



Wendy Artin, *Craggy Face*, 103 x 43 cm, watercolor on paper, 2010

*James Cogswell - Workshop on Wendy Artin's Engagement with the Classical Past - Kelsey Museum 2015*

This is a reproduction of the painting that I have returned to the most often from the Artin exhibition. My comments are based on engagement with the painting itself, not this reproduction. While I regret the typographic addition in this slide, the attributing caption serves the useful purpose of reminding us that we are looking at a digitally projected photo reproduction, and not the painting itself.

I see this painting as if it were in my peripheral vision. If I were to turn my head and hold it firmly with the neuro-optical-cognitive-musculature of both eyes, I might be able to bring it into focus. But I **am** looking at it directly, it **is** in focus and the images that I think I see still will not reveal themselves. For the most part, I still can only guess, through an act of conscious reconstruction.

The entire surface is full of detail, but only here and there, tucked way at the periphery are individual forms with clear bounded edges, smooth, rounded contours that separate

themselves from the rest of the surface. These forms appear to be strangely buried within the overall texture, cropped and overlapped, appearing from behind and orbiting away from the center where my eye naturally wants to locate itself. And those peripheral forms are the ones in the painting that offer the clearest reading, by virtue of having a ready name and set of instant associations: head, hand, hock.

The slowness of reading invites me to study what **is** there: deposits of minute particles of pigment dispersed across and absorbed within the fibers of paper, a large expanse of paper, edges curling, reminding me of its own dimensionality, occupying the space that I am also in. The paper's small irregularities speak to me of forces in its making and in its subsequent history. It has retained the imprint of those forces. In other words, the paper itself has history and memory, and the pigments only add another layer.

In fact, there are two large sheets of paper that come together in the center, along an edge that is as sharply defined as any painted edge within the paper itself. This edge also sets off associations and interpretations, begs for explanations, of course, reminds us of the stone slabs from which the frieze is carved.

I cannot ignore that central edge. It refuses to go away. Its prominence in the middle of my field of vision sends me out to all the other edges of the paper: to the edge at the lower left where the untouched surface tells me that this is simply the paper ending. How do I traverse the distance between the last blur of pigment in the lower left and that edge? Is that little triangular expanse, paper or empty space behind a mysteriously hovering slab? If both, where does it change from one to the other? The artist does not answer that question for me.

I am also sent to the edges where painted surfaces meet the edge of the paper. At the upper right there is a tear in the fabric of the representation, and I must decide if this edge is an interruption of the image from without or within. I'm not sure what I mean by that. Has the shape in that corner been cropped by meeting the limits of the surface it is on? or is it recording what has been broken off? The way that the other edges are handled, so differently, hovering somewhere between the world of the paper and the forms materializing themselves on the paper, there is a particular violence to that edge, in the way it appears to sunder an ear from its face.

The pigment imbedded in the fiber of the paper has so much variety, so many textures and movements I cannot tear my eyes away. The force lines leaning left from the center, the graceful smoothly surfaced peak of a wave moving right from that break, these remains narrate the history of their making while suggesting other readings, other possible histories. I

see tidal deposits, or a field of molten forms, a textured surface whose crags and depths and fissures and scaling skin I must reconstruct into something I can comprehend.

Hard edges and soft edges, pigments sitting drily on the surface and those whose liquid dispersal I can feel as if they were still in motion. Surfaces seem to catch the light to suggest cracks, fissures, bulges and undercuts. They also seem to have color: surrounded by arrangements of tone that assemble themselves into planar structures angled to an apparent light, these areas take on tonalities local to the area itself, prompting me to explain them as light waves altered as much by the surface properties of the material they are being reflected from as by the direction or properties of the light making them visible. In other words, what I have recourse to explain as local color. The question then, is what do I mean by "I"? The I that understands this as a painting based on a monochromatic palette or the one that understands that sensations of color are being evoked by monochromatic means. Or is the perplexity being provoked by the inadequacy of readily available language to articulate to ourselves what we are experiencing.

Maybe I am being deliberately obtuse, ignoring the representations buried within these perceptions. But my purpose is obvious: to foreground what we easily elide, what our cognitive capacities allow us to take for granted or encourage us to ignore, but which are the core of what the artist must work with, the source of whatever else might follow.

This surface is both pigmented paper and is stone. In other paintings surrounding this one, I see pigment as flesh, or fabric, or hair that I come to understand as having been materialized first out of stone before being translated, once again, into pigment on paper. In this painting, I see pigment as stone, the obdurate material of which the earth is made, the very figure of permanence and durability. It is a cliff side leaning, scaling and cracking before my eyes. The marvel of flesh, human or equine, is all the more magical for being discovered lurking within this slab.

There is enormous skill, and cognitive conjuring, needed to bring to life a surface without the expediency of drawing upon familiar forms into which we can project an identity: hand or face for example. Think of how easily an emoticon conjures complex associations with the barest of resemblances. It is demanding to bring a rock to life. It is not we, ourselves, and we understand it so poorly. And we do not have a specialized portion of our brains dedicated to its recognition.

The textures call to mind for me Chinese ink painting, several thousand years of pigments on silk and paper conjuring the stone face of mountains. (Forgive my choice of language). A tradition whose intent was not simply to evoke a recognizable scene but to explore the language of evocation, how brush, ink, and surface come together to offer us pleasure in our

own acts of perception, a way to see ourselves seeing. Resemblance, in that tradition, seems to receive the barest of nods, a means to another kind of experience. These are properties that bring this painting so close to my contemporary experience.

Seeing the hint of a head, a hand, the intact horse's hock, and entering the world of the object being evoked for me, I feel regret for what has been lost from this fragile object, what was shaped and made present through the self-effacing traces of hands and tools on its surface and then further effaced over time, a thing wounded by the violence of history, and reshaped through the normal course of physical decay.

But, I detect nothing particularly nostalgic about this painting. It acknowledges impermanence and vulnerability, even of the most revered and iconic remnants of a lost society. It puts me directly in touch with my consciousness of the present moment in my existence, my mortality. It also evokes the inevitable collapse of my own society, which we all know cannot endure. No society ever has. With our advanced technological tools of measurement, we have so many ways to anticipate its demise no matter how immanent or delayed it might be in coming.

Time and cultural memory are imbedded here, along with perceptual memory, the glance that slides across the surface to reconstruct what might have been or what it is moving away from, or towards, in its own slow material life, its history of formation and decay.

I become aware here of the act of seeing, of probing vision for explanations as to how something came to be, what its previous state might have been and what state it is moving toward. In other words, time. The time of endurance of the act of seeing, the time of endurance of the object I am looking at, of the things that are being represented, the motion captured within the representation itself, and the time encapsulated in the artist's act of making.

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