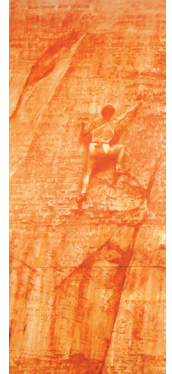


# Which Reality?

## Painting as Inquiry in the work of Mark Tansey How and to What Extent can a Painting Mean?

### *Close Reading*

An athlete scales a rock built from text. She is too close, yet we are too far away to decipher its message. There is no distance from which the text is fully legible, a problem which is philosophical in nature. Paul de Man, a Belgian deconstructionist, observed in his *Blindness and Insight* that critics who engage in close reading are blind to their own assumptions and consequently misinterpret the text. He questions the ability of any human to correctly analyze written discourse. Like Ludwig Wittgenstein, he exposes the imprecision of words.



### *The Innocent Eye Test*



Paulus Potter's *The Young Bull* appears alongside one of Claude Monet's haystacks. Art historians supervising the experiment watch the cow attentively to see how it will react. This is a take-off on a famous contest between Athenian painters to see who had the greater skill. Parrhasius was in contest with Zeuxis. The latter painted some grapes so perfectly that birds came to peck at them. He then called on Parrhasius to draw aside the curtain and show his picture, but, finding that his rivals picture was the curtain itself, he acknowledged himself to be surpassed, for Zeuxis had deceived birds, but Parrhasius had deceived Zeuxis. This is a picture within a picture (both fictions of the artist) and we, the audience, are just as duped as the Athenian crowd. In evaluating art there is no "innocent eye".



### *Robbe-Grillet Cleansing Every Object*

The French author & filmmaker attempts to remove hidden meanings from every object. His actions are ultimately futile. The labor is arduous, tedious, and unsatisfying. The stones are monumental miniatures--Stonehenge, the Matterhorn, the Sphinx, a Buddha, geometric shapes, the Trojan horse, a German tank, a train, a half-sunken building. One can never view historical events separate from their respective pasts.

## *Triumph Over Mastery II*

The painter is covering up Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel with an even coat of white paint. He is whitening out pictorial depth associated with an earlier period of art. That the white wall should pronounce the last judgement would be a bitter irony, but in his zeal, the painter fails to see that he has painted out his own shadow as well as the ladder on which he stands. Most interestingly, he paints over the face of God and does so by standing on God's left side, the side of the damned.



## *Mont Sainte-Victoire*

Inspired by Tansey's reading of Derrida's "Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles". Is it dawn or dusk; is the sun rising or setting? Are the figures male or female? Flip the painting upside-down and what was once a mountain becomes a cave. Derrida a third of the way across, removing a coverall, has become a woman and the "avant-gardist has shed his uniform and become a sort of ancient sage in cloak and toga, bearded and wise" (Danto 18). One thinks of Plato and his cave. The sky, marked with clouds, becomes the rock formations at its depths. For Tansey this marks a transition in the art world. The Avant-garde has become "demilitarized" and perhaps feminized by taking off their uniforms. The post-structuralism that was to follow is marked by "dense systems of meanings" that interrelate "The metamorphosis of everything into something else is optimistically suggestive of the possibilities of painting since Cezanne" (Freeman 54).

## *White on White*



This painting is a catalogue of oppositions: Inuits and Arabs, cold and hot, north and south, snow and sand, earth and sky, combat and reconciliation. The Inuits have arrived on dogsleds; the Arabs have crossed the desert on camelback. It is not so much that they have turned toward each other as that they have turned away from the fierce winds. Notice that the clothing and fur attest to winds blowing in opposite directions. There seems to be an invisible rift down the center of the picture, where cultures collide" (Tansey qtd in Danto 134). They must now decide whether or not to bridge that divide.



## *The End of Painting*

The fear was that photography and film would spell the death of painting. Photography, however, freed painters. A painted picture no longer had to pretend to be a non-fiction; it no longer had to be a cage for the real. It made it possible to think in terms of a conjectural field or a place of inquiry. In this painting a sculptor mounts a film of a painting; wherein, a man shoots his own image reflected in a mirror.



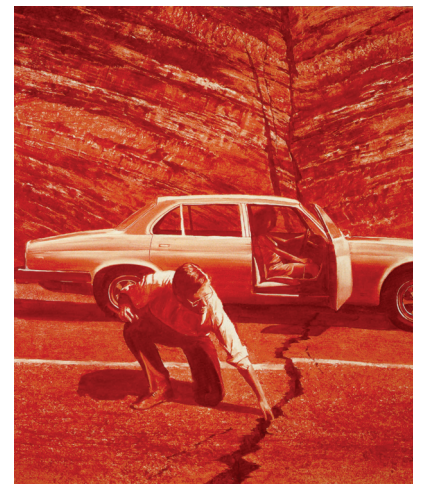
## *Discarding the Frame*



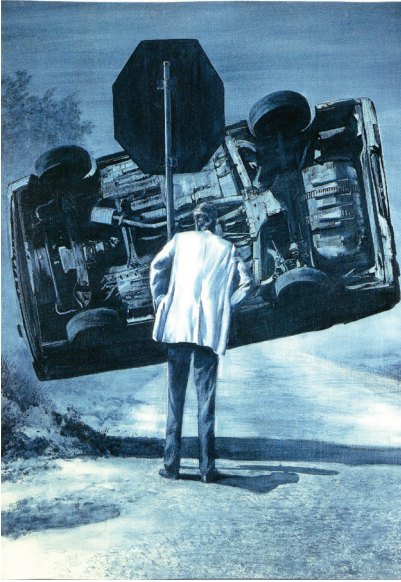
Inspired by Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" the realist wished to cage reality, but his own reflection is trapped in the frame. Our perceptions are colored by our emotions and experience. As in science we cannot help but influence our observations and analysis by our perceptual expectations.

## *Doubting Thomas*

The question of boundaries, of possible shifts or displacements along them, and the question of what is being bounded (or unbounded) are preeminent ones. If we are indeed in a liminal period, then the border is not out there somewhere at the edge of the frame but rather it is here, at zero degree, where the x and y coordinates meet. It is a site of encounter, a point of transition. The marginal is all around. - Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p.234



## *Pleasure of the Text*



It would seem that the driver of the vehicle having run a stop sign is about to crash. The man in the foreground however is in no danger since painting can literally stop the laws of physics. The man can study the underside of the car at his leisure just as we can study this painting for any length of time. Art makes this subjective and objective deliberation possible.



## *Triumph Over Mastery 1986*

“A modern child plays atop a fallen column amid an ancient, ruined city. Nearby a mother and her chastened off-spring stand on steps before the broken, abstract forms of the column. The columns’ gigantic size dwarfs the figures of the two boys and their mother. Tansey contrasts past and present, old and young, dead and alive. The playful, stick-wielding boy conquers this ancient artifact.. . He stands in for the artist; integral to Tansey’s search for truth and understanding in his comprehension of the past and its lessons for the future” (Freeman 33-34).

Books for reference:

Danto, Arthur, *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions*, New York: Abrams, Inc., 1992.

Freeman, Judi, *Mark Tansey*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993.

Hejinian, Lyn. *The Language of Inquiry* ; University of California Press, 2000

Taylor, Mark, *The Picture in Question : Mark Tansey and the Ends of Representation* ,1999