

"The Borders of Itself"

"From all the borders of itself". This a phrase used in the last stanza of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (1908). Rilke--looking at this ruined statue from the Musee du Louvre--describes a contrast between the solid, static object and an active, complex, layered experience of viewing it. He finds stories in the marble torso. His attention leaps back and forth, trying to decipher the differing stories and histories visible. Stories that affect--or better yet, excite--the viewer.

Stories are how we understand the world. Not just useful or entertaining, stories are essential. Human beings aren't able to understand the world--or act in it--*sans* our ability to string causes and effects together into a clear and concise narrative. Our brains are built to fix information and experience into our consciousness through narrative, and use that to predict future outcomes and determine our actions. A painting, sculpture or other work of art is a special category of object that that serves as a repository of stories. Many times a single painting contains multiple layers of stories, for instance:

Art is a behavior and the act of making art is a story. Every artwork--no matter how perfect, complete or inevitable it seems--is the result of actions, decisions, deliberations, corrections and probably accidents too. Every artwork is the expression of the determination of the artist to elicit a response or stay in the memory of another person. Try to think of every artwork as a performance, recording the actions, intentions, and discoveries of its author. How and why the artist made this painting just this way are the two really interesting questions.

The artwork may imply an action or event that is a story. Human beings have a deep need to see narrative, motivation and a moral lesson in all phenomenon. That's true whether there is an easily decipherable image or not. The psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel demonstrated this in a famous animation used as part of a study in the 1940s. The animation shows simple geometric shapes in various positions on a blank ground. Viewers of their short animation were invariably prepared to invent a story taking place--inventing conflicts, motivations, alliances and moral lessons.

The artwork is an object that persists in time and that is a story. Being a physical object, real world events may physically change an artwork. Art also exists in a context of other artworks and historic events. Outside of the control of its maker, an artwork may come to seem outmoded or prescient, newly relevant, ahead-of-its-time or offering a window into the thinking in the time period in which it is made. The artwork may also be physically changed over time. Art objects can break, decay and fade; they can be stolen, vandalized, or modified. The art itself can have a story.

The viewer and the art have a relationship, that relationship is a story. Imagine a Venn Diagram where circles for the intellect, the emotions and the physical body overlap. That's where art is experienced. Art is a human phenomenon, addressed to one thinking, feeling person in one human body. The physical presence of the artwork can inspire, intimidate, soothe, excite or direct a viewer and in that there is a story.

These different layers of story all "happen" simultaneously when one is looking at art. One story may be dominant, or all may work in harmony. The stories may contrast one another and may leave unanswered questions for the viewer to ponder, or create new meaning through paradox. Artists, like those in this exhibit, may be aware of this, and want it to be a part of the art they make. Consider this quote from Stephanie Pierce, "I disconnect too easily with making a picture, I shut down if that becomes the goal. When that starts to happen I have to upset everything to create some good problems." Or from Misha Kligman, "They [the paintings] are hopeful in a sense that maybe a painting can be more than an object but a kind of place where the past and future collide, in the process revealing that which is most hidden - our present." These quotes signal an interest in the borders between stories--where the trace of the artist's hand, physical presence of the object or even the information that is missing give the viewer license to create meaning.

Here is the full text of the poem:

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.