

What do you think about this as a painting?

I don't think it's a painting.

Why not?

Paintings are flat; this has volume.

So what is it?

A sculpture.

I still think it's a painting.

How so?

Because of the paint and the scrumptious color.

But the 3-d shape is pretty conspicuous, too.

That's true.

It looks like a drunk cube. It makes me think about the difference between the perfect cube and the imperfect cube.

The ideal and the actual?

In reality, nothing is perfect.

Now I wonder, why do we have to call it one thing or another?

Surely there must be a name for it.

We could call it a sculpainting.

Ick.

I'm reminded of another zen story:

An old, much revered Zen Roshi lay dying, surrounded by loving disciples eager to hear his last words. One of his followers pipes up, "Roshi, can I ask one last question please? What is life?"

"Life...is a river," says the teacher.

"What do you mean by that, Roshi?!?" demands the pupil.

"OK," replies the teacher, "life is not a river."

And he died.



Gail Fitzgerald, Le Freak, 2018. Wooden stretchers, canvas, wire mesh, plaster gauze, and metallic paint. 12.7 x 12.7 x 10.2 cm, 5 x 5 x 4 inch.

It's not actually a tattoo. It's a kind of pillow made of stuffed Pleather in the shape of a tattoo. Pleather?

Fake leather made from some kind of plastic.

That's funny.

Why is it funny?

Because it used to be that having a tattoo meant you were a real warrior, pirate, convict or outlaw gang member. Definitely not fake.

And now?

Now that tattoos are so popular, people who are not real warriors or outlaws sport them.

You could say that a tribal tattoo on a law-abiding, middle class college student is a fake. It's a real tattoo but on such a person it's false advertising.

Real and fake at the same time.

Like pleather is fake leather but real pleather.

So would you call leather fake pleather?

No, because real leather isn't pretending to be anything but what it is.

This particular design is known as a "tramp stamp." It goes across a woman's lower back, just above the butt cheeks. It's very popular.

Sexy.

Yes. It suggests that the person with such a tattoo is sexually adventurous: a tramp, like in the song, "The Lady is a Tramp."

I suppose that for at least some tramp-stamped people it's truthful advertising. And for others?

A fashion statement.

It occurs to me that a tattoo isn't a tattoo until it's been inked into someone's skin. And before that?

A disembodied image, a Platonic archetype.

Platonic?

Plato thought that ultimate reality – ultimately perfect reality -- consisted of ideal forms, or archetypes, in a realm transcending the material world. To produce what we take for ordinary reality, these archetypes descend into and give form to matter, which is physical stuff.

So the archetypal tattoo descends into ink and skin and becomes, for us, real.

Here it seems like the archetype took a wrong turn and got materialized as a pillow. It's like something you might encounter in a joke shop.

But here it's a work of art.

What's the difference?

It's not what is the difference, but where is the difference?

So where is it?

In your mind.



Al Freeman, Soft Tribal Tattoo, 2018. Pleather and polyester fill, 68.6 x 142.2 x 10.2 cm, 27 x 56 x 4 inch.

What is that?

It's a balloon.

Are you certain?

Yes. I've seen balloons before and this looks like a balloon. Not only that, but the title declares it's a balloon.

But that's only a title. Titles don't necessarily tell you what the titled thing is.

We might bat it around and see if it behaves like a balloon.

Or shoot darts at it and see if it pops.

Look here, the checklist: it indicates that the balloon is made of Styrofoam and paint. No balloon I've ever encountered was made of such stuff.

So, evidently it's not a balloon. What, then, is it?

Considering we're in an art gallery, it seems safe to say it's a sculpture.

A sculpture pretending to be a balloon?

Ha, that's funny.

Why is that funny?

Because a sculpture is not a sort of thing that can pretend.

But this one deceived us. We thought it was a balloon.

Perhaps the deception isn't in the thing but in your mind.

My mind deceived me?

The "Purple Balloon" just is what it is.

But illusions can have real consequences. A Zen story:

Master is sitting outside steps of temple smoking his pipe and watching his number one pupil meditating in the courtyard. Suddenly the pupil opens his eyes and exclaims, "Master, Master, I have it, I have it! I know the answer to everything!"

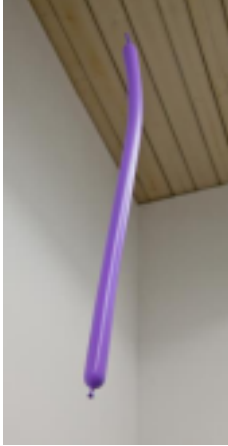
"You do?" Asked Master, "and what is it?"

"Everything is just an illusion Master, all is just illusion!"

Master gets up and approaches the student while pulling hard in his pipe, and as he passes the student, turns the contents of his red-hot pipe out on top of the nice bald head and bangs the pipe down hard to empty it, showering student's head with burning embers.

The student jumps up, shouting, "Master, what are you trying to do? I'm burning all over! Are you trying to kill me? What's the matter with you??"

"Ahhhh...", replies the master, "Illusion makes you very angry."



Tom Friedman, Purple Balloon, 2014. Paint and Styrofoam, 3.8 x 128.3 cm, 1 1/2 x 50 1/2 inch.

This is a tiny sculpture.

Yes. And mysterious.

There's a little, blobby shape like a boot or maybe a seashell with holes in it. And it's attached to the intersection of two, thin flat, corroded lengths of something arranged in a T shape.

And displayed on its own little shelf.

It looks like something the artist might have found.

But the checklist itemizes a variety of materials, so it seems safe to say he made it. And with much delicacy and refinement.

Do you think he wanted it to look like something he found?

Why would he want to do that?

If you come across something interesting but you don't know what it is, you'll be inclined to examine it closely. It could be dangerous!

Or useful.

Or edible.

I suppose that's what all artists want: for people to closely examine the things they make. How do you figure out what something is?

In your imagination you compare it to similar things that you know.

And if nothing similar comes to mind?

If it eludes classification?

It becomes even more interesting.

Looking at Mr. Hoyt's sculpture, I feel my mind bumping up against something it can't wrap itself around. It's frustrating. And fascinating.

It's like a square peg and all your mental holes are round. But you can't help trying to make it fit. Why do you suppose Mr. Hoyt made it so small?

Does there have to be a reason? Maybe he just likes small things.

Because it's so small it seems unassuming. It's not imposing.

Yes, and it's intimate, too.

Intimate?

You could hold it gently in your hands.

Small things can be dangerous.

Not negligible.

Right. A small thing can have a big impact.

Also, some people – not only artists – just like the feeling of making something small, intricate and complex. They're the watchmakers of humanity.

I suppose that for the artist creating the thing there's a satisfying feeling of focused concentration. All energies aligned toward a singular end.

Now I see the blob connected to the right-angled T as a union, a wedding of contrary dispositions – of the rational and the intuitive or, if you will, the feminine and the masculine.

Yin and Yang.

Exactly.



Matt Hoyt, Untitled, 2018. Metal, epoxy resin, epoxy putty, and pastel on polyurethane, 3.81 x 10.8 x 20.3 cm, 1 1/2 x 4 1/4 x 8 inch.

This reminds me of something Charles Darwin wrote.

The inventor of evolution?

Yes. He described humor as "a tickling of the mind."

Interesting. What made you think of that?

Those big, floppy hands, they tickle me.

Your mind, not your body.

Right.

You have a ticklish mind.

So it seems.

I suppose that's what having a sense of humor is.

I suppose so.

What is it about these hands that tickles you?

On the one hand, I see them as rubbery, fat-fingered hands of funny cartoon characters. And on the other hand?

I see them not as hands at all but as flat, painted shapes, one brown, the other pink, surrounded by yellow paint.

Now you see 'em, now you don't.

Right.

That tickles your mind.

Yes. The back and forth. This way and that. One side and then the other.

Which makes me think of a Zen story:

A youthful monk, journeying home, reached the bank of a vast river. Standing there, he pondered for long on how he could get across. He was about to give up and retrace his steps when he spotted an old Zen teacher standing on the opposite bank. He yelled to him, "Oh master, I am stranded here. Can you tell me how I may get across to the other side?"

The aged teacher thought for a few moments, looking up and down the river. He then shouted back, "My good fellow, you are on the other side!"

I would like to ask that teacher about this painting. I would ask him: Can you see it both ways – as an a composition of flat shapes and three colors and as hands in space at the same time?

That would be an excellent question. Personally, I'm of two minds about the answer.



Carl Ostendarp, Untitled (Couple Painting-Yellow), 1999. Oil on canvas, 172.7 x 195.6 cm, 68 x 77 inch.

"Crusts"

This represents something nothing else in the show does.

What's that?

Food.

Two giant slices of bread, one atop the other, with a square-ish hole cut out of most of its central area. What was taken away would be good to make a giant tea sandwich.

Being and nothingness.

How's that?

The crust-shaped stuff exists, and in the hole there's nothing.

Nothing?

Well, you could say that the hole is filled with air, which is made up of zillions of molecules. Yes. Also dust and microbes and pollen. But air is mostly invisible to us, so it looks like there's nothing in the hole.

Invisible air is all around us. Does that mean we are surrounded by nothingness? Perhaps better to say, nothing that requires our attention at this moment.

Zen masters advise us to empty our minds.

According to Ta Hui (1089-1163), "Buddha said, if you want to know the realm of buddhahood, you must make your mind as clear as empty space..."

Can you do that?

No. There's always something buzzing around in my mind.

Same here.

Perhaps this sculpture represents Buddhahood.

Please explain.

The bread is the body and the material world, and the space within is emptied mind. Hmm... I see also that the sculpture is entirely white.

Is it white or is it colorless?

What's the difference?

Maybe there's no difference objectively.

But subjectively?

If it was painted white, then that would be its color. If it's the stuff it was made of without any added coat of paint, then it seems colorless. Naked, you might say.

Unlike a classical nude in marble, which seems less naked than if it were naturalistically painted.

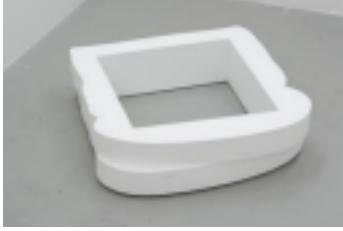
The form defined by light and shadow but without the full sensuous materiality of ordinarily real objects.

It seems to lack a dimension of reality. It seems slight unreal -- ethereal. A ghost. What is a ghost?

A figment of your imagination that haunts your mind.

I think this sculpture will continue to haunt my mind.

Mine, too.



Nathaniel Robinson, Crusts, 2018. Fiberglass-reinforced gypsum cement and paint, 20.3 x 78.7 x 81.3 cm, 8 x 31 x 32 inch.

This isn't black and neither is it a hole.

It's a circular mirror with green paint covering the surface.

So no light gets in.

Or out.

A mirror that reflects only darkness.

A black hole after all.

In astronomy, a black hole is a region of spacetime exhibiting such strong gravitational effects that nothing—not even light—can escape from inside it.

Being depressed is like falling into a black hole. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out. A mirror is the opposite of that: light bounces off of it.

The mirror is a recurring symbol in Zen. Chuang-tzu wrote,

“The mind of a perfect man is like a mirror.

It grasps nothing. It expects nothing.

It reflects but does not hold.”

On the other hand...

Yes?

Many things germinate in darkness. Seeds for example.

From which life arises.

And feelings, the seeds of thought.

Green is the color of life. Grass is green.

Should we say something about the circle?

Yes. In Zen, the circle is an important symbol. A circle painted in one stroke of a brush by a Zen master is called an enso.

What does it symbolize?

Wholeness; enlightened mind; life and death; the universe and the void; time and eternity; reality and abstraction; and so forth. Now I recollect a Zen story:

An old man on the beach drew a perfect circle in the sand with a stick. A little boy nearby piped up, “Hey, old man, how could you draw a such a perfect circle?” The old man replied, “I tried over and over.” He handed the stick to the boy and said, “Here, you try,” and he walked away. The boy tried to draw a circle but it wasn't perfect. He tried again and again and again, and although his circles improved there was always something off. Finally, one day he drew a perfect circle, and then he heard the voice of a little boy: “Hey, old man, how could you draw such a perfect circle?”

I like that story. It's circular.



Ah-Bin Shim, Black Hole 2018. Acrylic on mirror and steel bracket, 25 X 25 cm, 9 27/32 x 9 27/32 inch.

Do you like this painting?

Oh, yes, very much.

What do you see here?

A bulbous purple shape surrounded by orange.

Is that all?

It looks to me like some kind of toy stuffed animal viewed from behind. I see its tail, its haunches and little ears... or maybe eyes.

You might see it another way.

How's that?

As a nude male torso cropped above the nipples and below the thighs.

What I see as a tail you see as a penis?

I'm not saying I see it that way, just that it can be seen that way.

It's like the duck-rabbit illusion. You can see it one way or the other but not both ways at the same time. Yes. I feel a bit of frustration in my mind as I try to make it into something not ambiguous. You want a thing to be this or that, not this and that.

Yes. If I happen on a mushroom in the woods, I want to know if it's poisonous or not. Or magic or not. But if a mushroom guidebook told you which, would you then know everything about that mushroom? Not if you think about all the things you could come to know about it.

Is it possible to know too much?

Maybe. I just now recall another Zen story:

A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself. "It's full! No more will go in!" the professor blurted. "This is you," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"



Alice Tippit, *Teddy*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 38.1 cm, 18 x 15 inch.

This sculpture has several parts.

Yes. There's a pancake-shaped piece of pinstriped ceramic attached to a rectangular plank of unfinished wood with black shapes painted on it that give the illusion of receding into space like windows in the corner of a room. A thin length of wood attached to the lower part of the pancake form suggest the floor of the room.

So there is one thing, a sculpture, and there are several things.

Yes. The one thing is made up of other things.

Do those other things have parts?

It seems they do. The wooden pieces have sides and corners, for example.

Do the sides and corners have parts?

If you're talking about the wood, it's made up of tiny cells.

Do the cells have parts?

I suppose like everything else they're made of molecules.

I suppose so.

And the molecules are made of atoms.

What are atoms made of?

They're made of electrons, protons and neutrons.

Is there anything that doesn't have parts?

Yes. They're called "elementary particles."

So this sculpture is made of zillions of teeny, tiny parts.

According to science. But most of them we needn't be concerned about.

I should hope not!

All we need to worry about is what we can see with our eyes.

A sculpture.

Yep.

But with multiple parts.

An assemblage.

Yes.

So what makes the several parts into the one sculpture? What turns the parts into the whole? Your mind.

I should have known.

I'm most interested in the relationship between the ceramic blob and the other parts. What about it?

The blob strikes me as some sort of life form.

How's that?

Life comes mostly in blobby forms. Like human bodies are lots of blobs hanging on bony armatures.

Here it's like we're seeing the back of someone's head who is looking out the windows – or at monochromatic black paintings – in the corner of a room.

And what about that?

I guess we always see things in perspective, each according to his or her own point of view.

So the blob-head is trapped within its own perspective. That seems true not only of this blob but of all blobs.

Can human blobs ever escape this predicament?

Why would they want to?

It would be useful to be able to see things from other angles.

You can't actually see from any angle but your own; but you can imagine what things look like from another viewpoint.

Maybe that's what art is for.

Could be.



Christina Tenaglia, Untitled, 2018. Wood, paint, ink, nails, screws, and fired clay, 43.2 x 43.2 x 5.1 cm, 17 x 17 x 2 inch.

"Smoker and Mirror"

This is an odd picture.

How so?

In the middle where things usually appear there's a blank wall. The interesting parts – the smoker and the mirror – are off to the sides.

Yes. And all you see of the smoker is a hand holding a cigarette. And the smoker isn't reflected in the mirror. The mirror is blank. Also, there's that narrow corridor to the right leading into darkness.

Yes. I wonder what's back there?

Something dark and scary?

Maybe the title is a clue to solving this mystery.

Oh?

It calls to mind "smoke and mirrors," which is what magicians use to create illusions of impossible happenings.

I guess you could call the artist, Mr. Worth, a magician, an illusionist.

Yes. After all, the smoker, the mirror, the blank wall and even the darkness beyond aren't real; they all exist, if they exist at all, only in our minds.

Sort of like how what you see in a mirror isn't real but only a reflection of what's real. The painting itself, though: that's certainly real.

Mirrors are real, too.

I wonder why the wall takes up so much of the composition?

Remember those all-white abstract paintings we saw at the museum the other day?

Yes. The wall labels said that the artist wanted to get rid of illusions. I wondered why a painter would want to do that.

One of the labels said it was to "purify" painting, as if illusions were dirty.

So that kind of painting teaches us to live without illusions? To be disillusioned? Perhaps Mr. Worth's blank wall is making fun of that idea.

How so?

In his painting, the blank wall hides something. As if to say that pure painting doesn't get rid of messy illusions and fantasies but only pushes them out of sight.

It's not easy being pure.

A Zen story occurs to me:

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a young woman also attempting to cross. She asked if they could help her cross to the other side.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and continued on his journey.

The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. After rejoining his companion, he was speechless, and an hour passed without a word between them.

Two more hours passed, then three, finally the younger monk could contain himself any longer, and blurted out "As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman; how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?"

The older monk looked at him and replied, "Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river three hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?"



Alexi Worth, Smoker and Mirror, 2012. Acrylic on nylon mesh, 91.4 x 68.6 cm, 36 x 27 inch.