence in Western Civilization has not always been one of mutual respect and co-operation but there are some

45 ibid p 73
interesting similarities which, from the prevailing postmodern position unite them.

The Rationalist and the Metaphysician both believe in the existence of and both actively seek “The Truth”. In his book The End of Modernity Gianni Vattimo makes the point that Humanism with Western Rationalism on the one hand, and Western Metaphysics on the other are both methods of abstract, rational, theoretical deduction which have their roots in the “first principles” in the form of concepts such as time, space, essence etc. According to Vattimo both traditions were severely damaged by Nietzsche’s assertion that “God is dead”. Vattimo argued that, if God is dead and God was supposed to have created time, space, matter etc then all of the other great concepts are more or less reduced to the Heideggerian concept of "exchange value"; they lose their great importance and so we have also the collapse of any concept or school of thought which was based on the existence of these concepts. Science and Metaphysics ironically, are scuttled together.46

In the "mirage" of art history (as Newman called it ), Cezanne was one of the first Modernists and Newman was one of the last. They were both free of Postmodern rhetoric and saw nothing wrong, or pretentious, with at least pursuing what they took for the truth.

Newman probably would not agree with the concept "God is Dead" although, he was attracted to at least some of Nietzsche’s ideas and like many others he took from Nietzsche what he wanted. He liked to refer to the Apollonian (cultural) and the Dionysian (nature) as two opposing

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46 ibid Vatimo G. 1988, The end of Modernity-Nihilism and Hermenetics in a Postmodern Society, pg 20
strands in western tradition. Newman saw the Dionysian as an important but submerged element in western thinking and he saw artists as being key players in retrieving it for the benefit of anyone who cared to look.

Hess gives us an insight into Newman’s views on nature and the artist when he addressed a group of artists, critics and philosophers at Woodstock in New York State in 1952.

Newman was only half joking when he said, "in words aimed at the philosophers on the podium, he made a distinction between nature and reality: "Reality", he said "is what is there, like a river, but nature is what artists create - we see it as they reveal it to us." 48

Or as Oscar Wilde would say-

“Life imitates Art”

It was at the same gathering that, in response to something that Suzanne Langer had said he replied "aesthetics is for Artists as Ornithology is for the birds". 49 This is not only a reference to the Greek "invention" of beauty, which I will refer to later, but also a gentle swipe at the dogmatists among the critics, of whom Newman had plenty to say.

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47 This idea is raised by Dore Ashton in his 1972 book The New York School Uni of Calf Press pg. 72 and is a reference to Newman’s essay “A New Sense of Fate” where the transition from Egyptian Art (Dionysian in nature) and Greek (Apollonian in nature) is traced via the Minoans. This is where, according to Newman, we lost the essence and purpose of Art and inhereted Aesthetics instead. See page 187.
49 Ibid p. 26
What gives the Artist hope is that, although he is surrounded by the Art Critic - Theoreticians, and Art Historians - the Kunstausschaffter - the Artist can create if he has it in him to do so because the dogmatists among Art Critics and Art Historians do not know that they are operating in a mirage and that there is no such thing as "Art History". 50

Or, on another occasion he put it more succinctly...

The history of modern painting, to label it with a phrase, has been the struggle against the catalogue. 51

Newman had a complex and occasionally difficult relationship with Clement Greenberg who was the principal critic in New York in his day. Greenburg contributed to Newman’s career by writing about his work, usually in a very positive but particular way, but we are left with the impression that he could have done a lot more if Newman had been more co-operative. Hess explains -

... he objected strongly to Greenberg’s formalist interpretation and to his reduction of art to a pawn in the dialectical chess of historical necessities. He also objected to Greenberg’s insistence of yoking him to Rothko and Still "as if we were in bed together" 52

As for Greenberg’s concept of “Flatness” and his championing of Rothko, Newman called it-

50ibid Ashton D1972, The New York School, p.74
51ibid, Hess T.B., Barnett Newman p. 15
52ibid, Hess T.B. p 92
"Goddamn batik"

Both Newman and Greenberg were to reject the theoretical term Formalist (although it will probably stick to Greenberg). Greenberg remained an admirer of Newman’s paintings to the end.

Newman himself not was adverse to using rhetoric when it suited him. Indeed what Newman said and wrote is probably remembered today as much as his paintings. Unlike many of his contemporaries Newman had received a solid college education in the Liberal Arts. He had studied Philosophy and he was politically active both within the arts community and in a broader sense (he once attempted to become the first anarchist Mayor of New York City). He wrote articles on aesthetics and contributed to other artists catalogues. He was a great defender of the art of his generation.

In the 1930’s and 40’s he spent more time writing and teaching than painting in the studio, in fact he even gave up painting altogether for two years and only returned to it due to the encouragement of his friend Adolf Gottlieb. Like Cezanne he was not a naturally gifted draughtsman and painting was a real challenge. His struggle was not rewarded until 1948 when he finally made a breakthrough with a painting that he called Onement 1. After making the painting it took him eight months of contemplation to finally work out why it was so important to him and then the rest of his life to work on the idea in other larger works, testing it, trying to perfect it. I will include a brief analysis of this work because I believe that it could be argued that Onement 1, and the work that resulted as a refinement of the ideas and discoveries that were made in Onement 1.

53 ibid, Hess T.B., p 27
54 Greenberg C. "Complaints of an Art Critic" - Artforum Vol V1, No 2, Oct 67 p. 38
may represent the last, or at least the most recent, great challenge to nature as the sole realm of profound and ecstatic visual experience, that western painting was to issue.

Onement 1 was a small vertically positioned rectangular painting. It had a burnt orange field with an even red stripe (or zip as they came to be known) which traveled from the top to the bottom on a central axis. It was not the first zip painting he had made, in fact he had been working on several since 1946 but whereas they depicted stripes running over abstracted organic shapes and stains in background fields, Onement 1 differed radically. It was symmetrical and evenly painted. It was greatly simplified. The stripe was represented on the same plane as the ground which was painted up to but not behind the stripe. This provided far less incentive for the viewer to imagine the stripe, or zip as an object or person in a field (this is what Sartre called the "imaging attitude" which he argued opened the door to the construction of "beauty", (which was something Newman sought to avoid). So the viewer would be more inclined to read Onement 1 as a thing rather than a picture of a thing (in other words, for Newman, it had become part of "nature"). But that was not the only remarkable thing about his new painting, there was something strangely compelling about the vertical “zip” and its relationship with the symmetrical field.

It probably should come as no surprise that when an artist is the first to present the world with an image so simple, so archetypal, and so revolutionary as Onement 1, it attracted, and still attracts, many interpretations and arguments regarding its significance.

In his book Painting As Model Yve-Alain Bois says -
In *Omen* I the total bilateral reversibility of the painting prevents any possible dissociation between "image" and "field". Thus the sense of "totality" that Newman claimed as the main effect he searched for in his work he said "Instead of working with remnants of space, I work with whole space".55

Bois says that Omen's symmetry is -

The essential means used by Newman to preclude the possibility of any vestige of traditional composition.56

Ironically, this drags Newman back to the "mirage" of art history by placing him within its context, even if it is as an opponent or successor. Newman had his own views about the significance of symmetry in artworks and they can be found in the notes he wrote for a catalogue for an exhibition of North West Indian painting at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1946. Speaking about the characteristic bisection of all living things in this art, Newman concluded that the concern of the artists -

however was not with the symmetry but with the nature of the organism; the metaphysical pattern of life.57

In his book *The Human Situation* Aldous Huxley provides an account of symmetry which would support Newman's statement -

Let us consider first one of the fundamentals of spacial art which is also one of the fundamentals of living

56 *ibid*, Bois Y.A., p194
57Newman B. This article also appeared in the New York Times on 6-10-46
objects in the natural world: The question of symmetry and asymmetry as we see when we examine living creatures. There are two main forms of symmetry. There is the symmetry of the free living animal, which is bilateral symmetry: the two sides of the animal match one another, but it is different fore and aft; it has a head and a tail and it moves in one direction. This is radically different from radial symmetry, which we find in many flowers and in those kind of animals which don’t have the capacity for moving purposively in any direction,58

He goes on to say that-

where radial symmetry occurs as an artist’s symbol, it is always associated with ideas of repose and restfulness. The symbols having bilateral symmetry seem to have something dynamic and powerful directed about them 59

Bois says that the Humanistic approach should only be accepted in "a certain sense" and cites Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan to support his more empirical or formalist approach to Newman’s symmetry.

For what is perception of bilateral symmetry, indeed, if it is not, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has remarked, that which constitutes the perceiving subject as an erect human being, if it is not what solidifies for us the immediate equivalence between awareness of our own body and the always already given orientation of the field of perception? "One wonders what would be the self in a

59 ibid pg 178
world where no one knew about bilateral symmetry” writes the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

The Barnett Newman known to Thomas B Hess and the Barnett Newman that Yve Alain Bois wrote about seem to be different artists who believe in different things. Bois says that towards the end of Newman’s life, he tended to refer to his work in formal terms only. It is interesting that in the same book in an essay on Mondrian we don’t get to hear about Mondrian’s lifelong interest in Theosophy either. Mondrian is another difficult artist who seems to divide critical interpretations on the intentions of his work. Bois is not the first, and he won’t be the last critic to attempt to tidy up and sanitize an artist’s intentions and beliefs. Perhaps its just in the nature of the academy to lean towards the most rational interpretation available, and to synthesize it into an unambiguous, graspable concept. It is also possible that Newman himself subscribed somehow to both interpretations of his work. We know that Hess knew Newman and that after his death he spent many hours with Newman’s widow Annalee going through his notes and letters and Hess’s book has a strong Metaphysical theme.

In order to understand Newman’s painting it may be useful to look at the philosophical background to his thinking. Hess says that Newman’s first aesthetic manifesto was based on the “Ethics” of Benidict Spinoza who he had studied in college and was fond of quoting. Hess quotes E.A Burtt’s paraphrase from Ethics

When knowing truly, the human mind transcends its otherwise hampering finitude; it apprehends its object under the form of eternity. This is so because knowledge of anything is clear intuition of its essence as contained

60 Bois Y.A. 1990, p.195
in the eternal nature of God and its existence as necessarily determined by God. Such knowledge is part of God’s own knowledge of himself, which is not subject to change or destruction. And the love of God, since it arises from true knowledge and depends solely upon it, cannot be a transitory emotion, but is likewise eternal. However this knowledge and love, as gained by an individual mind, are not without qualification identical with God’s knowledge and love of himself. They retain an element of individuality of the thinker in whom they were realized. This circumstance arises from the fact that each human mind is intimately united to a bodily organism which occupies a particular spacio-temporal locus in existence and undergoes its own distinctive vicissitudes. Thus, while we may come to know God and other things in their eternal dependence on God, that knowledge still reflects the particular perspective in existence which attachment to an individual body has imposed upon it...the eternal part of any mind is hence also unique...61

It was from this platform of belief that Newman anticipated not only that he may have a glimpse of the eternal in front of one of his paintings but that others could approach his work, from their own “spacio-temporal locus”, and have a similar experience. Hess put it this way:

The spectator, like the artist himself, would encounter these metaphysical forces through the medium of painting in a mysterious, perhaps empathetic, perhaps

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archetypal contact; a rendezvous on grounds perhaps
 genetic, perhaps cultural, perhaps both.62

Hess’ text, and the quotes it includes from Newman himself, make it clear
that Newman, and many of his fellow artists believed in the power of art to
deliver a profound and revelatory experience to a viewer. Not just an
interesting or agreeable experience, not just the excitement of seeing
something new, but a revelation. That is the word they chose to use, with
all of its associations. Hess quotes Newman’s own words -

We are making it out of ourselves, out of our feelings.
The image we produce is the self evident one of
revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by
anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses
of history 63

For Newman, part of the problem with the "nostalgic glasses of history"
was that they set up an expectation of aesthetics or beauty and this, in his
view, undermined the power of art. It changed the art object from a
powerful religious artifact to an object to be admired for its technical or
formal qualities. Newman is one of many who blamed the Greeks for this.

It was the Greeks who invented the idea of beauty.
Before their time a work of art was concerned with the
problem of meaning and was a visible symbol of heretic
thought. Art was an attempt to evoke the metaphysical
experience. The Greeks had the romantic will to create
such an art which they hoped would function on this
level, but they demanded in addition that their art be an

62 ibid Hess T B 1971, Barnett Newman p.17
63 ibid Hess T.B. 1971, Barnett Newman, p. 15
object too. Their gods had to be not only the serious forces but ideal sensations. Whenever they strove to achieve the majesty of the Egyptian form, they insisted that their gods be objects of beauty too, and they succeeded in secularizing their divinities, making them things to admire rather than worship. 64

This shift can be measured geographically as well as chronologically in the transition from Egyptian art to the art of the Minoans on Crete, through to the Cycladic islands and onto the mainland from 3000 BC to the collapse of the Minoan civilization at around 1500 BC. This was a great achievement, and may have helped prepare the Greeks for the development of secular thought, but Newman seems to have seen it as a kind of decadence. For Newman, the Greeks, by having no Egyptian model to "perfect" in their literature managed to avoid this particular problem. So Greek Literature, he believed, became the "fountainhead of art " in the west.65

This change from the Dionysian - with its powerful religious symbolism, to the Apollonian - with its sense of refinement and aesthetics, where there is an increasing emphasis placed on how well, and with what skill an image is represented. This is what Plato was criticizing when he spoke of an imaging attitude that is the lowest order of thought, the way of artists.

Jean-Paul Sartre said, in his book “The Psychology of Imagination” that beauty resides, not in nature, but in what he also called the “imaging attitude” that we take to a painting where we see not the canvas, with its arrangement of brushed color, but a bunch of flowers or a glade which is, he says, an analogue of the original -which is the artist’s idea. It is in the

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64ibid Hess T.B.1971 Barnett Newman (taken from Newman's essay “A New Sense of Fate”) p.41
65ibid Hess TB 1971 Barnett Newman p.42
artist’s idea, which takes the form of an imagined image, and in the viewer’s imagination whilst looking at the analogue, produced by the artist, that an aesthetic experience can take place. The painting (or analogue) is, according to Sartre, not beautiful as such, but acts as a catalyst for the experience of beauty to be transferred from the artist’s imagination to the viewer’s imagination

That which is real, we must not fail to note, are the results of the brush strokes, the stickiness of the canvas, its grain, the polish spread over the colors. But all this does not constitute the object of aesthetic appreciation. What is "beautiful" is something which cannot be experienced as a perception and which, by its very nature, is out of this world 66

This is precisely why Newman and many of his contemporaries sought to rid their work of any possibility of recognizable imagery and, as a consequence, the possibility of being caught in the trap of “beauty”.

In Dore Ashton’s book The New York School Newman is quoted on the Apollonian nature of much European art.

The artist in America is, in comparison like a barbarian. He does not have the superfine sensibility that dominates European feeling, he does not even have the objects. This then is our opportunity, free from the ancient paraphernalia to come closer to the sources of the tragic emotion (the Dionysian) 67

Newman used the word “opportunity” in his call for American artists to embrace the tragic emotion. This "new sense of fate" as he called it had come about he said, because after Hiroshima the sense of terror had changed from the unknown, as was evident in the work of the surrealists to the all too well known. For Newman, what made it even worse was the fact that it was America that used the bomb adding to the feelings of individual impotence in the face of societal action. Newman wrote -

The Greek notion of tragedy was not ontological, but a social notion, a statement concerning the chaos of individual action....Greek tragedy constantly revolves around the sense of hopelessness that no matter how heroically one may act, no matter how innocent or moral that action may seem, it inevitably leads to tragic failure because of our inability to understand or control the social result; that the individual act is a gesture in chaos so that we are consequently the helpless victims of an insoluble fate.68

Far from seeing this situation as being the reason for despair and cynicism Newman saw it as an opportunity to get back to the fundamentals and make a new art that was more powerful than Western Civilization had seen for more than 2000 years and he made it clear in his essay "A New Sense of Fate" that he believed American artists could show the way.

Today this sounds rather like a nationalist rallying call for a new American culture. One that was at once serious, spiritual and intelligent. Perhaps it’s a good thing that Newman died in 1970. He could not have known that

after 25 years most young art students would know far more about Andy Warhol than him or Rothko or anyone else of his generation put together. Dore Ashton summed up Newman with this quote

Like Breton, Newman was a moralist whose primary interest was to find the appropriate means to bring about a total crisis of consciousness. His path was always circuitous, Leading now towards philosophical anarchism, now toward practical political action, now toward exalted philosophic speculation, now toward flat, hard nosed logic. 69

Newman, it seems, was a complicated individual who may not at all times have been given to consistent behavior or even consistent statements. But he was apparently consistent about his art and its seriousness. He worked at a time when it was more acceptable to do so. Many of the concerns of artists remain the same but the cultural climate can change, and has done so. Artists who ignore these changes often do so at their own peril. An artist is free to make whatever art he or she chooses but a critic, writer or curator is also free to ignore work that no longer addresses what they may consider to be the current or relevant issues. So artists have to find a way to survive and to say something about what is going on around them in an artworld that can often seem hostile to the art object itself especially painting which has been pronounced dead on countless occasions. One such individual is the Sydney based artist John Young.

BANAL KITSCH

In John Young Silhouettes and Polychromes, Graham Coulter-Smith says that Young was attracted to the American philosopher Paul Feyerabend's "epistemological anarchism" as outlined in Feyerabend's book "Outline of a Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge"

The epistemological anarchist has no compunction to defend the most trite or the most outrageous statement. While the political or religious anarchist wants to remove a certain form of life, the epistemological anarchist may want to defend it for he has no everlasting loyalty to, and no everlasting aversion against any institution or any ideology.70

Feyerabend's book, essentially aimed at scientists, presents a questioning of scientific method and suggests a philosophy of "anything goes" as being a more likely proposition for making progress. Young sees himself as a Postmodernist but he has managed to avoid the increasingly narrow set of concerns the Postmodernists tend to address. Like many other Postmodernists Young has been engaged in Deconstruction as a theoretical device in the production of his painting, but unlike many of his contemporaries he does not feel compelled to address heavy handed political or sociological truisms. The politics is there if you look for it and it is essentially anarchic and at times problematic but, as one might expect of an epistemological anarchist it is more difficult to pin down. It doesn't take a clear ideological line. Coulter-Smith says that in using deconstruction Young tries to avoid -

70 Coulter-Smith G, "Ecstasy and Administration" from 1993 John Young- Silhouettes and Polychromes, Schwartz City, Melbourne, p.20
the essentially moralistic strategy as decoding and substitutes it with deconstruction as an anti didactic, or ecstatic play of the free signifier. Most deconstruction, he believes is used as an essentially moralistic strategy which is by nature bureaucratic and symptomatic of an administered world, and simply addresses “that hideous sociological level that everyone feels obliged to address.”

Coulter-Smith describes the difference-

Decoding tends to be ideological, ie bound to a dualistic perspective, whereas the play of meaning (the free signifier) functions in terms of difference; distinguishing without judgment. The spectator-reader is left to make their own evaluation.

Here again we have a description of an artist which echoes Merleau-Ponty’s description-

Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees...

But it is used in a very different cultural context. Young refers to his paintings as being of "Bad Faith". He says that in Postmodern times artists simply act out the role that society has pre-ordained for them. They

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71 Ibid 1993, Coulter-Smith G., p. 21
72 Ibid 1993, Coulter-Smith G., p. 22
74 He called one of his exhibitions Bad Faith Realism in 1991. He said of his Polychromes: “They’re user friendly, people can somehow relate to them, and they walk away without the sort of dire need to give it a tremendous amount of meaning”

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have no aspirations to meet their "inner needs" since they have accepted Barthes's *Death of The Author*. Under these conditions, Young says, aesthetics has come to mean "skill and handiwork only".

This lack of "appraisal" is an ironic self conscious cynicism and is very different from the lack of appraisal of Merleau-Ponty’s Cezanne, with his labored empiricism. It is far removed from the moralist metaphysics, and good faith, of Newman of only 26 years ago.

It probably goes without saying that Young makes no attempt to work from nature. His subject matter is based on kitsch photographs, calendar images, soft pornography and (in his emulation of Gerhard Richter’s Polychromes) art history. All of this subject matter is recycled and used at arm’s length. It has strong ironic and ambiguous associations. It is made in "bad faith". *The* artist seems to have given up on art as a legitimate vehicle to try to express his "inner needs" because he, like most other contemporary artists has accepted Barthes’s concept of “the death of the author”.

Even his painting style has a mechanical look about it; He seems to have gone to some trouble to de-personalize his work. He works with assistants and, I suspect, makes good use of photo mechanical equipment in the studio. This means that the impact of the artist’s hand (of nature ) is down played leaving the work fashionably cool.

But does this mean that the artist is not interested in ever meeting his "inner needs"? Does it mean that he is disinterested in or oblivious to Nature? It is interesting that in his monograph he included an account of his experience with the drug Ecstasy and his consequent perceptions of nature, his "primary relationship" which were reminiscent of Huxley’s experience.
You get back to a primary state, it’s like being an apeman. It brings out all the very primary biological functions. You see a bird flying and you want to catch it and eat it, or if you see flowers or oysters you start to see their life force behind them. At that time it was a time to get back to some sort of primary relationship. 75

Young may be interested in this experience and the way it seems to reconnect him with nature, indeed a significant section of Coulter-Smith’s text details the influence that studying and practicing Zen Buddhism and Taoism has had on Young’s thinking. These philosophies hold an appreciation and awareness of nature as being absolutely central to any understanding of their teachings. But nature only exists in Young’s work as crude vulgar images of flowers and blossoms or cute furry animals, what Rex Butler called "greeting card ephemera" 76 Both Butler and Coulter-Smith suggest that these images have more to do with the sentimentalized images of nature that we see in the art of The Peoples Republic of China or in Nazi Germany. They are a far cry from the perceptions of Young’s “apeman” but as a postmodernist it is no longer acceptable to try to say something about his genuine experience of nature in his work, only an author would have the audacity to attempt that, and everybody knows that authors are all dead so there would apparently be no chance of success. A successful artist is by definition one who does not fail, and so we get this sad irony instead. Culture has eclipsed nature as the big subject for artists. We have shifted away from being a culture that was prepared to tackle difficult questions about intangible subjects (Newman), to the relatively safe territory of culture itself, with its pre-ordained theories and moral

75Coulter-Smith G, from “Ecstasy and Administration “, Essay from, 1993, John Young - Silhouettes and Polychromes, p.36
76Butler R, 1993 “Lost in the Mix “ article, Art in Australia Vol 30, Number 3, Autumn 1993
truisms. The rules have been provided for us but we have lost some of our liberty and a lot of our humanity.

If art is produced primarily for bureaucratic institutions, as John Young says and these institutions are cultural institutions, then there is no longer a place for nature because that is not what the Bureaucrats (the patrons) are interested in. Postmodernism is a stranger to ecstasy. John Young gives us “bad faith” art, the art we deserve. The bureaucrats and the artists are reading the same theories before the art is made, the artist is no longer an outsider. The artist has been accommodated by the state.

This produces a feeling of discomfort in artists and can sometimes result in inconsistent behavior or contradictory statements. This is where it pays to be an epistemological anarchist. There is no contradiction in contradiction. It is here that Young, perhaps ironically, comes closest to resembling a modernist or someone who might proclaim “art for art’s sake”.

There are passages in Silhouettes and Polychromes where Young sounds very much like an idealistic modernist but they are then followed by the inevitable disclaimers. Of the polychromes he says -

They are a relation based on love, and the spirit for art and between artists (Young and his assistants) In that sense the works manifest a passion.

Then we get

The literal titles of these works such as “Sanctuary”, “Fruit,” “Happiness”, and “The Seventh Sacred Season”

77Ibid Coulter-Smith G., from “Ecstasy and Administration” Essay in, 1993, John Yong - Silhouettes and Polychromes p.38
exorcise the sanctity of this passionate relationship between artists and turns your interpretation of this relationship into "Banal Kitsch". 78

Of his Polychrome grids he says -

I like to see the little rectangles as the Thorax or Larynx, the place before the utterance of the word ; it's almost like a close up of one of those images before one utters a specific sign, or meaning, or a word. 79

But of the painted images which share these canvases Coulter-Smith says-  

It is almost as if Young is pretending to be an artist working for the Soviet Union or the Peoples Republic of China, producing art ostensibly for the proletariat, but really for the Government, the Bureaucracy. 80

In the catalogue essay for Young’s 1996 exhibition at Sherman Goodhope Gallery, Dr Rex Butler, the Queensland academic supplies the necessary disclaimer with his proposition that Young's work is, to him, evocative of the 15th to 16th century nobleman and soldier Baldesare Castiglione’s concept of Sprezzatura or “the art that hides art”. Butler says that this was a system of coded and subtle signs which were understood only by the initiated. He makes the point that today Young engages in the same ironic activity so that we don’t quite know what to make of the sublime landscape we see in front of us. Is it a homage to the forces of nature, of creation, or is it just another cynical in joke? I am personally beginning to believe that

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78 ibid, 1993, Coulter-Smith G. p. 38
79 ibid 1993, Coulter-Smith G.p.43
80 ibid pg 42
Young would welcome the opportunity to divest himself of the dead weight of irony and “come out” of the Metaphysical closet. Young’s contribution to the text of his catalogue was to include the following quote from Henri David Thoreau.

Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we so love to talk, but the workman whose work we are.81

So an epistemological anarchist can produce works that are about ecstasy and ennui at the same time whilst hopefully remaining interesting to a cautious and weary audience. One can be disengaged and passionate, politically astute whilst at the same time making art for the bureaucracy.

This is the climate that we attempt to make art in the 1990’s. Young, aware of the problem, quoted Spengler in his book

Rootless, dead to the cosmic, irrevocably committed to stone and to intellectualism...that which was disseminated was no longer a style, but a taste, not a genuine costume but a fashion...82

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81Taken from Butler R., the catalogue for1996 “John Young”, Sherman Goodhope Gallery 20 June to 13 July.
82Ibid Coulter-Smith G.1993, From Oswald Spengler’s “Decline of the West” p.28
SUMMARY

Welcome, O life I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. - James Joyce 83

Anyone can make a contribution to the "uncreated conscience" of our race in some way. Some people’s efforts are held up as an example to us all. For others, like myself, it is simply what we do.

In this paper I have concentrated on the ideas of three artists and several writers. They are all people whose work I have admired. I believe that history, although certainly not linear in form, does have its turning points and Cezanne and Newman both made significant contributions to the way that many people have come to think about art and about nature and especially the relationship between the two. Both artists left behind important paintings and lucid accounts of what their intentions were.

I can appreciate Cezanne’s dogged attempts to “create nature” with his own invented empiricism. I can admire Newman’s idealistic attempts to find an evermore evocative symbol for pure existence. These artists are both heroes to me.

John Young is, in some ways, a more complicated artist. I was initially attracted to his work. The first time that I saw his work was at an exhibition called Steam at the Coachouse in Sydney’s Rocks district in 1993. He showed two beautiful polychrome grids which were identical in format to some paintings that I myself had made at art school ten years

before. But the reason that I liked them so much was his (and his assistant’s) superb use of color. There was something almost musical about the way the colors danced before my eyes. Thankfully there was no accompanying flowers cute animals or buxom nude to trivialize the impact of these works and I remember thinking that here at last was a new painter who could bring a painting to life.

I was aware of Richter’s work (another favorite ) but I failed to make the connection and see Young’s painting as an ironic appropriation. What I saw that day was ecstasy not ennui. His more recent work seems to be entirely in keeping with the statements he made in his book. I find his use of irony interesting but ultimately depressing and defeatist. Just as fascism descended on the world in the 1930’s I believe irony is the plague, in our culture, of the late Twentieth Century and we seem to be just as disinclined to speak out about it. Irony is the result of nihilism and it exists in a climate of fear and despair. Instead of getting Newman’s idealistic “New Sense of Fate” we have the other extreme of the irony and cynicism of Postmodernism institutionalized, petrified.

This fear is not just the internalized acceptance of the atomic bomb but an existential fear which can be traced back to Nietzsche and his proclamation that “God is dead” which has become a maxim in postmodern rhetoric. But even if we accept this death of metaphysics we must not attempt to over simplify something which is actually complicated. Nietzsche said many things and much of it is open to differing interpretations. In fact the concept of an objective Truth was one of his chief targets with his advocacy of what he called “Accomplished Nihilism”. He believed that if God was dead then that would bring about the end of all other absolutes including the notion of an objective truth. At the end of an essay called An
apology for nihilism the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo states a more positive intention for Nietzsche’s accomplished nihilism

An accomplished nihilism...calls us to a fictionalized experience of reality which is our only possibility of freedom

So it seems that as one door to freedom closes in our faces we turn around and discover another (Even a Postmodernist can find these “possibilities of freedom”). I suspect that there are many others as well, and it probably doesn’t matter much which door you are most inclined to pass through. I believe that Spinoza’s thoughts are relevant here -we each catch our own separate glimpse of freedom from our own particular perspective. We may not be able to pass through our chosen door but what is to become of us if we simply stop trying, stop looking. Cezanne and Newman tried and probably failed, but we are the collective beneficiaries of their attempts. We are in their debt. Their efforts were heroic and their faith in painting as a means to further the boundaries of human achievement and gain a greater understanding of nature were unshakeable.

Another unintentional theme that has emerged for me in the course of my preparations for this paper is the inability of many artists to convince others of the paramount importance of their perception of nature to their work. I have referred to Cezanne and his recorded conversation with Emile Bernard.

Bernard thought that Cezanne “submerged his paintings in ignorance and his mind in shadows”85 To Bernard; Cezanne wanted to create nature whilst denying himself the means to attain it ie outlines, traditional tonal

84ibid, Vattimo G,1988, The End of Modernity p. 29
85ibid, Merleau-Ponty M. .from “Cezanne’s Doubt”1993 The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader p.62
modulation and the solidity of conventional painting. Merleau-Ponty says that this is what Bernard called Cezanne’s “suicide.” He couldn’t accept that this is how Cezanne experienced nature. Cezanne was in fact simply conforming to nature as he saw it.

the artist must conform to this perfect work of art. Everything comes to us from nature; we exist through it;

*nothing else is worth remembering*[^86]

In another account I mentioned Bois’s reluctance to accept that Newman’s chief motivation in his paintings was his belief in the powerful archetypes of nature as manifested in his metaphysics. Bois would obviously prefer Newman to be a Formalist. Newman had similar difficulties with Clement Greenberg.

Here is another example, this time it’s a contemporary artist talking to a critic about the importance of nature as a source of inspiration for his paintings. It comes from the book *Gerhard Richter Paintings* where Richter is being interviewed by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh

B: (the paintings)...are remarkable in that they never occasion associations.

R: They do occasion associations. To a certain extent they recall natural experiences, even rainfall, if you will. Pictures can’t help functioning that way. That’s where they derive their effect, from the fact that they never cease to remind us of nature, from the fact that they are almost naturalistic. They are in a way.

[^86]: ibid Merleau Ponty 1993 pg 62
B: But then "naturalistic" would have to be defined. Not naturalistic in relation to nature?

R: Only to nature. We just don't have anything else.87

This should be sounding familiar by now. These people don't seem to be communicating very well and this is verbal communication with all of the advantages of visible body language intonation etc. Buchloh had even written a book about Richter. People hear what they want to hear, read what they want to read and see what they want to see. Buchloh's nature and Richter's nature are two different things, let alone any concept of their Gods.

One specialises in the language of painting and one in the written word. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this paper I believe both forms of expression are noble but imperfect. Not only are they imperfect as things in themselves but as a means of expressing something real or experienced they are deeply flawed.

To paraphrase Dave Hickey's statement I would say that -Writing (and painting) invariably suppresses and displaces the greater and more intimate parts of any experience (that they) seek to express.

Dave Hickey's solution was to accept writing's limitations and write as well as he could with humility; ie as a "citizen" not an "auteur"88

By this route, then, I fell upon the option of writing with as much strength as I could muster in a weak genre 88

87Nasgaard R.1988, Gerhard Richter Paintings, Themes and Hudson, London (my italics)
He had to accept that, for him, some experiences were simply impossible to write about -

Which is simply to say that my “Great subject” was, in fact, not a subject for writing at all. It was a cure for writing.89

He couldn’t write about the fleeting transitory "whoosh" he called it and so he had to settle for writing about things that would survive his pen and go on to manifest themselves again in another time, in another place, and appear before the eyes of another viewer. He had to curb his writing ambitions and find a new way to write. He became an Art Critic. He practiced his craft and he became very good at it.

This sense of resignation is similar to what Cezanne said about the lesson of simply looking at a sugar bowl or opening his window and looking at the view and how these experiences were so much richer than looking at a painting.

So does this mean that we should simply stop making art altogether? I do not think so. I believe that the art that we make does have the potential to enrich people’s lives and even to enhance their perceptions of nature. "Reality" Newman said, "is what is there, like a river, but nature is what artists create" The quality of what an artist creates is at least partly dependent on their technical accomplishment.

Painting, like writing, is not something that can be learned overnight. There is an element of craft in painting as well. Perhaps it’s ultimately more important, more useful than some of painting’s more celebrated

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89ibid, Hicky D. 1995 Artforum p.80
qualities, like how well a painting addresses contemporary sociological issues and stylistic practices. Contemporary issues are simply that, contemporary, subject to an inevitable change. There were probably other painters around in Vermeer’s day who were riding the Zeitgeist more effectively but many artists become irrelevant as soon as the fashion that they were identified with disappears. History is littered with artists like this. We only have to look back as far as the so called resurgence of painting in the early 1980’s the aptly named Bad Paintings to ask “what ever happened to-- ?”

I am not advocating that an artist should be oblivious to his or her times, that would be foolish. I am simply saying that we should practice our art with regard to and an awareness of its craft and its long and honorable (if flawed) tradition.

I am also saying that an adequate idea which is painted well is preferable to an adequate idea which is painted badly.

Vermeer’s work is, for me, proof of this. There is no great concept at work. Just the simple humanity of humble deeds beautifully realized. And why shouldn’t an artist use, or attempt to achieve beauty if they can ?

If Newman was wrong, and it is no longer possible to achieve a truly Dionysian painting in these sceptical times; why not then go for beauty: Accept painting’s limitations, and try to create something that is positive and life affirming? It just might happen that by letting go of the “ludicrous mantle of auteur”, accepting our limitations, and trying to perfect our paintings; investing them with grace and striving for a form of visual intelligence, we may perhaps be able to elevate the flagging status of painting in our culture.
In his pursuit of truth, of a Dionysian art, it is perhaps ironic that Newman also managed to achieve an art which could not escape the Apollonian association of beauty. Beauty is largely a subjective value judgment but it is clear to me that many of Newman’s paintings, with their expanses of space, the simple purity of their color, and the elegant relationship to symmetry of his compositions could indeed be judged to be beautiful, and this has obviously happened.

To return briefly to science, Einstein, who managed to link two of Plato’s first principals, time and space, and change forever our understanding of the physical universe, was emphatic that in order for a theory to be of any value, in order for it to have any chance of being proved to be true, it must first and foremost contain a mathematical equation or formula that he could recognise as being beautiful.  

It seems that for Einstein as well as for many other leading scientists it is not only time and space that are yoked together but truth and beauty as well. Beauty, not nihilism, should be the intended starting point for any artist who wishes to approach truth.

It is important for an artist to learn to live with defeat without succumbing to cynicism. We must, I believe, honor our tradition and know our limitations whilst at the same time be open to the possibility of overcoming them. It is the sincerity with which we attempt to achieve something worthwhile that ennobles painters and the myths that people construct around them. Painting is the language of the painter.

We do achieve our modest moments of “freedom”, and they can be found, I believe in the act of painting. Whether it be in the hours one spends in coaxing out the allusion of folded drapery with sable brushes (amounting

to a kind of meditation) or in the simple pleasure of dragging a large loaded brush of Vermilion across a stark white canvas - we may choose to do both. They are both acts that engage and comment on perceptions of nature.

Aldous Huxley had a lot to say about artists, especially painters. Like Merleau-Ponty much of what he said was more applicable to the artists of the past, the artists who served long apprenticeships and learnt their craft.

A few hours after he had looked down and became transfixed by the “endlessly significant complexity” of his gray flannel trousers he saw a reproduction of Botticelli’s Judith in a supermarket and I believe what he said about it sums up many of the points that I have tried to demonstrate in this paper.

It refers to the joy of looking at a well painted image. It refers to the value of craftsmanship. It refers to the allusive nature of the ravishing complexity of ordinary things. It draws our attention to the crucial importance of good painting to our understanding of our world. It speaks of the ultimate failure of that painting to achieve what it sets out to do and finally it alludes to the bankruptcy of what has come to replace genuine experience in our lives.

Poring over Judith’s skirts in the world’s biggest drug store, I knew that Botticelli - and not Botticelli alone, but many others too - had looked at draperies with the same transfigured and transfiguring eyes as had been mine that morning. They had seen the Istigkeit, the Allness and infinity of folded cloth and had done their best to render it in paint or stone. Necessarily, of course, without success. For the glory and the wonder of pure existence
belong to another order, beyond the power of even the highest art to express. But in Judith’s skirt I could clearly see what, if I had been a painter of genius, I might have made of my old gray flannels. Not much, heaven knows, in comparison with the reality; but enough to delight generation after generation of beholders, enough to make them understand at least a little of the true significance of what, in our pathetic imbecility, we call “mere things” and disregard in favor of television.91

91ibid, Huxley A, 1954, The Doors of Perception p.20
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1. Agnes Martin, The tree, Coll Albright-Knox, Buffalo


3. Richard Estes, Downtown, Museum Moderne Kunst, Vienna

4. Paul Cezanne, Still life with Watermelon, Coll Ernst Beyeler, Basel


7. Alberto Giacometti, Jean-Paul Sartre Private Coll N.Y., 1946

8. John Young, Steiner’s Saturday, Coll City Gallery, Melbourne, 1991

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11. Sandro Botticelli, The Return of Judith, Uffizi, Florence, circa 1470
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11. Sandro Botticelli, The Return of Judith, Uffizi, Florence, circa 1470
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