

Jill Trappler: A way of reading

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by Ricky Burnett

There are things that seem like secrets that someone is keeping, but aren't being kept by anyone.

– Cesar Aira, *The Seamstress and the Wind* [1]

To read a painting, one must gather some insight into its origins, look to the ground of the painting's being. To read a painting is not to describe it. It is not to describe its effects and affects, nor is it to describe its mechanisms, though this can be helpful. To read a painting well is to begin to understand the roots of its seriousness. saying this, I wish, early on, to cleave a clear line of distinction between such qualities as pleasing decoration and the trivial logics of design, on the one hand, and Jill's view of the painting life, a rather more stern and exacting commitment, on the other. The struggle to articulate experience is not the same as manufacturing a product for the market. This short essay is an attempt to address the threads that make up the warp and weft of Jill Trappler's seriousness.

Emily Dickinson once remarked that "consciousness is the only home we know of." [2] Consciousness is the medium of experience and experience the medium of consciousness. Consciousness enables experience; experience enhances consciousness. The struggle to articulate experience is unavoidably, then, the struggle to lift the veil on consciousness, to open 'it' up for exposure.

The very best experiences I've had from looking, reading and listening contain what I can best describe as a privileged intimacy, a communion with another mind, a mind present in its complexity. "We read in order to know we're not alone," goes the famous line often credited to CS Lewis. [3] I know, from periods of estrangement and loneliness that comfort and community, antidotes to estrangement, came to me from reading, listening and, yes, also looking. There is a difference between collecting things and collecting experiences. Sometimes experiences can be embedded in things, but not always. And that is why some paintings remain mere pictures — they don't hold enough by way of experience. Art is about experience, modified, transmitted and held. Art is not a thing. John Dewey argued this in his formative work published in 1934, *Art as Experience*. [4] In his last interview Jackson Pollock is recorded as saying, "Every good artist paints what he is." [5]

Now one way of expressing this is to borrow a notion from the philosopher, Martin Buber. I probably read his book, *I and Thou*, nearly fifty years ago and my copy has

long since vanished from my shelves, so what I'm about to suggest should be understood to be only tenuously connected to Buber with no blame placed at his door. [6]

As I recall, his basic thesis had to do with relationships, for example, the I/It and the I/Thou. The "It" would, I suspect, refer to the perceptual world, the world experienced as a world of things. And the "Thou," in turn, would refer to the world experienced as instances of consciousness. It is one thing to see a painting but quite another to see the consciousness that made it, to see the spirit animating matter, to see and sense *presence*.

"Contact of the most intimate sort is what poetry can accomplish. Poems do not endure as objects but presences," wrote American poet, Louise Glück. [7]

This notion, *presence*, might be applied to painting in general, though it applies especially well to what is most commonly referred to as abstraction, painting whose intention is to *be* rather than to *say*. *Presence* holds. *Presence* has no case to make, it has no aim, no wish to persuade, no desire to subvert and no wish to proclaim. *Presence* has but one goal and that is to establish itself.

In so doing, *presence* doesn't easily lend itself to dissection and unpacking. And *presence* should never be subject to 'interrogation.' This last is a hard and brutal word. It presupposes that something is defiantly withheld and that this something needs to be prised from its ground by force. The cultural habit of 'interrogating' experiences amounts, I suspect, to a collective paranoia, a distrust of the unfamiliar and even a distrust of something that may be merely difficult to name. Rather than ask of a painting "What is it?" "What does it mean?" and even, "What does it intend?" The better question is, "What does the painting hold?"

Jill Trappler has named one of her paintings *Emerald Calling*. It's an 80 x 141cm oil on canvas. It holds, in presence, the phenomena of *being* and *becoming*. *Being* equals its *presence*, the glow. *Becoming* equals the history of its making, the surface.



Emerald Calling, 2020. oil on canvas, 80 x 141cm, (Photo courtesy of the artist)

In a private correspondence with me, Jill has described the primary quality of her studio work as being “a collaboration.” Let’s approach her seriousness with this in mind and recognise that the birth of *presence* is the product of a coupling, a coupling of the qualities of Jill’s mind with qualities of paint (inert yet malleable). Presence is, then, a love-child. In speaking of collaboration, she is suggesting that both she and the stuff in her hands are in this together, both sharing the gravity of the moment. There is no forcing here, no argumentation, no sense of a manipulative, commanding author, but rather of a gentle coaxing, nurturing engagement. There is little evidence of a will to power. This recognition is a first step towards appreciating a larger and more complex philosophical picture.

Here’s a puzzle, a real puzzle, one that has entertained and engaged thinkers of all stripes and convictions for many years. Science has, I believe, formulated some plausible ideas about how, on this planet, many years ago, mineral matter surprised itself into living matter. But we have no particularly convincing idea as to how living matter got ideas. How did we get from being substances to becoming substances with ideas? How did substance come to feel and experience and then come to know that it feels and has experienced? How does stuff have experience? This is the problem of “sentient meat,” as Colin McGinn put it. [8]

But, in reverse, this is what good painters do. They apply sentience to paint, then ask the paint to hold it. Stuff so matters to the painter’s mind that the painter’s mind seeps into matter. Matter then learns, as it were, to stand-in for a *thinkingness* and a *feelingness*. This *thinkingness* and *feelingness* would otherwise not find its way into the world, but remain locked in the narrow, skull-bound space between the ears, were it not for the receptivity of paint. Qualities of consciousness can be said to embed in stuff and,

thereby, transform this stuff into a simulacrum of mind. If the paint cannot be said to be sentient in itself, and of course it can't, it can, nevertheless, be said to represent sentience. The paint registers and transmits a complex cluster of feelings and values. It stands for a way of thinking. Joseph Brodsky brings a new perspective to this idea of "thinking." Writing on Danilo Kis, Brodsky says this: "It is not so much that the thought is felt but rather that the feeling is thought." [9] Roberto Calasso offers a deeper gloss (sic) on this "thinking" when he says, "But we do not think in words. Or, rather we sometimes think in words. Words are scattered archipelagos, drifting, sporadic. The mind is the sea. To recognise this sea in the mind seems to have become something forbidden." [10] The sense of life in a painting is expressed in the paint and not in the picture.

"When feelings associate a consciousness forms." [11] This is the place of intimacy: the special access point to the complexities of another mind, an opportunity to experience something not normally noticeable, not normally in evidence, not normally available, a most often hidden thing. This hidden thing is a particular pulse of consciousness, a tide or confluence of tides, in the astonishing accident of ourselves.

"Consciousness is the raw sensation of whatever is awake and knows itself alive," as Calasso puts it in his book on the Rig Vedas. [12]

The experience of intimacy, the recognition of the animate sense of the *thou* in the image, is contingent upon *exposure*, an exposure of awakesness and aliveness. This is the painter's calling. Pretence and disguise will not do.

I am not here speaking of the confessional nor am I meaning to speak of admissions of, say, a mea culpa, and so on. I am speaking of an exposure of the self, of what it is like to be conscious or, put better, what it is like to be consciousness, or, as some might put it, what it is like to participate in consciousness. Good paintings reveal how a good mind works, and this otherwise secret mind is not accessible until it is embedded in paint. This is the compulsion and the commitment; to engage in authentic and honest exposure. The best paintings expose the painter: the face of the inner. The external stands for something internal.

"The surface of the wakeful mind trembles without cease, like the surface of the waters. And like the waters it assumes the shapes that press upon it." [13]

In this zone, everything is contingent and conditional, behaviours and outcomes are provisional, until they're not. And thus each painting of quality acquires its inwardness. Stéphane Mallarmé once said, "Every soul (or inwardness) is a rhythmical knot." [14] Calasso suggests that the land of the "rhythmical knots (is) a place where forms are freed from obedience to authority and rest entirely upon themselves." [15]

What is it then that can be said to be knotted or tangled? What kind of things or substances are these, for instance: exposure, silence, Eros, memory, surface, composition, energies, coherence, chance and happenstance, the unknown? Can things like this account for seriousness? Not 'things,' of course, but what then? Maybe, after José Ortega y Gasset, we might consider them circumstances: "Man reaches his

full capacity when he acquires complete consciousness of his circumstances. Through them he communicates with the universe.” [16] These ‘circumstances’ are also, and appropriately, abstractions – suitable ‘substances’ from which abstract paintings can be made, but, if, and only if, the entanglement is honoured, if the rhythms and knots are honoured. The knots must be left unpicked and the rhythms not betrayed. “To seek an answer,” says Louise Gluck “is to yearn for the immobile.” [17] Seriousness is established in this zone where immobility is anathema.

“The mind loves the unknown,” writes poet Charles Simic. “It loves images whose meaning is unknown, since the meaning of the mind itself is unknown.” [18] Mary Jacobus, in her book on Cy Twombly, uses this image: “The painting’s dream-navel reaches down into the unknown.” [19] Poet Jane Hirshfield has this to say: “Art makes encounter with the uncertain, a thing to be sought.” [20] Why should this be? Well, one answer, somewhat prosaically if succinctly put, is given by Robert Frost, “No surprise for the poet no surprise for the reader.” [21] The imagery here is all to do with lifting the veil. The stress is on discovery, or uncovering, if you will. Presence is searched for and the making is the search. The making is entertaining uncertainty and is not production. Jane Hirshfield again: “There is no place of true paradise, no place of true completion that does not include within its walls the unknown.” [22]

The ‘unknown’ makes its presence felt in the studio by virtue of the sustained reappearance of the question *what if...? What if I change my plan, or this tone, or this gesture, what if I take this detour?* Without the *what if...?* a comfortable repetition takes hold and habit creeps in. As someone said somewhere, habit is a form of failure.

If Pollock is right in saying that “every good artist paints what he is,” then we might begin to see that the quest for honest exposure and the entertainment of the unknown would constitute a very special kind of learning. A process through which one might acquire some understandings about the parts of oneself that resonate and collaborate together or, perhaps more usefully, understand those behaviours that hamper and hinder, one’s very own self-made booby-traps. Louise Gluck has this to say: “Learning (of) the sort I mean ... has to do with license, absorption, momentum, and is unlike the repetitions of mimicry which are mechanical and stationary and which lead nowhere.” Further on, she continues, “My definition of learning depends upon seeing a difference between that appetite for change and the process of anxious duplication.” [23]

So far we’ve tangled mind and matter with exposure and the unknown (an antidote to ‘anxious duplication’). What flavours are added when we invite in some of the other circumstances, like, silence, Eros, surface and memory?

The old cliché that every picture tells a story is true, though not true in the way, I believe, it is commonly understood. Every picture tells a story, yes, but it tells the story of itself, the story of its becoming. Paint, especially oil paint, holds and retains in the sense of having absorbed. Rembrandt’s paint on Rembrandt’s painted nose is as alive to my eye today as it was to Rembrandt’s eye several hundred years ago. The moment of Rembrandt’s touch, his certainty and his hesitations, his subtleties of wrist, are as present for me or for you now, as much as they were for him as he painted it.

Brodsky has this to say: "Unlike prose, poetry doesn't so much express an emotion as absorb it linguistically." [24] So too, by my lights, does paint absorb and make available again and again a bouquet of feeling and sensation. The word *surface* better expresses this capacity than texture. Texture merely tickles the fingers, but surface has tension, it "forces form," to use Jean Luc Nancy's phrase, "to touch itself." [25] Surface embodies time, it reflects and exists in the aura of time. The surface of paint is a medium of recall.

In *Mr Palomar*, Italo Calvino has the eponymous Mr Palomar speculating amongst other things on what it might be like to see the roofs of Rome as though a bird.

Looking out and down from his terrace in Rome he sees the complex of roofs, alleys, roads, domes, sculptures, mansions, hovels and thinks: Nothing of this can be seen by one who moves on his feet or on his wheels over the city pavements. And, inversely, from up here you have the impression that the true crust of the earth is this, uneven but compact, even if furrowed by gaps whose depth cannot be known, chasms or pits or craters whose edges seem in perspective to overlap like the scales of a pine cone, and it never even occurs to you to wonder what is hidden in their depth, because the panorama of the surface is already so vast and rich and various that it more than suffices to saturate the mind with information and meanings.

This is how birds think, or at least this is how Mr Palomar thinks, imagining himself a bird. "It is only after you have come to know the surface of things," he concludes, "that you can venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible. [26]"

The surface of things is inexhaustible and, indeed, may even in some circumstances be unsayable. Feeling is often thought in silence. "My hunch has always been," says Charles Simic, "that our deepest experiences are wordless." [27] In *Near the Wild Heart*, Clarice Lispector, muses "How curious that I am unable to say who I am ... The moment I try to speak, not only do I fail to express what I feel, but what I feel slowly transforms itself into what I am saying." [28] She fears being misled by her own tongue.

In the third of his letters to a young poet, Rainer Maria Rilke offered this advice: "To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion, entirely in itself, in the dark, in the inexpressible, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own intelligence ... this alone is what it means to live as an artist." [29]

"When the heart listens to itself then poetry is born," said Novalis. [30]

Through the years, it has become abundantly clear that Jill is stubbornly defensive of a zone of silence that surrounds her seriousness. The fear, I suspect, is that speech will betray the secret conspiracies and collaborations. That too many names and too many adjectives might fog the process, cause premature closure and betray the private rhythms that silence allows. Eros is betrayed by Psyche's need to identify and, in acting on this need, she woefully corrupts the alchemy of desire. Mary Jacobus, while dealing with Twombly's engagement with Keats's *Ode to Psyche*, says this, "In Keats's myth

Psyche (poetry) inhabits the border between conscious and unconscious, sleep and waking, instinct and language – the place where Eros and meaning come and go unseen.” [31]

Jill has referenced these figures, as she wrote to me recently, “When I collaborate in making a painting I seek that third element. In Jungian language it is called the connecting principle, Eros and Psyche. When I am in collaboration with materials and this third element, the work holds purpose and we travel. The connection ends at some point and the work is finished or needs revisiting.”

The connection, or connecting principle, is substantiated in the senses and forged in the dark. Think here of the senses in love with themselves and the decisions they take. In love with each other, the senses fondle in the dark, defensively glancing only obliquely at each other’s shadow. In this mute conspiracy, a zone of touchings and penetrations, the senses delight in chance discoveries and the excitement for the painter is, *What just happened here? This is new!* In these ‘wow’ moments, often viscerally felt, mind and body jump for joy, hand in metaphorical hand. “The poem is the development of an exclamation,” said Paul Valery. [32] Rhythms of the body and the movements of the mind become, then, one of the many registers of experience. And, as Jane Hirshfield has said, “Our human attention has many ways of engaging.” [33]

Chance, accident, and apparent blunder are all part of the painter’s toolbox. James Joyce famously wrote in *Ulysses*, “A man of genius makes no mistakes, his errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.” [34]

The implication here is that some agency might be at work: a helping hand, a guiding principle. Further, that in the privacy of the studio, chance may not be chance but destiny, that accident may not be accident, but a willed collision of opportunity with intention, that blunder only a blunder if misread. In the studio, ‘getting out of trouble’ might well be the most vital of skills. “Creativity,” says William Gass, “concerns correct choice.” [35]

Many metaphors have been deployed through the ages to characterise the various natures of these agencies, these helping hands. As Jill herself has said, “I talk to myself when I am working. I say, we need to do this. I have often wondered who ‘we’ is.”

I want here to consider two possible ‘visitors’ to the studio, just two metaphysical communicants, the duende and the angel. In his book *the demon and the angel*, American poet Edward Hirsch examines the presence of these two ‘forces’ in various forms of art and through various times in history and how they have contributed to the continuous growth of the new in our inner world. [36]

Hirsch posits Lorca and Rilke as the primary models for the duende and the angel respectively. He writes, “There are striking likenesses between the rising duende and the falling angel ... yet there is also a key difference ... Whereas Lorca’s figure bursts up from below, from the earth itself, Rilke’s figure descends from above – it drops down from a transcendental source.” He continues, “The demon and the angel are two

external figures for a power that dwells deep within us. They are the imagination's liberating agents, who unleash their primal force into works of art." [37] I know that Lorca's evocations of the duende made a strong impression on Jill in her early years and still do.

This is not the place for an extensive examination of these two figures, but some elaboration might be enlightening. I'm going to rely heavily here on Hirsch's short closing chapter. "Both the duende and the angel take us to the far limits of the human self." He speaks of the duende animating the work of art, "with its breath, a dark fire." The angel illuminates the work of art with, "a fiery touch, a darkly luminous blessing." They are, he says, "figures crediting the imaginary realms that dwell deeply within us."

Hirsch goes on to ask where the angel and the duende might be found. By way of sampling, here are some of his suggestions. The angel might be found "burning on roof tops, moving through secret passageways and winding staircases, corridors of light and red mountain ranges, country churches and abandoned cemeteries, like twenty thousand stars purpling at midnight. It flashes its sword in the gate and troubles your dreams."

The duende might be found "flinging itself into the vast night. Look for it hiding under your boot soles. (It) is a wind that breathes through the empty arches over the heads of the dead, the wing of a wounded hawk, a dream that mocks the bloody mocking bird and flees through empty subway tunnels, it is a joy that burns and a suffering that scalds like hot ice. It announces," (and here Hirsch uses a line from Lorca's *Deep Song*) "the constant baptism of newly created things." [38]

To my ear, the duende and the angel represent a dialectical pair: disruption and salvation. Two forces ever present in the ebb and flow of work.

Throughout this essay, there has been both an explicit and an implied acknowledgement of the notion of the transmutation of energies. But transmutation per se is not enough. The last and great requirement is coherence, the magic of order and belonging. Or, as Auden has put it, "when we find ourselves in the presence of clear thinking about complex feelings." [39]

Some may call this composition. Composition is never composure. Composure is stable and at rest. Composition is an arrangement of tensions, a choreography, an alignment of energies speaking through the beats of continuity and discontinuity. Composition is the articulation of a grand oxymoron — a profound stasis bristling with nervous energies. All entrancing organisation is underpinned by precariousness.

The word 'nervous' here is apposite. In the nineteenth century, R.A.M. Stevenson in his monograph on Velasquez spoke of the "nervous force of the brain working across a picture." [40] And Calasso, in *Literature and the Gods*, talks of "the hidden nerve structure of every composition." [41]

"We are unknowing dancers by nature," said philosopher Alva Noe. A little further on, "Ee are organised by the things we do." [42]

To my mind, the fundamental organising principle that inhabits all painters' thinking at every level is this: "How much is too much, and how much is too little?" This might have to do with quantities of pigmentation, for instance, but this is not the crucial area of concern. More importantly, it has to do with navigation, maintaining a viable course through the various weathers of one's person to get to that special destination we all crave — a painterly Shangri-La. This consideration of too much or too little is not to evoke the Aristotelian notion of a golden mean, or the idea of 'a moderation in all things.' Far from it, for without teasing the extremes, pushing the possible to the limit, one would be betraying a crucial knot in the web of seriousness. The value to be held here concerns the necessary qualities of ambiguity, anomaly, and of nuance — tension in extremis — keeping the various inner horses of oneself in creative alliance.

In my view, the most frequent error made by painters, especially in the abstract mode, is to couple too much self-satisfaction with too little uncertainty. This is a fatal alliance, leading to the misguided notion that appearance is a convincing substitute for mind. It isn't. This flawed idea is anathema to good painting. It's a capitulation to the temptations of cosmetic tones and the anodyne touch of a timid brush. Poor painting reeks of recurrent betrayals of value.

The power may be in the appearance, but the appearance is not the power. The power of the painting lies in the mind of the painting, which in turn is grounded in the gravity of the endeavour and the rigour with which each endeavour is pursued — how its terms are respected. It lies in how much the endeavour asks of the author and how the author, in turn, stays true to their rhythms and knots, stays true to the deeper questions of the possibilities for consciousness.

Jill Trappler is a serious painter, and *Emerald Calling* is a serious painting.

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[1] Cesar Aira, *The Seamstress and the Wind*, trans. Rosalie Knecht (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2011), 118.

[2] Emily Dickinson, quoted in Charles Simic, *The Life of Images* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 15.

[3] In his play *Shadowlands*, the playwright William Nicholson attributes this remark to CS Lewis. It is unclear whether he actually said it or not.

[4] For an extensive contemporary examination of this see Alva Noe, *Strange Tools, Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015).

[5] For more on this see Maria Popova, discussion on *Conversations with Artists* by Selden Rodman, Brain Pickings. Available [here](#).

- [6] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, first published in an English edition in 1937 by R & R Clarke, Edinburgh.
- [7] Louise Gluck, *Proof and Theories* (New Jersey: The Echo Press, 1994), 128.
- [8] Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame* (New York: Basic Books 1999).
- [9] In the introduction by Joseph Brodsky to Danilo Kis, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1980), xvi.
- [10] Robert Calasso, *Literature and the Gods* (New York: Vintage International, 2002), 116.
- [11] Richard Shiff, "Powder in the Sea." Un *Rothko/Sugimoto* (London: Pace Gallery 2012), 6
- [12] Roberto Calasso, *Ka* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 259.
- [13] Calasso, *Ka*, 258.
- [14] Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, 126.
- [15] Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, 131.
- [16] José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote* (New York: The Norton Library, 1963), 41.
- [17] Gluck, *Proofs and Theories*, 117.
- [18] Charles Simic, *The Lives of Images* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 5.
- [19] Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 67.
- [20] Jane Hirshfield, *Ten Windows*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2017), 123.
- [21] Hirshfield, *Ten Windows*, 190.
- [22] Hirshfield, *Ten Windows*, 116.
- [23] Gluck, *Proofs and Theories*, 123.
- [24] Brodsky, introduction to *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, xvi.
- [25] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 9.
- [26] Italo Calvino, *Mr Palomar* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1985), 55.
- [27] Simic, *The Lives of Images*, 23.
- [28] Clarice Lispector quoted in Nicholas Humphrey, *Soul Dust* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1990), 138.

- [29] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Herter Norton (New York: Norton & Company, 1962), 29.
- [30] Novalis, quoted in Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre* (Austin, University of Texas 1973), 125.
- [31] Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly*, 194.
- [32] Paul Valery quoted in Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*, 36.
- [33] Hirshfield, *Ten Windows*, 25.
- [34] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: The Bodley Head, 1960), 243.
- [35] William Gass, *Reading Rilke* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 96.
- [36] See Hirshfield, *Ten Windows*, 26.
- [37] Edward Hirsch, *The demon and the angel* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 2003), xiv–xv.
- [38] Hirsch, *The demon and the angel*, 230.
- [39] Hirshfield, *Ten Windows*, 109.
- [40] R.A.M. Stevenson quoted in Michael Jacobs, *Everything is Happening*, coda by Ed Vulliamy (London: Granta, 2016), 188.
- [41] Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, 130.
- [42] Noe, *Strange Tools*, 15 & 18.