THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

in reverse

Robert Irwin said something that has stuck with me for years: "What we're really talking about is changing the whole visual structure of how you look at the world." If you can change how you bring the world into focus, that can, *in time*, change the culture itself.

Looking at the re-installation of Irwin's *Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light* (1977) a few years ago, it was clear what he meant. On the face of it, he had dismantled the perspectival apparatus that had defined Western painting since the Renaissance. All the elements were there: a picture window, stretched

cloth, a horizon line. Even a coffered ceiling and gridded floor tiles were on hand. But everything was dislocated and stripped of metaphor. Light was freed and endlessly varied, grazing the scrim, by turns translucent and transparent, while enlarging the space with the finest gradations of light and shadow. Softly lit, people grew quieter, moved more slowly. That would have been enough, but Irwin had dismantled something more. For a short time, the whole perspectival way of looking at the world was gone too. What was so breathtaking about losing *that* was how beautiful everyone looked in ordinary light.

ii

In 1919, as the Bolsheviks moved to liquidate the medieval icons, the great Russian polymath, Pavel Florensky, lectured and circulated a beautiful essay on reverse perspective. He treats it, like any artist's tool, as a witness to reality, linking Russian icon paintings with a worldview that is embodied, embedded, and spiritual rather than the optical, theatrical, and rational view given by linear perspective.

Florensky argues that the reverse perspective of the icon was a choice, not, as critics charged, a lack of skill. The icon painters had set themselves an entirely different spiritual task than their Renaissance counterparts. "A window," he wrote, "is never simply a window; it is either the light streaming in or else it is just a bit of wood and glass." A window *between* the visible and invisible worlds, the icon bears witness to the invisible. With linear perspective, we peer through the window at a semblance of the visible and the limit of the visible becomes the limit of the world. In reverse perspective, the invisible world looks at us.

Parallel lines converge behind us in reverse perspective, including us in the purview of the image and establishing the conditions of an encounter. Andrei Rublev's early 15th century icon of *The Holy Trinity* is exemplary. Three angels are seated around Abraham's table. The perspective of the platforms on which they sit converge behind us, including us at their supper. While this iconography was closely prescribed by the Holy Fathers, Rublev made one change, which redoubled the effect of reverse perspective, and for which he was declared a saint. Instead of depicting the angels in a hierarchical manner, each angel bowed to the angel on the right, establishing their equality and creating a ring of almost palpable centripetal force. We not only witness their supper; they draw us to their table. Painted when Russia was engulfed in civil war and overrun by Tatar invasions, it held out the hope of fellowship and communion and for this it was beloved.

iii

In Florensky's analysis, the worldview each perspectival method girds is bracing, at times harrowing. Rooted in set design, the theatricality of one-point linear perspective supports every kind of passivity, so that not even its masters use it exclusively. It flattens the reality of everything that occupies the interval between the eye and its vanishing point to deliver a uniform, rational space. Countless images of greater and lesser depth populate the interstice like so many shadows in Plato's cave, allowing us to forget that the vanishing point only marks how far the eye can see. Beyond that limit, what vanishes with the vanishing point is not the world, but our relative relationship with it. It confers an atmosphere of necessity as it reduces everything to conform to one point of view.

[As the world persists with or without us, we can only pause to recall that Florensky was writing before the advent of our analogue, digital, and virtual screens.]

Perspective is, for us in the West, both visual and conceptual: a supple tool in an adaptable form, as well as a methodology that distorts the space it seeks to illuminate. That concepts also have their own horizons, their own vanishing points, signals the place where the world exceeds the grasp of thought. Works of art are more than the conceptual language we throw at them. They interrupt our naming and ask us to open to an experience.

The West's long refusal of metaphysics as an experiential discipline began with Ockham's nominalism, with the denial of the mind's ability to grasp anything other than logic and matter, or to know anything real other than itself. Denying a metaphysical reality beyond what our discursiveness encompasses has generally been the project of rationalism. Yet the language proper to an encounter with the unknown is not discursive.

In the philosophical expression of a perspectival view of the world, Florensky argues, Kantian disinterestedness is distilled. Disinterestedness, like linear perspective, implies "a facile experience of the world, devoid of feeling for reality and a sense of responsibility for it, one that sees life as just a spectacle and in no sense a challenge." The reverse perspective of the icon, by contrast, requires and rewards an inner exertion. Its truth is not a likeness but an event; the experience it can afford is catharsis. When a work of art constructs an encounter, when we are in some sense seen by the work rather than the sole proprietors of vision, it requires our embodied presence and a patient attentiveness—a small exercise in opening to the unknown.

iv

Florensky's writings brought me to the understanding of Irwin's scrim veil piece as a watershed. If modernism in painting was about pulling the vanishing point forward, Irwin's scrim veil pulled it through, turning it, as Florensky would say, from a point of darkness to a point of light and collapsing, for a short time, the confines that a perspectival rendering of the world imposes on vision.

For Irwin, Cubism represents the endpoint of a 500-hundred-year process of flattening the subject matter of painting ["from Christ to this king to this burgher to his maid to her red shawl to the color red."][1] The only thing left to do, in his view, was to dissolve any separation between figure and ground by marrying painting to the environment to arrive at presence.

David Hockney's disagreement with Irwin about the meaning of Cubism and its challenge to perspective hinges on the possibility of painting *and* presence. For Hockney, whose current retrospective at the Met touches on reverse perspective, Cubism was about saving figuration from the onslaught of photography. Cubism showed that painting could depict what photography could not: time, multiple perspectives, a living reality.[3]

In 1913, a catalogue of Picasso's early Cubist works was widely circulated in Moscow, the same year an exhibit of ancient icons, many of which had never been seen before, opened in Moscow to universal acclaim. Florensky, too, thought about Picasso's Cubist works and while he acknowledged their power, he censured the violence they did to contemplation. The relationship a painting constructs with its viewer and the kind of experience that relationship affords was, in his view, sacred.

v

I have found, again and again, in what for me are the most memorable experiences of contemporary art, the activity of reverse perspective, that change agent, at work.

Stephen Westfall's *Sandalwood* (2013), for example, is about the size of an icon. It is made of diagonal bands of rich, pulsating colors, some of which form a series of nested diamonds. As the colors and their edges wrestle with each other, the impression is of a muscular, syncopated shimmy.

When this quiets down, something remarkable happens. The smallest diamond at the center of the painting shoots forward and seems to turn in space, while the larger bands carve out space behind it. Two different spatial orders are present: the hard-edge sign, which refuses illusionistic space, and reverse perspective, which ushers in an entirely different spatial experience, one that implicates us. Here what is smallest is also what is closest.

As this hard-edge sign unfolds over time and changes character from flat to spatial, it attains a metaphysical character by standing for two different orders of experience. When the inner diamond telegraphs forward like an envoy from another realm, it is a gift for witnessing the painting's temporality. Sandalwood, it is said, brings one closer to the divine.

vi

It has been nearly two decades since I saw Susan Rothenberg's *White Deer* (1999-2001) at the old Sperone Westwater. It is a large painting, over 7 by 9 feet. The deer are running left to right on a mostly whitish ground. On the right is a large human head, its gaze dripping blood. Two of the deer, harried and frightened, look up at us as though we are on an outcropping above them. I still remember exactly how their gaze seemed to lift me off my feet. From this unmoored position I found myself eye to eye, so to speak, with a slaughtered deer beneath a headless figure in the upper right corner. Here reverse perspective constructs a space that is not spiritual but ethical. As it relocates our perspective, the demand it makes of us is a choice: the painting is either a mirror or a caution.

vii

Torkwase Dyson's *The Many of Us Say No, Auction Block* (2016) is a set of nine laser cut drawings on black acrylic, some matt, some reflective, which are arrayed on a gridded platform about two feet off the ground. Each drawing is incised with architectural notations and has a roughly half-round shape of about hip-width. Other markings seem to indicate a knot of windows and doors. Looking down, what slowly comes into focus is that we are looking at the plan view of a human body. With sudden, almost crippling intensity, the work registers the experience of the auction block, of senses and orifices as windows and doors for others. In this, it makes the reality of suffering inflicted on others a precise and intimate experience of one's own.

viii

It is hard not to see a metaphysical dimension in the re-emergence of reverse perspective in some works of contemporary art. And indeed the reappearance of metaphysics, after its long banishment, is seen in the arrival of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology. While not spiritual, all reassert an autonomous reality of which we are but one part.

CONTRIBUTOR

AV Ryan

AV RYAN is a sculptor and writer living in Brooklyn, NY.