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Metaphor

My friend Jürgen Habermas wrote: the artwork has no meaning outside itself. Despite the beauty of his text, this I cannot agree with. My work is, after all, metaphorical. Enrique Juncosa wrote about the metaphor of fire in the paintings of Guerrero. He painted giant matches in rows. These invoke a parallel architectonic structure that carries with it the constant sense that they are made to be burned. That is their function, to burn, burning down their own pictorial metaphor. He likens this to my painting, *Tiger*. The tiger is beautiful. It moves with ultimate grace. It has soulful eyes, yet it destroys life. But this destruction is part of our natural world, and a part we love or at least respect and do not want to lose. Yet, on a personal level we are afraid, correctly, of this violence. My painting, as a metaphor, refers to this. This beauty that is dangerous. My painting has order; the stripes are tied up horizontally in order, yet they are painted rough. So they, in a sense, carry the possibility to overwhelm their own order. The painting is full of subversive elements that the stripes are obliged to transverse in order to maintain their allusion to classical pictorial order. Yet this pictorial longing, insistence in the belief in harmony and order, is a fight with the physical structure of the work, which includes a shelf that has the effect of making it inch forward and split the canvas that has to be painted across in order to continue the desire to unify. Then, in the bottom corner, the pictorial argument of the painting is turned around. The direction of the stripes is reversed, which tips over everything that has been visually built up in the upper part of the painting. Add to this, that a regularly ordered structure is being painted like animal skin or a rough landscape, and the disagreement between the metaphor of order and the metaphor of emotion becomes greater.

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Habermas has also stated beautifully that a painting, especially an abstract painting, never entirely explains itself. This is important. This is part, an essential part, of its power. What starts out as a reluctant form of communication grows with time into an enduring quality. It cannot be worn out. It cannot be used up since it is not trying to convince through information. (As if explanation and information were convincing). A mysterious embodiment, it remains silent, yet potentially potent, whilst never entirely giving up its mystery. Maybe Habermas is looking for true freedom. It is interesting that he chooses the abstract painter, who is perhaps most connected to the things and surfaces of the world, to write about while looking for an art form that has no meaning outside itself.

For me, this is not contradictory; it is complex and fascinating. And, anyway, who can figure out the needs and desires of the human soul. Not me. I make things for people to look at that are not closed down, not concluded, things that are made emphatically with the wish to stay open. But, this idea of no meaning is interesting. Well, more than interesting, doubly interesting. If something has no meaning, if it doesn't mean anything outside of its own power to affect us, then we are in a sense free. And where else are we free?

When you look at a mountain, does it mean anything? Except to a mountain expert, to most of us the answer is, no. It is not a question of what it means, it is a question of what it does to us. And the more romantic we are by nature, the bigger and deeper its effect. I have seen friends and myself transfixed by the inexplicable power and nobility of a mountain, and that is enough. It doesn't say anything to us. It doesn't explain itself. It doesn't tell us how it feels, or how high it is, or how many birds live on it. It just is. If you want to study it you can, otherwise, it just is. This feeling is an undoing of personal structure. To make a

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painting that really has no meaning and yet is powerful enough or tender enough to unravel our personal structure is maybe what Habermas expects from Art, on the highest level. And why not? It happens to me all the time, in front of Cimabue for example.

But now, maybe, at least in Art, we are fed up with stories with explanations, stories with information and with justifications. A painting that doesn't mean anything outside of what it embodies as itself, would be more or less impossible (**to write about?**), but not (**beside?**) It would still be possible to write beside or parallel to it, as a separate but seeing work. Like the way we look at the fishes in the water. They live, they have their own politics, but it is a separate parallel world. That is the way the world really is. We don't talk to the birds, do we? If we do, they don't talk back unless they are in cages. Then they are no longer birds, in the authentic sense.

With paintings, we look for meaning. But we could also look for meaninglessness. To find meaninglessness and meaning, impotence and profundity all at the same time would present a freedom that is inhabited. Maybe that's what he's looking for.

Sean Scully

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