

AMAR DAWOD

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ON THE ART OF PAINTING

I

‘If one day I decide to abandon painting, nobody will feel its impact; neither will society recognise the need for my work.’

That is what the great Danish artist Per Kirkeby said in reference to the art of painting. Here, I cannot but declare my full support for his position. We still have illusions, embedded in our imagination about art. Many commentators portray it as a very egoistic need—aiming to satisfy the painter and not necessarily an audience. In fact it is possible for painting to not even have an audience, even though, at its height, it proactively engaged in the making of a civilisation, in the sense that it persists outside of the paths of history and its intentions. There are those who think of art as equivalent to ‘breathing air.’ Their dogmatic fantasies lead them to the perception that art is capable of changing history and raising societies. I would say that indeed it can, but only for the seeker who wholeheartedly embraces it, assimilates its hidden secrets and claims the keys to unlock its inner world. The endeavor alone does not however guarantee the success of the quest. To further the analogy, some of the discovered keys could be ineffective; the unveiled secrets could be inconsistent with the core essence of painting and its accomplishments. Painting can be a unique and different translation of the world. Its function is not simply to turn perplexing and intriguing concepts into more graspable thoughts. From that which is ‘incomprehensible’ it is able to create a new visually tangible entity capable of numerous facets. It can be joyful or nightmarish, comforting or painful, hateful or pacifying, bewildering or nauseated, vague or obscure. And all this whilst never manifesting itself as a comprehensible entity.

Those with an inflexible view of an ideal world – a utopia - may find the artist’s depiction of a magical world difficult to accept. The artistic depiction often extends beyond the boundaries of political and ideological walls, outside the limits and confines of accepted norms, traditions and the commonplace. Its subject may not pertain to our visible actions but rather it attempts to focus on and unravel areas and ideas which may be puzzling, or even apparently absurd or meaningless. Understanding the course of painting can be compared to the anticipation and thrill of climbing a staircase, winding endlessly into the unknown. The one who climbs the ladder will experience an uncanny feeling of fear and delight which is a result of the risk that the adventure of climbing the space of objects and others carries with it.

What I tell you now is no secret. My art, my painting, has in a way spared me the pain which I associate with human existence. It is in a way like my own space in which I breathe the air from my virtual and different life. Does it mean that I hate this world? If so, it is because humanity has organised the world in a devastating way. People are preoccupied with satisfying their worries and needs, tirelessly continuing to pursue them, even if this results in the murder of others and the desolation of all the flowers and trees in the world. What kind of darkness do we live in? How many stars have we extinguished? Painting, as a reaction to all this, is a kind of liberation and thrilling road, even if that road is sometimes bumpy.

Pleasure, in its physical and spiritual form, is among humanity’s central goals; the problem however lies in how to attain it! I tell you, there is a great deal of pleasure in painting, because it strives for man’s ultimate dream: the unity of the world’s phenomena, a unity structured on doing away with all the existing dichotomies.

II

‘He who arrives at the object of his vision is no longer concerned with the vision’ (The Book of Tawaseen, Al Hallaj)

I do not rule out using intuition to tackle the essence of painting. It gives me the ability to return to my being, myself in an original and more innovative state. Freeing myself from the rules of authoritarianism, I am able to investigate the elements which construct a painting. Accordingly, this self-awareness leads me to neutralise the mind, to alleviate my perception of things, above and beyond the ordinary, as I face human destiny in all its manifestations, and reach out for the beauty within its continued and lingering decline. The pursuit of this beauty is now my means of achieving satisfaction. I am not a scientist examining the world in parts, rather I see the entire world transforming as I observe it. My own test of it brings me closer to myself, my fears, anxieties and feelings of uselessness, and leads me to my imagination as it aims to dominate the process of capturing and constructing my world of art. I believe that the imagination is free of the restrictions of space and time, and beyond the control of norms and rules. As I visualise how objects unfold and materialise, I am led to a new and different rendering of the commonplace, the ordinary. I do not capitulate to the assistance given by my mind in depicting the image it composes until it serves my intention of composing my restless thoughts, tirelessly maneuvering between different formations.

Apollinaire said: ‘When man wanted to imitate walking he created the wheel, which does not resemble a leg...’

Painting is no different from entering a labyrinth.
I can start from whatever point of departure I want:
from the circular shape of a ball,
a line,
an area, or even from
a period.

Initiating the starting point is an easy task, representing a sort of introduction. The real difficulty, in laying out the drawing, depends on the success of that introductory step which aims to capture the essence of the painting, striving to reach the goal of the original undertaking. It is not sufficient to know how to begin, but to understand how to get to the ultimate destination. In other words, you have to discover the picture prior to drawing it. For me, the aesthetics of a painting lie in the vagueness and recklessness of the content and the absence of a unidimensional purpose. In themselves, shapes are incapable of avoiding one particular meaning. Elements that save a painting from the burden of characterisation are ambiguity and recklessness, or a certain lack of caution, and courage. Such elements are a necessary feature in a painting. For me, a painting is not dissimilar to a written text which has been eroded and destroyed so that though it is hardly legible but can still be understood through intuition. In this way, it reinvents itself through different interpretations, after each new reading. The more ways a painting is ‘read,’ the more effective and powerful it becomes.

Celebrating the dominance of a singular scene is not always a necessary approach. On the contrary, my aim is for many different

scenes to swarm the canvas' surface, scrambling around to claim their presence without completely cancelling each other out. Using 'visual excavation,' this multilayered scene allows the eye to proactively:

drill rather than passively react,
retrieve rather than confront,
observe intuitively instead of factually.

And then, what part of myself would appear in my painting? Is it my own self with its joy, pain and anxiety, my thoughts? Or perhaps the:

universe,
death,
spirit,
war.

Or that which my hand – hesitant, unsettling, harsh and charitable – has performed?

What appears of me on the canvas is like the sound reverberating against the walls of a valley or a thunderbolt illuminating a forest's darkness for a fleeting moment.

III

I should have turned into a massive centre of gravity, just like a spider dreaming of turning its cobweb into a net for everything. I too would like my inner web to lure all things in, not in order to walk on life's outer surface with a confident pace, but with the restrained steps of uncertainty. Perhaps my paintings might breathe to create their own worlds encompassing diverse objects: the air in the earth's cracks, paper clippings, spilt mud or even things prone to forever disintegrate. I would happily have tended to millions of imaginary birds, which alone among all other things are aimlessly lost in our existence, are equipped to generate the thunders of astonishment from the world's other shore. The effect of the astonishment is in the unraveling of the true face of life from beneath the heavy dust of the ambiguities hiding underneath that same face. What invites me to the eternal fellowship with the imagination is nothing, that persistently penetrating feeling against the injustice of the ways objects are being projected; what exists out there is only a pale reflection of the true potential inherent in the objects of observation. What we customarily call 'life' is merely a handful of posts for decoding the symbolism of a more welcoming world, posts left out at the sidewalk of our daily lives.

In order to step into this all-embracing world, before all else, humanity must colonise the 'self,' occupy and settle it, to find the soul's untapped wealth as we search for the sanctuary of hope. We would have then a protection and a greater energy to change the existing order of things. New ideas would spur us to the path of boundless freedom—a freedom, which I am able to achieve through my painting and which places me in a difficult and necessary confrontation with both myself and the world.

When I begin the act of creation, millions of imaginary birds haunt me, waiting in the distant horizon. I wait too, in the expectation of a single glimpse; they appear and then fly off again. Were I to gaze at them for hours on end, I would simply drop my tools and do nothing at all, for imagination is a commitment to achieve perfection. And if it was possible to capture this perfection with ease, the very act of creativity would extinguish forever.

Creativity derives its being from the suspense of the unpredictable, from unanticipated distractions. If I had sought after a specific artistic aesthetic, it would not have survived. The aesthetic expression is not what we create, though we are engaged in generating it. My friend, let the imaginary birds set in on your wasteland; but do not classify them. In the beginning, there never is a classification; there is no particular point where the creative experience ends. If I were an author, I would hang up, next to my works, many commentaries to explain what my works could or could not accomplish. This is because I dream of figures with strikingly unfamiliar heads, feeble and velvet hands. But, this is not always achievable. Many are the wonders that are planted in the fields of the soul but they are not always easy to harvest.

I ask you, my friend, to contemplate this predicament. In the heart of every artist the desire for a work that he or she has failed to conjure up. If this was realised, the act of painting would die; for every single creator is a hunter, returning back to us with magical tales and wholesale lies, after miles of a long and difficult journey. For these tales and lies are far better than observing the heart that ceased in the corpse of a dead animal. Creativity is pure imagination and it can never be the complete realisation of what is imagined. Creativity is a long journey. There is no destination to head to.

Amar Dawod
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