

Postcard Chat

BETWEEN YVES BERGER AND JOHN BERGER



Van der Weyden Rogier, "L'Annonciation" (ca. 1440), detail. Oil on wood. 2 32 x 36". © RMN-Grand Palais.

IN THE ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN, MARIA IS READING her future life in the Bible.

Van Gogh paints the Bible as a still life.

Goya paints his model posing but still dressed.

Both the last two are an invitation.

Both lie open on drapery.

And how similar in their spatial perspectives are their open invitations.

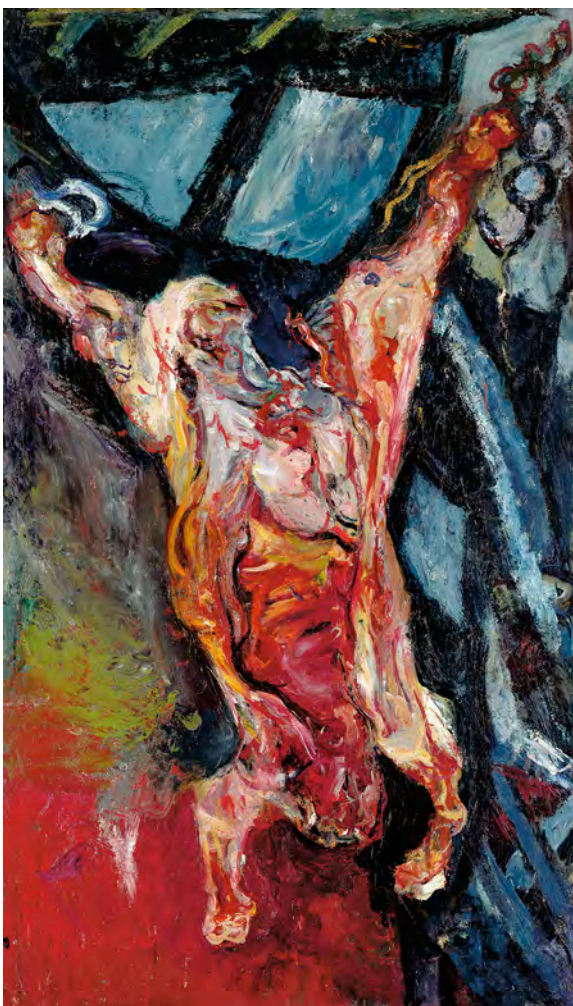
Love John



Francisco de Goya, "La maja vestida" (1800 - 1805). Oil on Canvas, 38 x 75". Courtesy of the Museo Nacional Del Prado.



Vincent Van Gogh, "Still Life with Bible" (1885). Oil on Canvas, 28 x 30". Image courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent Van Gogh Foundation).



Chaïm Soutine, "Le Bœuf Écorché" (ca. 1924). Oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 29 1/2". Courtesy of Christie's Images Ltd. 2015.

THERE IS THIS SAYING IN FRENCH: "Je peux lire en elle/lui comme dans un livre ouvert." Isn't it a very nice way to express this desire we have to access what's inside? Inside what we are facing and its mystery. How we wish to penetrate the outside world, not to take control of it, but to feel more completely part of it. To overcome the isolation we feel in our flesh. The terrible border of the body... See how Chaïm Soutine was obsessed by reading the inside! "Le Bœuf écorché" offers itself like an open book too...

X Love Yves



Antoine Watteau, "Gilles" (ca. 1718 - 1719). Oil on canvas, 72 2/3 x 58 7/8". Courtesy of Art Resource.

"TO OVERCOME THE ISOLATION WE FEEL IN OUR flesh. The terrible border of the body..." Your words and the Soutine unexpectedly made me think of Watteau and his players and clowns. All the dressing-up and frivolities to hide the terrible border. I was looking for Gilles the Harlequin, and I came across the Marmotte. One of our marmots who stands on two legs to see across the snow, now a gag in a box to make people in the cities laugh. Then I found Gilles and the donkey below and behind him. (Donkey and marmot might have a lot to talk about.) Inside his costume Gilles's body has no borders because joke after joke has dissolved the body into a sky. His body is becoming a cloud. He is painted like a landscape.

Love John



Antoine Watteau, "Savoyard with a Marmot, France" (1716). Courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

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JOHN BERGER is a storyteller, essayist, novelist, screenwriter, playwright, painter and critic. His son, **YVES BERGER**, is a painter who is represented by Art Space Gallery, London.

GILLES SAYS: "I'M A STRANGER IN A STRANGER world. I'm here but belong nowhere. I drift in this life of exile." The Savoyard with his marmot, from St. Petersburg, replies: "Cheer up, don't fuss! See the sky today: no drama can happen under this blue. Nothing to worry about: the light won't go down, even when we die."

Over a century later, in New York, Max Beckmann paints a woman wearing a carnival mask. A cigarette in one hand, a clown hat in the other. She says nothing, but her black mask doesn't hide what her eyes tell: "Darling you are as bad as me. Who do you think we are?"

Beckmann was a man of faith. "The great emptiness and enigma of space" he named God. All his life he was trying to enlarge and deepen his knowledge of the world we live in. Light, as it were, was the vehicle for his quest. Drawing, the road. Hence his use of black.

Colors in his paintings come after form. They bring complexity and unexpectedness.

Look at a black and white reproduction: nothing essential is missing. Probably the same is true of Georges Rouault (who was born 13 years before Beckmann and died 8 years after). He too painted actors, clowns, and mythological scenes. He too had a strong faith. To the point that he could paint a sun circled with black.

X love Yves



Max Beckmann, "Carnival Mask, Green, Violet, and Pink" (1950).

A FEW DAYS BEFORE I GOT YOUR BECKMANN I received a postcard from Arturo. Here it is. I put Dürer's "Screech Owl" beside Beckmann's "Woman with Mask" and together they made me smile. Their two faces and tummies wink at each other.

Also both paintings present a species.

He is all screech-owls throughout time; she is all women wearing a carnival mask!

And of course this is linked with what you say about outlines, drawing and the use of black.

And this made me think of images which insinuate the opposite. Kokoschka was an exact contemporary of Beckmann's. In Kokoschka nothing is permanent and all is transient.

Even in his self-portrait with his beloved Olda, which is intended as a testimony to their lasting love, every brushstroke is fugitive, fleeting, momentary. And these qualities are a proof that they are alive.

Kokoschka is very different from the Impressionists for whom shifting sunlight was a miracle and a promise. For Kokoschka light is a parting touch. When he was painting an aerial view of the Thames in London, I accompanied him for a moment to the roof from which he was painting it. This was in 1959. And his gaze was like that of a migrant bird about to leave.

Love John

"THE GAZE OF A MIGRANT BIRD ABOUT TO LEAVE." YES A GAZE WHICH embraces space in such a way that the distant and the nearby are brought together. And this gaze creates a kind of map on which miles or kilometers pass by like the hours of a day.

Facing this Kokoschka feels how fugitive light (and life) is!

Zhu Da, who belongs to an ancient Chinese tradition, feels the same but believes that light and life are eternal and that he is the fugitive!

It's a question of perception.

Remember when, as a kid, I stood with you in a phone cabin on a bridge in Geneva?

And watching the water flow beneath our feet I got scared and cried, convinced that we were drifting away.

Zhu Da also drew and painted several species of plants, birds and fishes. (Maybe he even drew a mouse which Dürer's owl would surely have gobbled up a century and a half later!)

But to Zhu Da, unlike Dürer, the idea of a self-portrait would never have

occurred in the same way because the "self" already belonged to the species and the landscape and could not be separated from the rest of the creation. We couldn't be further away from the mindset of modern and postmodern Western culture.

Hence Giacometti's and Schjerfbeck's self-portraits. Following Kokoschka, they feel it's "departure time." To his future life for Alberto, to her approaching death for Helene. And both look back...

For your pleasure I add a photo of our beloved Käthe Kollwitz next to one of her self-portraits.



Helene Schjerfbeck, "Self Portrait" (1944). Charcoal and wash tint, 12½ × 9½". Courtesy of the Didrichsen Museum.

With love

X Yves

ONE OF THE FIRST OLD MASTER paintings to enthrall me and seize my imagination was Poussin's "Et in Ego Arcadia." The three shepherds come upon a tombstone and thus discover that even in carefree sublime Arcadia Death occurs.

Poussin was obsessed by the question of what was and what was not eternal. Let's look at his "Landscape with Saint John on Patmos." John is writing his vision of the Creation and God in a landscape which spans the whole of Time. And I want to compare this with a landscape by Zhu Da.

In the Poussin the trees, the rocks, the distant mountain are painted in such a way as to emphasize their density, solidity and permanence. And in the Zhu Da, by contrast, the trees and rocks and mountains are brushstrokes and gestures. His vision is calligraphic.

At the same time both landscapes are full of a sense of space, distance, nearness and permanence. Both question the notion of eternity. But what Creation means to each of them is very different.

For Zhu Da, God has written the world and he transcribes it; for Poussin, God has moulded the world and he measures it.

For Zhu Da there are no horizons but only pages and the spaces between words which are wisdom.

For Poussin there is an encompassing emptiness which has to be filled with prayers and angels.

In their later work Giacometti will become, within the European tradition, a kind of calligrapher. And Helene Schjerfbeck a kind of keener.

Love John



Nicholas Poussin, "Landscape with Saint John on Patmos" (1640). Oil on canvas, 39½ × 53¾". Courtesy of the the Art Institute of Chicago, A. A. Munger Collection.



Zhu Da, "Au dessus de fleuve" (ca. 1702 - 3). Ink on satin, 13¾ × 22¾". Courtesy of the Honolulu Museum of Art.

SHITAO LIVED AT THE SAME TIME AS ZHU DA. In his famous *Remarks about painting and calligraphy*, he wrote: “You must first learn to know the nearby to be able to reach the far-out.” And: “The landscape expresses the shape and momentum of the Universe.” Shitao believed that all creation could be represented, held together within what he named: “the unique brushstroke.” As if everything, including his art and him, were eternally written.

Much closer to us in time, other artists have been writing the world. In the USA, we find de Kooning and even more evidently Cy Twombly (notice the title of the reproduction I send is “Arcadia”...). Also, closer in spirit to Zhu Da or Shitao, for she too shows her love and attraction towards Nature: Joan Mitchell.

Nicolas Poussin. He always left me cold. It’s only now that I can start approaching his work and feel its gift (what prompts us, at a given moment and not before, to recognize a body of work, is a mysterious and fascinating question, no?). Many artists I admire refer to Poussin and the way he measured the world within its existence in time.

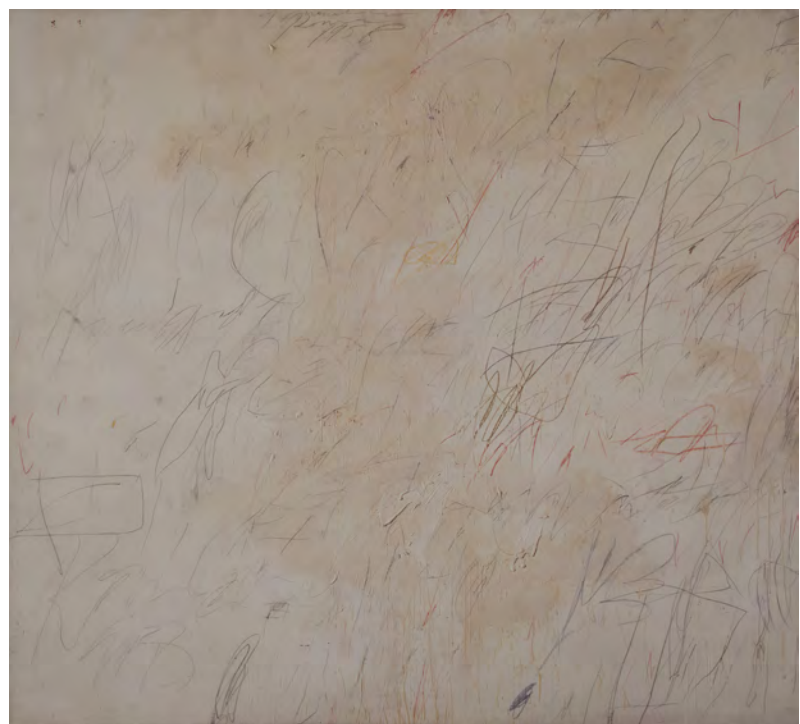
Measuring is an obsession for many artists. Amongst them, the most emblematic might well be Leonardo Da Vinci. His famous studies, where writing and drawings support each other in order to get closer and closer to “how things are as they are.” A complete dictionary of measurements—including animals, plants, human body, faces, clouds, machines, buildings...

Much less well known, the British painter William Coldstream was also obsessed by measurement. Patrick George says about him: “On a daily basis he would guess ages and heights on the underground, the distance between lampposts and the weight of babies.” That fascination can be seen in his slowly developed paintings. And what makes this “Seated Nude” more touching for me than the Leonardo studies, is that the most precise measurement doesn’t stop the ongoing doubt about what he is seeing and about his painting it. Here the measures seem to hold together an endless sum of doubts, hold them together within the unity of an image.

Following Coldstream, Euan Uglow constructed in his studio a specific set-up for each painting, allowing him to precisely measure the parameters, including light. In that way he could find the right distance between the world in front of him and his inner feelings. He too called to Poussin for help...



Joan Mitchell, “Chicago” (1966–67). Oil on canvas (triptych), 102 x 191”. Private collection. © Estate of Joan Mitchell. Photo by Brian Buckley, courtesy of the Joan Mitchell Foundation.



Cy Twombly, “Arcadia” (1958). © Cy Twombly Foundation. Private Collection.

Love Yves



William Coldstream, “Seated Nude.”

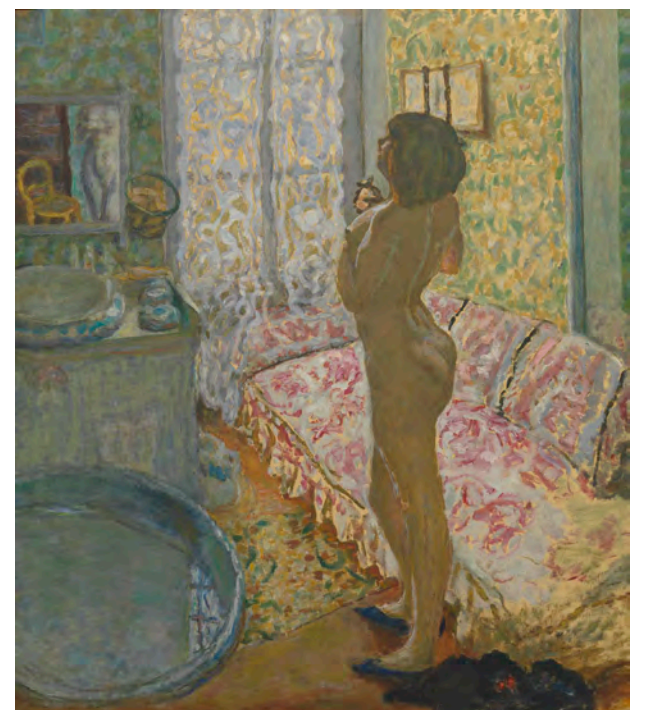
I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE TO KNOW Coldstream a little, and even to work beside him, drawing or painting from the same model. He wasn’t at all bohemian; he had the air of an English gentleman who had just left his private library. When he painted, he entered a trance of concentration with its own total silence, and whose stamina, as you so rightly say, was (is) doubt. Creative doubt. It was a great privilege to work beside him.

And what is so striking about the “Seated Nude” you sent is that she, the woman, the model, expresses this doubt, quite apart from the way she is painted, in her very being: in the way she is sitting, in her expression, in her hands, in the manner in which she occupies the space around her. She is the incarnation of doubt, waiting for her destiny, for what life will give her. Her body represents patience, endurance, hope, but no certitude.

So, by contrast, I send you this nude, “Eau de Cologne,” by Bonnard. Here the woman, the model, has a total confidence in herself, her body and the sunlight of the world around her.

Just as the first painting shows us the doubt endemic to a certain profound manner of creation, the second shows us what a creation, when achieved, can offer to those who look at it, can offer to the world.

Love John



Pierre Bonnard, “Eau de Cologne.” ©Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. Photo: J. Geleyns.