

Assignment one

Student # 514945 - David Bell, Understanding Visual Culture, 30 April 2017

Part A: The Innocent Eye

Introduction

In 1857, British art critic John Ruskin wrote his book *The Elements of Drawing*, in which he said:

'The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify, - as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.' (Ruskin, 1857: 91)

In 1981, American painter Mark Tansey, made a painting called *The Innocent Eye Test* (fig. 1). In this paper I give an interpretation of Mark Tansey's 1981 painting in light of Ruskin's words.

Ruskin

Ruskin explains how we visually perceive the world around us. He says:

'Everything that you can see in the world around you, presents itself to your eyes only as an arrangement of patches of different colors variously shaded' (Ruskin, 1857: 24)

And he goes on to say:

'... the whole art of painting consists merely in perceiving the shape and depth of these patches of color, and putting patches of the same size, depth, and shape on canvas.'
(Ruskin, 1857: 91).

He describes how, as children, we start to understand the devices and codes of realistic perspective, and tells us:

'The perception of solid Form is entirely a matter of experience. We see nothing but flat colors; and it is only by a series of experiments that we find out that a stain of black or gray indicates the dark side of a solid substance, or that a faint hue indicates that the object in which it appears is far away.' (Ruskin, 1857: 91).

In the statement in which we are asked to comment on in this exercise, Ruskin is saying that in order to make a painting an artist must revert back to this childish way of viewing, this 'innocence of the eye', and represent colours in paintings as we perceive them 'without consciousness of what they signify'.

We must note from our 21st century standpoint that Ruskin is talking to us from the Victorian era, when the accurate portrayal of the world through realism defines a good painting from a bad painting; when accurate perspective was seen as mastery of the painting medium.

Tansey

Looking at Tansey's painting *The Innocent Eye Test* (fig. 1), we see six men all dressed formally revealing a large painting to a cow. One man in a white lab coat holds a clipboard, a symbol of data collection and analysis; another man stands to the side with a mop in hand in anticipation of bovine excreta. On the wall to the right we see another painting, Claude Monet's *Grainstack (Snow Effect)* from 1891, telling us the scene takes place in a museum or art gallery.



Figure 1 *The Innocent Eye Test* (1981) Mark Tansey

The unveiled painting is the famous 1647 painting by Dutch painter Paulus Potter called *The Young Bull* (fig. 2).



Figure 2. The Young Bull (1647) Paulus Potter

If we consider Tansey's title '*The Innocent Eye Test*', we can see that it is associated with the 'innocent eye' of Ruskin's statement, and we might conclude with some certainty that Tansey is making a bizarre proposal about how the artworld might test Ruskin's assertions concerning the making of paintings using 'the innocence of the eye'.

The *test* of the painting's title appears ask whether the untrained eyes of the cow might be able to convert the 'flat stains of colour' into a realistic portrayal of the cow and bull in the painting. Of course we don't know the answer is, the cow might well see an interesting image, and quite like it.

Looking Beyond the Obvious

Tansey explained to Arthur C Danto:

'In my work, I'm searching for pictorial functions that are based on the idea that the painted picture knows itself to be metaphorical, rhetorical, transformational, fictional. [...] my work investigates how different realities interact and abrade.' (Danto, 1992)

And indeed Tansey offers a painting which poses many interesting questions.

Perhaps Tansey's painting is the result of a test of Ruskin's theory. Tansey painted his painting in grisaille - grey monochrome - and we can clearly appreciate the scene without the benefit of colour. This is contrary to Ruskin's assertion that 'Everything that you can see in the world around you, presents itself to your eyes only as an arrangement of patches of different *colors* variously shaded' (Ruskin, 1857: 24).

Why did Tansey choose *The Young Bull* as the subject of the painting to be unveiled, and also then choose to have a cow as the observer of the painting? Cows were seen as symbols of prosperity in Holland, so there is equality of a prosperous status between the animal observing and the animals in the painting. Which leads me to think that we as observers are integral to the 'test'. Let us explore Thomas Gainsborough's 1750 painting *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (fig. 3) for some parallels.



Figure 3. *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (circa 1750) Thomas Gainsborough

In this painting we see a prosperous man and wife posing under a tree, gazing out from the painting at the observer. There is a similar composition in *The Young Bull*, where both bull

and cow (both prosperous symbols in Dutch art history terms) look out from the canvas to the observer, replicated in Tansey's painting looking out at the observing cow.

Imagine, if you will, yourself in the National Gallery looking intently at this painting *Mr & Mrs Andrews*. Do you see yourself in the same space as the observing cow in Tansey's painting? You are one of many many people standing before it peering at Ruskin's 'flat stains of colour'; ... you are one of the herd, as cattle traipsing through endless rooms of art, while the artworld observes you, quantifies you and classifies you, in the same way as the men in Tansey's painting study the observing cow.

Sturken and Cartwright sum up quite nicely in their brief study of Tansey's painting:

'Viewers approaching Tansey's work were likely to get the joke, which is a reflexive one about ... the art historian's and critic's desire to see and to study scientifically how spectators see, making the spectator into a kind of test animal. Tansey's painting is, in part, a joke about the history of representation and a joke about the academic study of practices of looking' (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009: 173-174)

List of images

Figure 1. Tansey, M (1981) *The Innocent Eye Test* [oil on canvas] 198.1 x 304.8 cm At: The Met Fifth Avenue, New York, USA

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/mark-tansey/the-innocent-eye-test-1981> (Accessed 18 April 2017)

Figure 2. Potter, P. (1647) *The Young Bull* [oil on canvas] 235.5 cm x 339 cm At: Royal Picture Gallery, Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paulus_Potter_-_Young_Bull.JPG [Accessed 18 April 2017]

Figure 3. Gainsborough T (circa 1750) *Mr and Mrs Andrews* [oil on canvas] 69.8 × 119.4 cm At: National Gallery, London, UK

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Gainsborough_-_Mr_and_Mrs_Andrews.jpg [Accessed 19 April 2017]

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(957 words excluding Introduction, References and Bibliography)