

Close-viewing Painting of the Late Twentieth Century

In the next six sessions you will be *Close-viewing* paintings from the late twentieth century. My proposal is that you could benefit from attention to the seven recurrent concepts proposed in 2015 for a course in Modernist Painting.¹ A synopsis of these concepts has been provided below.

The idea of *Close-viewing*, a term I have invented, derives from early twentieth century writers involved in *Close-reading* literature.² Initially in *Close-viewing* the participant will focus on a particular painting with attention to seeing what is there. *What is there* may involve rhetorical features, structural elements, contextual references, patterns of connectedness and particular historical inferences. Subsequently the participant moves from observation to interpretation.

Session one will focus the attentions of participants on paintings that evoke the human figure through representation, simulation or expressionist practice. A comprehension of these terms in session one will enhance the potential of participants to understand the paintings to be viewed in subsequent sessions. All of the paintings chosen for later sessions may be better comprehended through an understanding of their precedents in relation to their contemporary context. The first part of session one is intended to contribute to that historical context and to help each participant's comprehension of the terms. The second part will provide a quick view of the sessions to follow.

Seven Recurrent Concepts

1. VIEWER AS CONTRIBUTOR: EYESIGHT

As a viewer you contribute to the production of the painting. The painter factures the painting, the viewer momentarily completes the process and potentially completes the process each time the painting is viewed.

2. PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE: PERCEPTION, PROPRIOCEPTION: SYNTHESIS AND INVENTION

Your eyesight, and its relationship to your body and your brain, is mobile, involved in synthesis and invention from your physical experience in front of the painting. Your perception and proprioception is complexed by this mobility; for example, the eyes reconcile small areas of colour into a synthesis and the brain will sometimes invent what is seen based on an expectation.

3. EUROPEAN READING EXPERIENCE: LEFT TO RIGHT IN FRONT OF RECTANGLES

Readers of languages written from left to right would also inherit the cultural tradition of viewing paintings in rectangles and initially read these from left to right. Our position is to stand in front of the paintings with already coded viewing habits and with prior expectations. Good paintings can challenge both positions directly derived from awareness of these positions.

¹ These are the notes titled *Seven Recurrent Concepts* written by Allen Fisher for WEA participants in 2015 regarding some of the concepts used during the sessions for the course *Modernist Painting 1950-1970 in Britain and America*. An extension of the proposals and other elaborations of the seven concepts may be found in Allen Fisher. *Imperfect Fit. Aesthetic Function, Fracture & Perception in Art and Writing since 1950*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016.

² For example, I.A. Richards. *Practical Criticism. A Study of Literary Judgement*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1929.

4. CONSTRUCTION: PATTERNS OF CONNECTEDNESS: STRUCTURE AND PROPORTIONS

Specific aspects of construction evident in a painting encourage recognitions that elaborate a pattern of connectedness, such as a recurrence of shapes. Patterns of connectedness are the basis of aesthetics and consciousness. Construction can involve structure and proportions, presenting rules and breakage from rules. In terms of structure we experience visual weight and stress, held by the edges of rectangular (as well as circular and oval) shapes, or left without ties, as if floating, in the visual plane. Paintings on cave walls, murals and scrolls provide for a different dynamical potential. Some aspects of construction will also encourage your viewing choices. A diagonal signal from the lower righthand corner will bring the eye back into the activity of the painting; the height of a horizon line can determine the visual perspective, determining the area of grounded activity in contrast to the represented distance. In terms of proportions we are influenced by the visual-cultural experience of having seen other paintings. The ideas inherited by Renaissance artists (ratified in book form by Luca Pacioli and the Leonardo da Vinci workshop in 1509) were already integral to the experience of design in buildings and codified in the works of Euclid and Vitruvius. Examples of using proportion, such as ideas of the Fibonacci series and Golden Section (1: 1.618...) provide a basis for traditional shapes (such as relations of height to width) and innovation from, or disruption of, that tradition.

5. EXTRINSIC AND INTRINSIC: REPRESENTATION AND REFERENTIALITY

Paintings provide a range of foci with regard to viewing options. Some paintings are overtly representational and referential and use extrinsic experiences to inform the meaning of the painting. This can be deceptive; referential works also rely on constructed or structural norms. Some paintings do not appear to rely on extrinsic factors, but appear to rely almost entirely on the integral experience of the artwork. The 'interaction of colour' (as Josef Albers named it³) appears to favour the integrated experience, but we could argue for the referential associations that some colours and shapes have, and which will also potentially vary with each viewer.

6. MEDITATIVE AND CONTEMPLATIVE: AFFECT AND EMPATHY

As viewers we have a multiplicity of choices that we make explicit, or are incidental, or we are unaware of them. A painting's evident flatness or its representation of depth affect our attentions in terms of meditative and contemplative experiences. The former is achieved from taking the flatness of the image into ourselves as an immediate presence. The latter is achieved by proposing to ourselves a distance and thus a future. Both of these responses interface personal experiences of affect and empathy.

7. MODERNIST DIFFERENCE: ABSTRACTION AND FIGURATIVE ATTENTIONS

An interaction or exchange of thoughts then rises. In the period 1950-1970 painters and viewers have inherited critical changes regarding representation that started in Modernist painting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ Put simply, the situation is that Abstraction and Figurative attentions are not mutually exclusive; they may appear to be quite separate, but they are not. This is partly because of cultural familiarity with the traditions of representation, but also because painters and viewers are involved in active experiences that renew at each viewing.

Allen Fisher, September, 2017.

³ Josef Albers. *Interaction of Colour*, London: Yale University Press, 1963, reissued in anniversary edition, 2013.

⁴ My proposal would place that Modernist change back to paintings by Jacques-Louis David in the eighteenth century, corroborated in T.J. Clark. *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. Different aspects of that Modernist change could also include paintings by Nicolas Poussin in the seventeenth century and by Piero della Francesca in the fifteenth.