

## *Beyond Appearance*

It was cold both inside and outside Benjamin Swaim's studio, already dark though it was not late in the day. Snow was forecast. I had traveled by train from Bretagne, a journey that speeds through the countryside so rapidly that the changes in scenery are hardly remarked. Features of the landscape are fleetingly grasped, crossing one's perceptions and thoughts, then dispelled, framed by the train window in which one also finds one's own reflection. From the train, the view is contingent and mobile, and as a traveler, one is suspended in time until the moment of arrival. It takes time to adjust between landscape and cityscape. As it gets dark, the horizon changes to skyline.

The paintings were brought out in front of me, as though in a process of *salon* selection. Occasionally I could look at two together, side by side, letting my regard slip across the plane of each painting, from one frame to the next. One painting becomes another, as I remember; yet they are never the same. It is a film of painting that plays out, a film of a changing horizon, for although the line of horizon changes, never quite connects one to another, it is the only constant. In writing about what I saw as what I see now, thoughts enter in trains of association, disperse, then cluster again. I catch a view from my studio where I am writing, into a garden, beyond which lies a field, beyond which lies a forest, beyond which I cannot see as the line of snow marks the limits of the horizon.

Stop. Horizon? How do I understand the distinction between one part of each painting from another part as a horizon, unless as a metaphor? If it is a metaphor, then something is condensed in – as - an image. I call the place in the paintings where one part meets another a horizon, yet it is a trope, a figure of speech, for I know that what I take as such is no more than the effect of light and dark, the opposition or gradation of pigment on canvas. I am outside the paintings, yet at the same time I expect, accept the possibility that I might fall into them. It is the occupational hazard of the viewer, and one must finely calibrate the closest approach one might make, if one is not to be subsumed. In the myth of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, Zeuxis paints grapes so perfectly the birds fly

down from the sky to peck at them, yet Parrhasios paints a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis demands it should be lifted so he might see what lies beyond it. The lure of the image causes him to fall, to take it for the thing it represents, or that one imagines it to depict. What Zeuxis wants to see does not exist; what he sees is not what he wants to see, and yet for a moment, he articulates his desire.

In taking the line – a line of vision and material - as a horizon, I also assume the paintings are landscapes. If they are landscapes, then properly they should map the lie of land or sea, providing co-ordinates in the world that I might then map onto other things, as a metaphor does. The horizon does not exist, after all; one is always approaching it as it forever recedes. Once it may have been taken as a real limit, a dangerous edge over which one might fall. It runs across the painting, then extends into another painting though there is no real transition. It traverses the field of vision, left to right, right to left; its trajectory cuts the world into two. That much is visible. However, there is another division that is largely unseen, as simultaneously, the line, that is no more than the meeting of one part of a painting with another, marks a line between what is oneself and what is beyond. It also marks the image of the viewer's body, inscribing internal thoughts and external experiences. That there is indeed a beyond – of sight, of image - is always assumed, by Zeuxis or any other viewer, even if what lies there is an unimaginable void, monsters, Australia or China. Though each painting is a frame, placing a clear demarcation of what is inside and what is outside it, there is no comfort of a scene within which one might locate oneself. The experience is like sailing for days in the ocean without sight of land, cast adrift, when landscape becomes the unending view of the sea, no shoreline, no compass, simply a shifting horizon, the boundary between sea and sky.

Stop. Landscape? How do I understand these paintings as landscapes, other than from the description of them as such by the artist or from the exhibitions that have contained them in this way? As a genre of art, turned into a medium of art, landscape both presents and represents, and in short, is a frame as much as a frame may hold it. Landscapes, then, are both places and paintings of places, but in these paintings there is no place. Yet nonetheless no-place is depicted, from

one to the next, each time making a new proposition about a locus of junction. What I remember seeing is neither *put*, in the sense of landscape architecture or gardening, nor *found*, in the sense of being there and faithfully recorded, even allowing for exuberant interpretation, as in the paintings of Turner or Monet. As their viewer, I continue to read these paintings as landscapes, not simply because I have been told that this is what they are, or because I am lazy, but rather because I recognize a certain arrangement of signs as such. I read across, then cut my own axis of sight, from me to the painting and beyond it, what might be called the 'psychic space' of the painting. I meet the next painting, and each time the encounter is singular, despite the immediate memory of what has been seen already and the anticipation of what may be next.

My viewing, as both presence and memory, has more than two dimensions. And strangely, where I am – as viewer - shifts in rather an uncomfortable way, like the oscillating change in viewing in and from the train window. I am offered neither concealment nor prospect, from which Jay Appleton proposes the viewer's pleasure in landscape derives.<sup>2</sup> The former would provide refuge, a place from which I could see without being seen. The latter would place me in a commanding position, a vantage point, and in neither place would I have anything to lose (it is a somewhat predatory pleasure). Here there is the line – a horizon if I believe these to be landscape paintings – formed through light and colour, the stuff of painting, and I am not seen, for there is nothing to see me in any of the expanses before me. If I am not seen, then I cease to exist.

Stop. Sight? How do I understand that I see these paintings? The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has some remarks to make on pictorial creation, devoting a seminar in 1964 to the question of what is a picture, noting the fascination of rediscovering composition in a work, 'the lines dividing the surfaces created by the painter, vanishing traces, lines of force, frames in which the image finds its status'.<sup>3</sup> He continues, 'The picture does not come into play in the field of representation. Its end and effect are elsewhere'.<sup>4</sup> Painting sets in place a particular economy of vision, one with a dialectic of showing and seeing, in which there is a cut in movement. A painting is the outcome of a gesture that ends, 'the brush stroke [...]

in which movement is terminated'.<sup>5</sup> The painter's gesture, applying paint to the surface of the canvas, is completed by the regard of the viewer, who freezes the gesture. Lacan is arguing against any natural relation between 'thing itself' (the term is Kant's) and subject, insisting rather on the splitting or fracture between subject and object. There is, says Lacan, a blind spot in the central field of a picture, an absence or vanishing point in representation. This is the limit of vision, like the vanishing point of the horizon. It is not the vanishing point that disappears, but the viewer (he would say 'subject'), and this is the 'evil eye' that painting must pacify. For Lacan, the eye, as subject and organ of sight, and the gaze, as object of the scopic drive, are split, and this is the division of the subject, expressed in the field of vision. The paintings are mobile, the line across each oscillates, and as it traverses, suddenly becomes a mass that descends or rises, yet is arrested on this axis. There is either too much light or not enough, and in either case, one asks for a relief from seeing, like the respite afforded by the blink of the eye.

I have turned to my notes, scribbled down in the cold Parisian studio. I read that Benjamin Swaim starts with the sky, then looks for the sea that will function with the sky, producing a unity through light, even though the colours are unnatural. The scene is always imagined – it is not to be found in the world, though it may be imagined as existing – and is made through the movement of the brush. The light is all over; it is not diffused, nor is it dramatized as in the landscape painting of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the work is closer to the abstract painting of Brice Marden, Mark Rothko or (illegible). The pigment is a stain, pulled from the side, across the image (but it may be 'across the eye'). 'Veil' is followed by a question mark, as though I had intended to follow this further. I suppose that even then I was thinking of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, of Zeuxis' demand that the veil be lifted, his desire to see what is beyond it. It is dark outside now, and as I write, I am reflected in the window, while what lies beyond the glass – the aleatory landscape - is still there, at the limit of visibility. At last, when I can hardly see, when the world, like the paintings, becomes monochrome and the line of the horizon is barely perceptible, I am in the picture. Stop.

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<sup>2</sup> Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape*, London: John Wiley and Son, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979, p.108. *En français: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973, p. 123: 'lignes de partage des surfaces créés par le peintre, lignes de fuites, lignes de force, bâtis où l'image trouve son statut'.

<sup>4</sup> p.108. 'C'est par là que le tableau ne joue pas dans le champ de la représentation. Sa fin et son effet sont ailleurs'.

<sup>5</sup> p.114. 'N'oublions pas que la touche du peintre est quelque chose où se termine un mouvement'. (p.130).