

Attunement: Why Does a Painting Feel Alive?

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A painting can sometimes feel alive. This is not a claim that it contains life in any literal sense, nor that it possesses some mysterious quality that can be identified once and for all. The feeling is stranger than that. A painting can appear to continue doing something after it has been finished. It can seem to resist being exhausted by looking, as though something remains just beyond what can be said about it.

I am a painter. My work begins outdoors, with small sketches made by hand that are carried, sometimes for years, before arriving at the studio to become a painting. Some of what follows will refer to specific paintings made this way: a fjord in Iceland, a blue church, a grove of birch trees in Northern Ontario.

This essay began with the question of why a painting can feel alive. I do not think I can answer it. The more useful question is what conditions allow such a feeling to emerge.

For me, one answer begins with attunement. I use the word to describe a form of attention that is not simply directed towards the world, but altered by contact with it. To be attuned is not only to notice something. It is to allow the encounter to change the terms of looking. My paintings begin from such encounters, but they do not attempt to preserve them intact. They carry them forward, through time, memory and material transformation, until what was first seen becomes something else.

The smallest decisions in the studio reveal this process. A title, a mark, a pigment, a format. Each begins with looking, but none remains only a record of what was seen.

The title

I do not arrive at a title by describing what a painting shows. I arrive at it by sitting with what the painting has already done to me. “Vestdalur”, a painting of a fjord in East Iceland, took its name only after I let myself remember what had actually happened there: a difficult journey reaching its end, a release rather than an escape, a specific and unrepeatable encounter with another person in

that valley. The painting had been finished for some time before the title found it. Once it did, however, the title did not describe the image so much as locate it, the way a coordinate locates a place without explaining what it feels like to stand there.

This is true of most of my titles. “Sleepless”, for a small painting of a blue church in the same Icelandic town, came from learning that the church had once been rejected by its community for its colour before becoming the fixed point by which the town oriented itself, and from the fact that the original imprint was made during twenty-four-hour twilight. “Flash Salvation” came from a memory of being lost on snowshoes in Northern Ontario during a period of crisis, stumbling by accident into a grove of old birch trees and feeling a sudden identification with a tree that might not survive another season.

The title does not explain these paintings. It is closer to a residue: something that survives the movement from experience into paint.

Christopher Le Brun once put this more sharply: titles should not tell the work, they should only show it. To tell is to close the painting down to a single meaning. To show is to point towards something already present without exhausting it. “Fizzing Thicket”, a title that came from a quality in the mark, works in this way. The word does not explain what the thicket means. It names a sensation the painting already contains.

The mark

The mark is where this problem becomes most physical. It is where the looking becomes electrified.

The mark happens at the level of the wrist before it happens at the level of thought. I do not always know what a mark will do until it is already on the canvas, dragged, pressed, scraped back with a rag or a blade, or a finger, and built up again. My hand knows things my eye has not yet caught up to. There is a particular moment, usually after the fourth or fifth layer, when the paint stops behaving like description and starts behaving like matter with its own resistance, pulling against the brush, refusing certain colours, accepting others, of its own accord. I am not choosing the mark so much as negotiating with it.

A mark in my work is not simply an instrument for describing a tree, a building or a sky. It can become a labyrinth, a form folding into another form, built through layering until the surface holds something I could not have planned for. Colour follows this process rather than preceding it. I mix, layer, remove and rebuild until colours appear that could not have been deliberately imagined in advance. The palette behaves less like a fixed system than a living organism. Something arrives through the work.

This matters because the painting's vitality does not come from the image alone. The image provides a structure for looking, but the mark disrupts the certainty of what that structure appears to contain.

The delay

My paintings begin with small hand-held sketches made outdoors. They are not preparatory studies in the conventional sense. They are records of an encounter made under the limits of what my hands can carry: backing board, paper, pencils, pastels. The constraint is part of the looking.

The sketch is made immediately. The painting often happens months or years later.

Kierkegaard's observation that life is lived forwards but understood backwards offers a useful way of describing this gap. The sketch is made forwards. I am standing somewhere, moving through an experience without knowing what it will later mean. The hand records something before the mind has fully understood it.

The painting is the backward movement.

It does not correct the sketch, enlarge it or simply continue it. It returns to the encounter after time has accumulated around it. By the time I paint, the original moment is no longer available. What remains is an imprint, altered by memory, distance and everything that happened in between.

I have started to think of this as a weirding of time. The sketch belongs to the moment in which something was encountered, but it remains active after that moment has ended. When I return to it months or years later, I am neither back there nor simply here. The painting does not bring the past into the present unchanged. It brings the two into contact with one another.

In a discussion of Paul Klee, Johnny Golding used *I Fear Safety*, one of my small cabin paintings, to think through the spaces between marks, layers and colours. She described grey not simply as a colour, but as a hinge between states, something that can emerge between colours, between forms, and between moments. In my own work, the grey is not necessarily grey. It can be the interval that appears when one layer remains perceptible through another, or when two colours refuse to settle into a single reading. The vitality of the surface often happens there, in the space between things.

David Abram's account of phenomenology, drawing on Husserl's conception of the lifeworld, has helped me understand this differently. He describes perception not as an encounter between a detached observer and a finished world, but as something lived from within it. This makes time less like a sequence of separate points and more like something we inhabit.

This makes the painting a different kind of knowledge.

The sketch knows only that something happened. The painting asks what remains.

That distinction is important because it shifts painting away from reproduction. Photography can preserve the appearance of an instant. My paintings are interested in what an encounter leaves behind once the instant itself is no longer available. The camera captures the moment; the painting carries what the moment left behind.

Tom Palin's writing on painting helps me understand this remainder as something more than memory. A painting is not simply a container for information about an earlier event. It is itself an occurrence, something that continues to perform possibilities in the present. The painting does not return me to the original moment. It produces another one.

This is close to what Giorgio Agamben means by the contemporary: not simply belonging to the present, but maintaining a particular relation to it, one that is at once intimate and estranged. I recognise something of this condition in my own relation to the present. My paintings bring earlier encounters into the present without treating them as historical material. They remain slightly out of time, carrying another moment inside the one in which they are encountered.

The delay is therefore not an inconvenience to the work. It is part of the work's meaning. The painting exists because the original encounter has become inaccessible.

The charged image

This is why I have become interested in the possibility that a painting can function as a charged object.

Paul Sérusier's *The Talisman*, painted in 1888 under Gauguin's instruction, offers a useful point of reference. The painting is small, flattened and radically coloured. It does not appear interested in reproducing the visible world according to photographic terms. Its charge seems to come from somewhere else.

Aby Warburg offers a different but related way of thinking about this through his writing on the Pueblo Indians of North America. Certain images, in his account, are not simply representations of powerful natural forces such as lightning or weather. They participate in relationships to those forces. Their importance lies partly in what they enable people to do with an overwhelming experience.

I do not claim equivalence between these ritual forms and my paintings. The comparison is much more modest: not that my paintings hold power over lightning or weather, but that returning to the same motif again and again is, for me, a way of staying in relation to something I cannot fully account for, the same function Warburg locates in the Pueblo image, however different its stakes and history.

This helps explain why the same motifs keep returning in my work: cabins, trees, fjords, forests, horizons, skies. I do not return to them because they possess a fixed symbolic meaning. I return because the encounters they carry have not been exhausted.

A recurring motif is therefore less like a symbol than a place I have not finished visiting.

The question then becomes difficult. Where is the charge located? Is it in the painting itself? Is it something I project onto the painting because of what happened to me when I first encountered the place? Or is it produced only when another person looks at it and brings their own experience to the object?

I am increasingly suspicious of the need to separate these possibilities.

Take "Sleepless." Is the charge in the blue church itself, a colour so wrong for its context that a town once rejected it? Is it in what I brought to the encounter, arriving at dusk after days of not sleeping, already primed to see a building as a held breath? Or does the charge only exist now, in this sentence, because a reader who has never seen the church or the town is nonetheless building an image of both? I cannot separate these. But I notice that each answer changes what the painting is asking of the person who stands in front of it. If the charge is in the object, the viewer is a witness. If it is in me, the viewer is reading a diary. If it is only produced in the encounter, the viewer is a collaborator, and the painting is unfinished until they arrive.

Perhaps the important thing is the relation between them.

Attunement and exchange

I have described painting as my exchange with a vital and restless world. The word exchange initially sounded intuitive, but it became more demanding the longer I stayed with it.

Golding's reading of Foucault's later work on *parrhēsia* and curiosity led me to think about debt not simply as an obligation to repay, but as a structure that produces relation. You owe because you are already bound to something. The debt does not close the relationship. It keeps it open.

This changes how I think about the places from which my paintings begin.

I am not simply taking a sketch from a landscape and turning it into a painting. I am acknowledging that something happened between myself and that place, and that I have not finished responding to it.

The painting becomes one way of continuing that response.

This is where attunement differs from attention. Attention can still imply a subject looking at an object. Attunement suggests that the relation changes both sides. The world is not simply there for me to observe. It interrupts, affects and alters the conditions under which I can see.

Abram's account of perception as participation helped me recognise something that my hand-held practice had already been doing. Looking is not extraction. It is an embodied involvement in a world that answers back.

The sketch is therefore not just an image I carry away. It is evidence that I was changed by being there.

Dwelling and getting lost

Heidegger's writing on dwelling gives another dimension to this. To dwell is not simply to occupy space. It is to establish a relationship with it through care, attention and participation.

Yet dwelling, for me, has rarely arrived without first getting lost.

Rebecca Solnit's writing on getting lost helped me understand this less as a failure of orientation than as a suspension of certainty. When I no longer know exactly where I am, I become available to things I might otherwise have ignored.

The birch grove in Northern Ontario was found this way. I had lost the trail completely. The encounter that followed became one of the sources for "Flash Salvation". What mattered was not simply the appearance of the trees. Something happened in the movement between disorientation and recognition.

This is another reason the word attunement seems useful. To be attuned is not to have perfect knowledge of where one is. It is to become sensitive to what is happening before it can be fully explained.

My practice depends on that condition.

But dwelling cannot be understood innocently.

I move between Berlin, London and the landscapes I return to in Iceland, Luxembourg, Germany, the UK, Northern Ontario and elsewhere. That mobility is made possible by forms of access and privilege that are not evenly distributed. Landscape painting has its own history of concealing this.

John Barrell's study of English landscape painting demonstrates how rural poverty could be actively composed out of the frame, with labour and hardship transformed into pleasing scenery for those who consumed the image elsewhere. The Group of Seven, within my own Canadian inheritance,

operated differently but participated in another kind of erasure, in which landscape became entangled with nationalism and claims upon land.

I cannot resolve this contradiction by making my paintings personal.

What I can do is hold it there.

The landscape I paint can be both an intimate encounter and a historically loaded construction. Dwelling can be a form of care and still depend upon mobility, ownership and access. The task is not to erase the contradiction but to remain conscious of it.

The painting as remainder

This brings me back to the original question: why does a painting feel alive? If I have to offer something like an answer, it is this: a painting feels alive when it holds different moments in relation without resolving them into a single, finished present.

In my case, that history begins with an encounter, passes through the hand-held sketch, remains suspended through time, enters the studio, accumulates through marks and pigments, and finally becomes an object that another person can encounter without access to the original event.

Something has been lost in that process. Something has also been gained.

The painting is not the place I saw. It is not the feeling I originally had. It is not even a transparent record of the person I was when the sketch was made.

It is what remained when all of those things had passed through time.

That is why I think of the finished painting less as a record of what I saw than as a record of what I was willing to sit with long enough for something to declare itself.

Attunement does not promise that things will be alright. It does not produce a solution to ecological crisis, displacement, grief or uncertainty. It offers something smaller.

A willingness to remain in relation.

A title, a mark, a pigment, a format, a sketch carried for years, a painting returned to repeatedly. Each is a way of refusing to let the encounter disappear too quickly.

Perhaps a painting feels alive for the same reason a person can remain interesting after we have spent years knowing them: not because everything about them has been revealed, but because something remains capable of changing the way we look.

The looking does not end when the painting is finished.

It passes into the object, and then into whoever stands before it, if anyone does.

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