

FANTASTIC FLOWERS MATTHIAS LAHME

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AT LIERENFELDER STR. 39

Because the capacity of sight is continuous, because visual categories (red, yellow, dark, thick, thin) remain constant, and because so many things appear to remain in place, we tend to forget that the visual is always a result of an unrepeatable, momentary encounter. Appearances are a construction emerging from the pieces of everything that has previously appeared.

People talk of freshness of vision, of the intensity of seeing for the first time, but the intensity of seeing for the last time is possibly greater.

As the paints form the stem, the leaves, the petals, as their recognisable forms emerge from the whiteness of the paper, I feel the history and the experience which has made them as they are. The life of the flower is now as finite as the rectangle of paper on which it was being formed, but within it, in a way infinitely more mysterious than any study. A character and destiny had emerged.

Nobody could ever mistake these paintings as ones of botanical studies. Why not?

I chose a triptych of paintings to frame and hang on the wall beside the table at which I work. Gradually and consistently my relationship to these flowers changed.

There are several ways of describing the change. The content of the painting increased. The painting, instead of marking the site of departure, began to mark the site of an arrival. The forms, drawn, filled out. The painting was no longer deserted but inhabited. For each form, between the paint marks and the white paper they marked, there was now a door through which moments of a life could enter: the painting, instead of being simply an object of perception with one point of view, worked like a filter, from behind, it drew out my memories of the past whilst, forwards, it projected an image which, unchanging, was becoming increasingly familiar. If I look at the painting now, I barely see the perceptible forms of a flower at all; instead I see facets of life. Yet if somebody from outside came in, he would see only a painting of a flower. It is still unmistakably that.

The advent of the cinema and television means that we now define drawings (or paintings) as static images. What we often overlook is that their virtue, their very function, depended upon this. The need to discover the camera, and the instantaneous or moving image, arose for many different reasons but it was not in order to improve on the static image. In the nineteenth century, with the dawn of the industrial revolution, when social time became unilinear and regularly exchangeable, the instant became the maximum which could be grasped or preserved. The plate camera and the pocket watch, the reflex camera and the wrist-watch, are twin inventions. A drawing or painting presupposes another view of time.

Any image – like the image read from the retina – records an appearance which will disappear. The faculty of sight developed as an active response to continually changing contingencies. The more it

developed, the more complex the view of appearances it could construct from events. (An event in itself has no appearances.) Recognition is an essential part of this construction and depends upon the phenomenon of reappearance sometimes occurring in the ceaseless flux of disappearance. If appearances, at any given moment are a construction emerging from the debris of all that has previously appeared, it is understandable that this very construction may give birth to the idea that everything will one day be recognisable, and the flux of disappearance cease. For example: the story triumphs over oblivion; music offers a centre; the drawing challenges disappearance.

What is the nature of this challenge? The drawn image contains the experience of looking. A photograph is evidence of an encounter between event and photographer. A drawing slowly questions an event's appearance and reminds us that appearances are always a construction with a history. We use photographs by taking them with us, in our lives, our arguments, our memories; it is us who move them. Whereas a drawing or painting forces us to stop and enter its time. A photograph is static because it has stopped time. A drawing or painting is static because it encompasses time.

Vermeer's view of Delft across the canal explains this. The painted moment has remained (almost) unchanged for three centuries. The reflections in the water have not moved. Yet this painted moment, as we look at it, has a plenitude of actuality that we experience only rarely in life. We experience everything we see in the painting as absolutely momentary. At the same time the experience is repeatable the next day or in ten years. It would be naïve to suppose that this has to do with accuracy: Delft at any given moment never looked like this painting. It has to do with the density of assembled moments. As a painting, the triptych above my table is unremarkable. But it works in accord with the same hopes and principles which have led men to draw and paint for thousands of years. It works because from being a site of departure, it has become a site of arrival. Every day more of my lived experience of the world returns to the images in front of me.