

Why I Am Not a Painter

*With thanks to Frank O'Hara, as I
borrowed his title*

(For years I have been troubled by a very strong intuitive response to natural landscape. It is a double response, for I *do* see the scene I am looking at as a painting, one already painted, and at the same time, I involuntarily think, and feel a strong emotion as I am thinking this, "I wish I were a painter.")

No ideas
but in things? But then,
why do I want
to paint this world today? A thaw in our
egret landscape
and then fast freeze,
this morning
each tree etched with frost.
My holly plant
sitting on the steps in its inadequate pot
shows each leaf outlined in crystal
and the bare
forsythia bushes wave thin ice-crust
twigs. What ideas come to me
seeing this world?
None.
But I want to paint it, so I call home
after a walk to my office
and tell my husband
he should photograph it.

Why?

Too easy to say
it won't be that way tomorrow. If I

wanted to hold the image,
why didn't I stay outdoors
looking at it all day.? I had
nothing
better to do. But I went inside and buried myself
in a book.

This
has been true
each time
I have seen something
I wanted to paint:

the plantation oaks on Jekyll Island,
the curving cliffs at Laguna Beach,
the fog canyons,
autumn in the Blue Ridge Mountains,

I almost get shorthand messages now
from my brain/ "I wish I were a painter. I'd paint this
scene."
and "Therefore you don't need to look at it very long."

Do I want to paint it because that
would force me to set up my easel
and sit for a long time looking at the scene?
Why don't I simply sit and look at something I find
beautiful?

What does beauty in my eye
do to me?

The carbon cave
soots my eyes. Oh, John Dunn, my
ophthalmologist,
surely you represent
clear vision.
What else is poetry? But looking down

the labyrinth to a California past
shows me the darkness of sex.
Is it possible
to plant a garden
and not see the ground open up?
The wasp which has been flying around in my
 bedroom
now clings to the window's cold,
scarcely moves, but in the ground
swollen with white kernel
in an old civilization.

I am looking at some cuttings of a
velvet plant, in a fat green bottle
which once held framboise.
Their curving leaves, like arrowheads,
are glowing magenta in the afternoon sun, their
delicate princess hair roots, fine and white,
almost filling the bottle, beginning
to curl around its bottom.

The glow of the soft leaves
reminds me of all the beauty I would like to paint.
How much I prefer a tree, this huge fig plant,
a night-blooming cereus which has never bloomed
reaching long fleshy fingers into today's sunshine, the
bristly spruces with each clump of needles
outlined by ice.

The human form is one I wish I did not possess.
 Daphne, you were not punished.
 Narcissus, none of you.
How much I would rather be
a plant

 than what I am.
Is this why I wish I were a painter?
For it is a painter of landscapes
and of still lives I would be.
Humans and animals
so trivial, uninteresting. But water lilies,
yes, or Stevens' "junipers shagged with ice."
Does this explain why
some few
of us
who live in apartments
read the Burpee and other seed
catalogues?
Or why I, who once cared everything
for egg beauty
and the passionate life
now prefer
still lives,
the bloom of plant life
a world where desire has been eliminated?

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The Magician's Feast Letters
Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1982

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