

La mémoire fautif (Le plus petit des Little Single parce que j'ai oublier le reste!)

Memory and remembering badly

For some time I was aware that the memory of objects played a crucial role in the construction of my pieces. At first I thought that I was assembling objects together—as if for the first time. They were shapes that contained elements of diverse objects I had seen and “catalogued” together somewhere in my brain. Partly the time it would take to make these pieces confused my thinking, because from the time I “thought” of the sculpture to its realization was generally a good half year. So I hung on to that thinly sketched-out shape that had popped into my brain as a fertile seed of an optimistic form. A fun form! A futuristic form! After all, what could be more sunny than the future? I saw myself as a designer of sorts.

I'd play a game with myself during this time as I would tell myself that if couldn't remember any one the five or six pieces I had in my head, it deservedly could be dropped from the “to do “ pile. Apart from that first sketch, I didn't have any information on the piece. Was I testing the strength of the invention, as I thought then, or was I testing my powers to remember, as I wonder now?

Some years later I ran into a Magritte painting in Switzerland that took its time to tunnel its way into my thinking. It's a simply structured canvas with a gray background and a black biomorphic form connected to the top right hand of the canvas that moves diagonally into the center of the painting, forming two large puddle shapes. Next to it Magritte wrote “souvenir d'une femme,” and below, near a dark circle, he added “cheval.” Over time, this painting in effect reversed completely the way I had thought about my memory of shapes and their relation to the shapes I make.

Magritte's painting presented a more pessimistic view of the relationship between memory and creativity. The subject matter "the woman" is barely recognizable, in fact she is closing in on total blob-like oblivion. The horse at the bottom of the painting has already effectively disappeared. There is a driving need to fix and capture, as error ridden as that may be, and the mere whiff of a distinguishing image is better than nothing.

I don't want the reader to confuse this type of memory with selective memory, which has nothing to do with it. Just the opposite, in fact. If anything, when a memory has been "selected" I suspect the mind works extra hard in building up its argument to present its case in the future. Those memories are generally sharpest, as if brought into focus by the editing knife that shaped them. And rarely does one remember forms that way. They don't generally fall into the category because those gestalt-like memories normally are the markers of time.

What interests me is the very opposite, it's the small peripheral elements, the visual stuff that catches the eye. What one remembers from the window of a moving car, or scanning a shop display. I don't think I have any control over the memory of these objects. I sometimes grab hold of the form either by sketching the shape or buying the object, but I think those actions are really attempts to "fix" the image when I doubt I remember enough of it.

What exactly happens to something "remembered" or stored away if I am not really conscious of the act of recording it? I can only judge from the results: a sculpture made with bits of previously seen shapes. My mind has combined mussel shells with spacecrafts, and Easter Island figures with mailbox slots. Funny how "Flash" and "Tito, the sculptures I've just described, are some of my oldest pieces. I avoid trying to make sense of the shapes as they appear. I like the freshness of the moment—BAM!

By now I think I have figured out what's going on with my brain and these shapes. Stuff gets pictured and stored. Where? It's the work of an overworked low level bureaucrat getting besieged by images, and doing his best to make order by shoving images in shopping carts strewn around the halls of my mind. And what the hell is order? I cannot even put a row of books in one order let alone a library, and that's being logical. An apt metaphor is

the Library of Congress' attempt to gather and record every piece of government blah-blah, as well as transcribe the volumes of blah-blah that have been transcribed to microfilm, that are in the process of rapid disintegration. One has these acres of stuff being re-imaged, now in a computer format, but when the microfilm job gets done, some years away—the computers will be antiquated—and the whole thing now even fatter with more blah-blah will have to get transcribed onto something else. Makes the video artist's work of reformatting his or her disk's into perpetuity a piece of cake! Anyway, why I like this as a metaphor is that the mere thought of this gargantuan task seems to crumble in ruin even thinking about it.

Maybe it's an amazing metaphor more than a logical one, but for me it's emotionally accurate. I'm not trying to argue for things like stone and bronze against more ephemeral material. I could care less. What interests me is the degradation of stuff remembered, and I am sure felt (why else would the eye grab something on the run?).

I am facing a constant failure. The degradation of objects remembered resurface not as I saw them. They surface fused with other objects. That fusion renders most things barely recognizable. I have not sculpted those points of fusion because I cannot distinguish where they happen. My brain blends and glosses over those bumps of faulty memory. That process constantly surprises me. It is as if the mind is perpetually trying to redress its inadequacies, by buffing and shining that mess of a memory.

All this makes me wonder why I make objects. To break that answer down into two parts would probably help. The first leaves me to always point back to Winnechott's thoughts on a transitional object. Some need I have in continuing to invest inanimate objects with meaning just seems more convincing than any other theory. All those ideas on artists making an order of the world are fine for some artists' work, but I seem far too ambitious in visually consuming new images to have much desire to eliminate them afterward. Plus I suspect that my brain has its own way of eliminating stuff.

Making sculpture has also something to do with running my hands over the objects. I think it's a way of fighting back against all the despair, loss and abandonment that is

embedded in memory. The connection I have with things, whether I use them or am making them, has an important effect on me. I think those repetitive actions of hands working on objects helps me remember and orders those images. They seem to come more to the surface the more I work, and that's not true just by making drawings, so it must be the connecting to stuff that's a bridge of some sort. And the more I bring to the surface the more I feel calm and centered.

NEW CHAPTER (One in between on the edge of the eye)

An argument could be made that what happens on the edge of the eye is where instinct lies, and the whole need to focus there is because of a person's innate intuitiveness which is set in motion by letting the edge work. As much as this sounds attractive, I think it's only partially true. Sure there is a certain amount of intuition that happens on the edges of things but I don't think all images one has gathered should be treated as such. It's just too much information coming in. Rather I think what resurfaces has the stuff of importance.

Another way to think about the phenomena of the edge of the eye is to look at color. Two sculptors, Judd and Sugarman, who thought of the connection between form and color, come to mind at present. My thinking about form, sculpture and speed is indebted to Sugarman since he was the first person I read who spoke about the relationship between form and color. I have noticed color has a way of appearing fast or slow. If the colors stand out on their own, a color that's quite bright and pure has greater chances of having speed than a darker and muddy color. But within the bright end of the spectrum I felt that yellows for instance were often slower than reds and oranges. Or for the same matter a Prussian blue even with its bite had a slower effect than an ultramarine. Since I worked in brown wax I would be always thinking of color and form as an intersection of two sensibilities. Inevitably I would play with the speed of a color in relation with the form's "speed".

All this speed thing naturally gets more complicated with the interrelation of colors. And though Judd didn't write that much on color either, and certainly not on color and speed, I think these were issues that he focused on at given moments. Once was with his horizontal progressions. But here, as with Sugarman, he is working with one color, letting the

reflective metal give the “speed” aspect. Further on in his career, and I suspect because he responded to the stainless boxes installed in Marfa, Judd created a series of extraordinary multi-colored boxes. What he noticed was the way the stainless steel boxes absorbed the environment outside at the same time reducing it to “fast” explosions of reflected color. There is the most curious effect of a static box of milled stainless steel that reflects color and creates a sense of greater chromatic intensity as well as the feeling that it’s rapidly streaking by. In both groups, color has a way of popping off at the edge of one’s eye. Somehow they bring to mind experiencing color from a speeding train.

Ultimately the weird thing about a lot of color, especially placed like that, is no matter what color you choose you end up ultimately talking about speed and not color. Somehow too many colors end up being not about color. Color at this point ceases to function (as it can only do so well) as the great recipient of feeling. At any rate I feel I am just beginning to get a sense of the relationship between speed, feeling, and color, by not getting to attached to the strangle hold of any one in particular.

New Chapter: Two elliptical recollections

There are two aesthetic experiences that keep running through my head and as I write this I now know where to put them. The first was visiting the Thorvaldsen museum in Copenhagen. Among the things I love about the place is that it was installed by the artist before his death, and in that case the intention of both the artist and curator is one and the same and therefore intense. The rooms that particularly interest me are a series of small ones on the second floor that have a generic “museum” structure, in that the window is on one side with a succession of interconnecting doors at right angles and tucked close to the window wall to give the most wall space for the art. His windows are higher than most but placed in a way that cast light down at around a 35 to 45 angle onto two reliefs placed at eye level that run roughly the length of the long walls. At the end facing the window, is a large sculpture in the round. Each room is painted a different color (I remember yellow ochres, dark greens and crimsons); the sculptures were either plaster or marble. The marble with its slight softness in the way the light is absorbed works better, but I imagine he sold a few of the originals to finance the project. What captivates me is the displacement

of everything. The emotion is felt from the color not the subject matter of the principal piece, but the two are nevertheless related. Likewise the action or movement is in the eye-level reliefs that not only unfold cinematically but also push you down to the end of the room to come abruptly to the principal act of the room, which in contrast appears even more frozen. It's kind of composed like certain Bonnard paintings where the subject matter is on the edges in the dark while the color resides in the center with nothing going on except basking in "colorness". The genius of these rooms is this displaced feeling between form and emotion. It brings to mind some Greek tragedies where all the dramatic violent action happens off stage.

The second of these elliptical recollections was visiting the Languedoc region of France a few years ago. Apart from seeing the exhibition of a friend I had taken a day to drive around to look at Romanesque abbeys in the area. Perhaps it was the effect of seeing several in a day that gave me a strange sensation as I walked around each cloister. These structures impressed me as the period white box. They are free of outside distractions. The three elements that make the purpose of the space meaningful are pared to the essential. First, is the person walking through a protected space, second is the light casting into the space through the spaced columns, and third is the structure itself—a rectangle walkway with a wall on its outside perimeter and column inside edge—which is the unifying key to the space because it fuses all the elements together. What stuck me was the fact that the position of the columns was different in each space, as was the size. Not unusual until one considered monks or nuns generally chanted inside these spaces for hours, generally in the form of repetitive private chant. It struck me that these chants were each personalized for the space by the placement of the columns that provided the metering of both the words and the walk. This became apparent to me as the way the light was broken up by the shadows of the columns patterning the floor, and giving the beat to the soul. And yet such was the elemental structure of both the action and space it was literally seen passing on the edge of the eye.

Sleds/ Death/ Gisants

A recent insight I made was in connection to the relationship between death and speed.

During my residency in Saché I worked on a large lithograph that will be printed at the Beaux Arts of Rouen. I thought I would do a massive drawing with little pens. The drawings (as I had to complete three drawings one for each color plate) were to be worked on in trains. I have long had a fascination with trains but more recently, as I have been paying increasing attention to what happens at the edges of the eye, I thought that the train was a perfect vehicle to pass through space and let the eye remember quickly, almost instinctively, and no doubt imperfectly. The very outlined periods of time would also potentially squeeze a “shot-gun wedding” of sorts between thoughts running through my head with what caught my eye outside. As I am almost finished with the third drawing the project is nearing confusion and the last layer is largely lightly written rather than drawn. I was bound to put all onto paper including boredom and fatigue—if such a thing can be drawn.

Somewhere along the project, as I was traveling at times just to work, I thought of H.C. Westermann and decided to entitle the print “Vois France Dabord” after his “See America First” lithos.

The next element of this insight to fall into place was seeing some Gisants in an exhibition in Paris. It struck me that these sculptures were perfectly shaped torpedoes to propel the soul into another world, down to the hands in prayer position which served as a perfect keel of sorts. The body streams by, you really have to readjust your angle of sight to look at the face. They made me think of the speeding landscape in a train, the long horizontal pieces of Judd, esp. the multicolor ones where color more or less explodes, making a color fed confusion of the simple geometry that is the structure.

Back in Saché I was busy making some shapes rolling blankets around plastic and steel tubes and encircling all that with hoist straps.... Things tied, they feel like rafts. There is a slowness to these pieces not unlike the need to slow shapes down with dead color. And sleds: so far I am working with the idea of finishing eight of them. Again I see myself in them, hurtling through space. I now realize my brain is trying to bridge all these diverse images together so in part memory is working not from an image but a sensation, one of passage.

And finally the last insight; I remembered last night observing my mother in the last days of life, shutting down from life. She had stopped eating over a week earlier, she had even left liquids behind, but in her semi-delirious state I had a feeling her brain was hard at work. The excited eyes of a child at play come to mind except hers were shut. I have this feeling that she was closing down episodes, memories of her life. That process had started months earlier, as I would observe her staring out into space. I knew that her mind was not adrift but memories were being sorted, gone over, peace had to be made in some cases, before being stored one last time. Reminds me of shutting down this computer, instead of just putting it to "sleep," shutting it down means that programs I had opened maybe weeks ago, visible only by an icon below, now each in turn jump up (think of Nijinsky's last jump Eric!), flicker one last time before shutting off. I am so convinced of this mind's activity because another friend, weeks before her death, pointed to her last paintings and said that she had to paint all her paintings again. I understood it was her way of reconciling her life's worth of memories. In her case filed into paintings, she was, no doubt, a better file keeper than I am! I wonder if that's what they mean by a death being more peaceful if one can race through one's library one last time staring into the jumble of those closets that made up your life, and being able to slam those doors shut with conviction and a little laugh at the weirdness of it all.