

FrameWork 4/18

John Nyman on Scott Lyall

The Looks

I

The animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as are the fissures and limestone formations. Nor are they *elsewhere*. Pushed forward here, held back there, supported by the wall's mass they use so adroitly, they radiate about the wall without ever breaking their elusive moorings. I would be hard-pressed to say *where* the picture is that I am gazing at. For I do not gaze at it as one gazes at a thing, I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”ⁱ

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's “Eye and Mind,” his last published essay, makes a remarkable claim on behalf of painting and the picture in general. In the first place, he distinguishes sharply between the phenomenological world of images and the techno-scientific universe, in which appearance is only the residue of *objects* more effectively manipulated at the level of their materials. While science, in other words, bases all of vision on the sense of touch, only phenomenology can understand our lived experience of seeing as “*having at a distance*.”ⁱⁱ On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty also refuses to limit aesthetics to the domain of the symbol, the mind, or even the concept. Rather, *looking* is an act and property of that mundane yet impenetrable (because fundamental) entity known as the embodied self—an immaterial “body which is an intertwining of vision and movement,”ⁱⁱⁱ and “a self, therefore, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future....”^{iv}

By the time of its publication in 1961, however, “Eye and Mind” may have already begun to sound like a naïve paean to a long-gone era. While already well-established formalist and emerging minimalist practices defied the distinction between art and object at its literal core, even performance and conceptual art diverted Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception by replacing its explicitly metaphysical orientation (“every theory of painting is a metaphysics,” Merleau-Ponty wrote)^v with more brazenly ontological rejoinders to the question of aesthetics. And all of this, of course, is to say nothing of the half-century of continental avant-gardism the phenomenologist seemed either unable or unwilling to assimilate.

The rest, as they say, is history. Yet it is precisely by ruminating on this history—that is to say by devouring it, digesting it, and chewing through it again—that *Cave Paintings Now* arrives at its strikingly prescient assertion of a phenomenological metaphysics of vision. While Lyall's work feels numbingly cognizant of the many tricks twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists have employed to revolutionize the debate over what art is, its half-ironic splicing of these strains exposes not a likely melange but a startling lack, forcing us to reconstruct the alchemy by which art expresses its value—financial, cultural, spiritual, and visual—in the first place.

One feels called to account along the same lines that, as Merleau-Ponty writes, “so many painters have said that things look at them,”^{vi} yet Lyall makes sure to subtract the creative genius who “listens” to those looks for us. The exhibition’s works are absolutely paintings without a painter (much as they are, surprisingly though not secretly, paintings without paint). But instead of allowing us to economize the picture by ruining its authority, Lyall’s postmodernist bait and switch only throws us further out into the wild. Though it staves off capture by subject, concept, or matter, *Cave Paintings Now* is stuffed with *looks*.



The works titled *DRAGONS*, for example, subtly bear the same frightening agency and elusiveness as their namesakes; in the first place, their photographic documentation feels like a snapshot of the Loch Ness Monster. While it’s true that a single photo doesn’t come close to capturing the multitude of images each piece offers—as one encounters iterations of *DRAGONS* in real gallery space, they readily flash between various multicoloured assemblages of blotches, branches, loops, and halos—there’s a further dimension to the camera’s inadequacy. The photographs are misleading (and misled) in that they suggest (no doubt against the photographer’s wishes) a unique image correspondent with each numbered title, when actually the physical uniqueness of the works is impossible to demarcate in the human imagination.

To my eye, at least, every instance of *DRAGONS* is both too much and not enough to tell them apart. When I manoeuvre around the dull metallic surface that meets me from most angles, I can catch visions of a turbulent cosmos, or else a mind-blowing microcosm laying bare the deep complexities of subatomic particles, organic chemicals, or brain dendrites. But these fantasies are very much my own, and trivially so; I know very well that the aluminum foil in front of me, although its texture has been manipulated at scales small enough to shepherd the refraction of individual light waves, is in a physical sense no more than what it is. Nonetheless, every iteration of *DRAGONS* preserves an impenetrable optical complexity and identity, an autonomy composed of pictures I will never properly *have*, either at a distance or at my fingertips.

Throughout the exhibition, I am threaded through a fabric of looks simultaneously embodied and not my own. Tracing the left wall, I draw close to the first iteration of *DRAGONS* only to be corralled into the vertical expanse of two works titled *sunlight painting (later evening)*, which engulf me in their finely textured, seemingly organic wash of pale pink and chemical green-grey. Even if I can wrench a landscape from the two horizontal gashes spanning the gold, mirrored surface of *untitled (talent)*, and even if I see myself there—in the landscape and in the gallery—reflected, the panel’s blaring diffusion of light blasts my vision to a distant, dark periphery. In truth, my body is an accident of illumination. Upstairs, *sunlight painting (early morning)* pulls my eyes into a blur whenever I look up to try and gauge its palette—bluer, paler, and yellower than *later evening*,

but I'm not sure. Beside it, I squat to frame my body in the black glass pane of another *untitled (talent)*, the top of which sits below a standing person's eye level.

Yet the looks' authority is not only spatial; rather, once I've become acquainted with the vertiginous depth and meticulous nuance of Lyall's premises and processes, I realize my thinking has positioned me in the exhibition's visuality as much as my body has. From the beginning, Lyall's "supernumerary" still life^{vii} —in this show, a beat up humidifier, a bouquet of flowers, and airy specks of yellow ochre on a crinkled tarp— signals me to restrict my assessment of the show's artwork to the immateriality of two-dimensional planes: in other words, to *paintings* in Merleau-Ponty's sense. I'm told that the canvas base of each *sunlight painting* has been sanded down to total smoothness, then run through an inkjet printer until the interlaced pigments coalesced into the texture of—of course—thin paint on a rough canvas. Suddenly, Lyall's cave feels more like a spot lit tunnel, although I'm not sure if I've found my way to Plato's form of forms or merely another node in the underground infrastructures of seeming. Either way, I have no hope of parsing idea and appearance, information and object, medium and message.



II

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

—Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"^{viii}

While the bulk of Wallace Stevens' career is probably best captured by poems like "The Idea of Order at Key West," which celebrates a transcendently human vision's capacity to wash over the world, I've always been taken aback by the opening stanza of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Although we, as readers, have been introduced to the poem in the role of its lookers, these first lines catch us in a startling reversal: if

motion can be measured to the movement of an eye, and the blackbird's eye is the only one moving, how do I picture my own gaze within the scene?

Later, Stevens writes,

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.^{ix}

And there is a harmony there (Stevens's first book was titled *Harmonium*), where Stevens and his blackbird mingle in a fuller epistemology than either possesses on its own. But I can't shake the feeling that there's something more to their chiasm. At the gallery, I stand one-to-one with *DRAGONS* (I can't be sure which instance), but my impression of its surface (in the sense that I might have an impression of a person's face) is scattered across the disjointed peaks of colour and form it pitches through the intervening distance. For both Lyall's pictures and Stevens's blackbird, I am as passive as the mountains. I think there's a word for this: *transfixed*. And it might be translated this way: *had at a distance*.

Notes

ⁱ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 355. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 357.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 353.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 354.

^v *Ibid*, 361.

^{vi} *Ibid*, 358.

^{vii} Scott Lyall, email (16 April 2018).

^{viii} Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." *Poetry Foundation*.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45236/thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-a-blackbird>.

^{ix} *Ibid*.