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Unintended Consequences: Diversity and Studio Art Critique

(CAA Panel, Feb 16, 2007, NYC)

Art has the power to reveal the political unconscious of a society. The unconscious exists below the surface, but the criticism of art, and by extension the art school critique, can reveal precisely those values that lie under the surface. For example, in any art school environment, teachers have biases based on their own backgrounds, whether regional, ethnic, gendered, pedagogical, theoretical etc. The problem arises when those biases are not made transparent and put into question by the teacher and the student, but masquerade as natural. The best environment is one where students apply their recently acquired critical thinking skills to their own education. However, because the school or university structure is by nature hierarchical, students often believe in their faculty as truth tellers, much less biased and fallible people. The hierarchical division between teacher and student should be fluid enough so that studio art critiques are dialogues, not diatribes. Teachers have an obligation to reveal their own fallibility. Such revelations can lead to better scholarship.

During a summer residency I attended before starting my MFA, I was making small autobiographical figurative paintings based on scenes from my family and my childhood. The format of the paintings was flat, graphic, and patterned, simultaneously drawing from traditions of pop and folk art, and Persian and Indian miniatures. (IMAGE--MOTHER ASLEEP WITH REMOTE) In one individual critique, a faculty member there told me that my work was too timid and young, and that another faculty member supported the work because of its "ethnic content." She compared me to a former Korean student of hers who was making art to please her parents. Is it categorically wrong to make art that *does* please or speak to one's parents and their experiences? Further, if painting scenes of my family was "ethnic content," when was any artwork free from such content? The teacher singled me out as an "other," without acknowledging that students of all backgrounds were also being coddled for their "ethnic content," by other faculty. She surely had a point about my work being timid and young, but it seemed wrong to single me out, because it implied any praise I received was a result only of my parents' Bangladeshi immigrant status. Unable to successfully de-naturalize the instructor's comments, I remained inarticulate during the critique.

A few years later, in an individual critique at a post grad school residency, a prominent cultural critic turned to one presumably abstract painting in my studio and said he didn't like it because the forms reminded him of flowers. I told him that indeed those *were* flowers. These abstract paintings were based on textile patterns. (IMAGE--SNOW CANDY) He asked if I really wanted my work "to be so feminine and so Asian," but to his credit, qualified his comment with, "or that might just be my cultural point of view." I immediately reiterated without malice that his own viewpoint as a German male might have something to do with his read of my work as feminine and Asian because of its laborious, colorful, and willfully decorative qualities. During the

rest of our short meeting, we did reach some genuine point of mutual respect, as I had held my own. Both of these critiques were with visiting faculty. My experience in grad school in between these two residencies affirmed the value of sustained contact with faculty over a two-year period. Visiting faculty say anything they want because there are no repercussions. One or only a few meetings seems not enough time to unpack the complexities of a student's identity and its relations to a practice. In a forty-five minute session, questioning and actually probing the student can be cumbersome. So often, first impressions and superficial typecasting prevail, based on the student's gender, ethnicity, and language, *in addition to* the artwork.

I started teaching full time after that. My transition from student to teacher happened overnight, so I more than anyone realized its arbitrariness. I felt just how constructed and precisely unnatural my authority was. I like to reveal this fact to my students as often as possible by telling them that I don't know the answers or by revealing a bias, for example, towards work with a physical and material presence, or work with a succinct or distilled aesthetic or wit. Or sometimes I even hypothesize what an "opposite-minded" subject (and often a real member of the Cal Arts faculty) would say to them. Whereas these individual critiques highlight the subjectivity of the teacher and student, what happens in a group critique where the impulse is naturally toward consensus? In this situation, the potential for an instructor to assert authority and take the position of the truth teller is heightened by the spectacle and theatricality of the whole exercise. For this reason, group critiques at their worst can be a way of exaggerating the student/teacher hierarchy. However, at its best, the consensus of group critique can be a revelation to the open minded student who cannot see his or her own work due to the bias inherent in being an author of something. Sol Lewitt's declaration that "the artist may not necessarily understand his own art. His perception is neither better nor worse than that of anyone else," is akin to a pithy summary of Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author". This authorial blindness is due in large part to the internalization of identity and influence. In other words, the difficulty and paradox inherent in seeing one's practice from the point of view of an observer, a kind of Lacanian mirror stage crisis of misrecognition, in relation to the image of one's own artwork.

A recent class group critique revealed to me precisely the nature of this kind of misrecognition. In her BFA thesis show, the student had painted two large paintings on un-stretched canvases that she had stapled to the wall. In each mostly monochromatic painting were oil painted line drawings depicting one white woman and one South Asian character. One painting depicted a South Asian bride in fully ornamented attire and jewelry touching the chin of a white woman. The white woman looked at the viewer or metaphorical cameraman with a cautious smile, while the South Asian woman looked at her with a straight-faced expression. (IMAGE--STUDENT ONE) The second painting depicted another white woman in an evening gown touching the hand of what appeared to be a South Asian rickshawallah, street vendor, or laborer in a lungi or sarong wrapped up between his legs as these laborers do. Again the white woman faced the viewer with a smiling expression of one posing for a snapshot, whereas the South Asian man also facing the viewer

appeared stone faced in his expression. This painting included a drawing of the sun, with decorative lines or rays emanating forth and spilling into the scene. The decorative elements referred to Indian folk painting and henna designs painted on brides' hands and feet, as well as 1960's psychedelic designs influenced by these forms. These elements confused two and three-dimensional space and lent an air of fantasy and abstraction to the works. The two white women were also represented in portraits in two other pieces in the show, hanging sculptural paintings suspended from the ceiling. Each woman's portrait was decorated with glued on sequins, mirrors, and painted flowers and other decorative motifs, and adorned with hand painted texts of their first names. On the floor was a cheap Persian style rug, not part of the exhibition, brought in as a seat for the class, but affecting the experience of the show. The walls were painted a bright magenta to just above the height of the paintings. (IMAGE--STUDENT TWO)

The student started by saying that she had made the paintings out of an interest in pattern and decoration and that after four years of conceptual critiques and ant-formalist bias at Cal Arts, she had finally found the courage to do what she had wanted. When prompted to speak of the narrative of the characters represented in the work, the student stated only that the two white women were images of her friends, while the two other characters had originated from images off the internet. When asked what the contexts of these internet figures were, the student was unable to answer, and say only that she had chosen them for the decorative nature of their dress conforming to her desire for lush and decorative paintings. A red flag went up here, as it was clear the student had not exercised the due diligence expected of any Cal Arts student. Hearing the student's intentions revealed crucial unconscious intentions and unintended consequences.

I had already formed a narrative of tourism around these works. I said that these women seemed to have traveled to the Indian subcontinent on vacation, encountering the bride and the laborer, and then returning with virtual snapshots of their experiences and decorated souvenir portraits hanging from the ceiling. Even the use of mirrors on the hanging portraits referred back to South Asian decorated handicrafts and fabrics. The student huffed at my interpretation, saying she hadn't intended these paintings to be about tourism or about India. I take stock in Sol Lewitt's implication that the author's intention can never completely encompass the meaning of a work of art, and have said so to my students on many occasions. The viewers and their identities (by definition the contexts they find themselves in) are always active participants in a work's meaning. A student who clings to her own intention as the final or fixed meaning of a work is surely fighting a losing battle in art school. When I realized that the work was more intriguing than what she had to say about it, I did something I rarely do: I asked that the student not speak anymore until the end of the critique, when she could respond to the class, in the hopes that she might *listen*.

Many of the students spoke and reiterated the tourism theme. Others noted the disparate class backgrounds of the laborer and woman in an evening gown, a potential historical colonial servant/memsahib relationship. The idea of fantasy came up several times as the patterns overtaking the image spoke to surreal

space, or the trippy qualities of psychedelia. A complete and convincing surreal touristic fantasy emerged as a consensus of meaning in relation to these works, mirroring the internet tourism the student had employed in her process. Some students remarked on the passive or at least stoic expressions on the faces of the South Asians in comparison to the smiling and wide-eyed expressions of the women. Students rather revealingly remarked that the white women seemed familiar, and one likened the woman in an evening gown to a David Hockney portrait of a collector recently exhibited at LACMA. The South Asian people however were less familiar to some in the audience, much more difficult to place or empathize with. Did these paintings split the identification/objectification binary of psychoanalysis described in Laura Mulvey's now famous essay on visual pleasure along not gender, but racial lines? But I was one of a handful in the room who felt that the South Asian characters were also people I had known. My identification with these figures was something I thought the author might like to hear about, since she took the view of objectifying them, though not sexually, she saw them as mannequins for decorated clothing to hang on, not accounting for the ramifications of representing them.

Was objectification of these figures inherently wrong or unacceptable? If the student had been of South Asian background would such objectification become acceptable? I don't believe that the role of the group critique is to establish rules or off-limit subject matter for some and not for others. When the critique does so, it reaffirms the ideologue's position and exaggerates the student/teacher hierarchy. Rather the critique should frame the terms of the debate, and allow the students to understand the distinction between a figure we identify with versus one we objectify and the *reversibility* of these two types of images. For one could simultaneously read this work as mocking of the white women and their fetishization of another culture. Were the white women so clearly the protagonists? It seems the centrality of their position in the exhibition and steadiness of their gazes would say so, but I'm not so sure. At least one of their gazes seemed tentative and unsure. The woman with the bride seemed a little overwhelmed to me.

In his essay on Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of the black male subject, Kobena Mercer describes the complexities of the role an author's intention plays in a work's read. (IMAGE--MAPPLETHORPE) Mercer revises his first essay of 1986 which takes the photographs as "cultural artifact(s)" (173) of how white people stereotype black male sexuality "at the center of colonial fantasy." (177) This former read ignores Mapplethorpe's intentions as described in his written statements. Mercer's second essay written three years later, by contrast, offers a more sympathetic view; in light of the politics of the religious right at the time, Mercer reveals his own fallibility as a critic. He takes into account comments made by Mapplethorpe and some of his black models that offer a perspective on the author's identity as an urban gay male artist. Mercer addresses the *reversibility* of the gaze in Mapplethorpe's work, which he says, potentially offers a critique of racial and sexual stereotypes as opposed to an affirmation of them. By reversing his read, Mercer offers "a reconsideration of post-structuralist theories of authorship":

Although romanticist notions of authorial creativity cannot be returned to the central role they once played in criticism and interpretation, the question of agency in cultural practices that contest the canon and its cultural dominance suggest that is really *does* matter who is speaking. (194)

The question is further complicated when speaking about authorial intention when it comes to student artists. Students are authors in training and their intentions are often unformed and unknown. Though they should surely learn to cultivate their intentions, in the meantime they can learn from hearing about unconscious intentions and unintended consequences during group critiques. Some teachers preach that a work that does not reflect the student's intentions has failed. But I maintain, that if the intention and the read of the work were completely congruent, the continual surprise and subsequent growth in art production would be lost. In other words, the student should be constantly revising intentions as well as the work itself.

When I visited my parents in Islamabad, Pakistan, where they are temporarily residing, one of their friends cajoled me into lecturing on my work at the National Art Gallery, though I felt unprepared on many levels. The cultural gulf and potential language barrier made me apprehensive. I saw my current work as a reaction to abstract expressionist painting traditions in the US and Europe; how was I to describe it to a group of people who didn't give much thought to that tradition, and whose post-colonial academic painting instruction was squarely rooted in representation, whether that of the pre-modern West or that of Islamic miniature? In lecturing, my work seemed to include the painterly representation that was accessible to this audience. Some of the recent work is comprised of an "expressionistic" painting made of large casual gestures, *and* a dissected copy of that work. The dissected copy occurs slowly and deliberately, one small gesture at a time. (IMAGE--BIG BRUSH PAINTING AND SMALL BRUSH COPY YCM AND DETAILS) Members of the audience likened the process of making the copy to that of painting a still life from observation. A friend had once asked me if I saw these works as a feminist reworking of the male dominated tradition of expressionist painting. And it seemed that this audience could only appreciate the expression of spontaneous painting bravado *through* its laborious and crafted counterfeit. Beyond the abstraction, the lack of perceived skill, labor and discipline of the expressionism seemed the most foreign to these viewers. By including a laborious and painstaking copy, these diptychs are also related to another aspect of my identity that is rooted in the context I was accidentally lecturing in. Just as I had hoped the listening to of diverse viewpoints would reveal some subconscious desire to my student, this new audience had revealed another aspect of these works to me. In other works, I described how abstract patterns in Islamic architecture and tile design had always influenced my reaction to the Western modernist tradition. This fact was of obvious interest to the audience more so than the unknown Bridget Riley or Agnes Martin, as evidenced in the newspaper headlines the next morning: "Faruqee pairs Opposites in Painting Islamic Patterns," reaffirming my belief that an audience's viewpoint determines the perception and meaning of a given work at a given moment.

During my stay in Pakistan, I also read Azar Nafisi's memoir "Reading Lolita In Tehran," about teaching English Literature in Revolutionary Iran. Nafisi describes how a less overtly political novel such as the Great Gatsby spurred more discussion and debate than Mike Gold's Marxist writing, which was clearer in its point of view. In the context of the Revolution, some of the students saw the novel as an affirmation of American cultural decadence. When she decides to have her class put the novel on trial, however, the student defense attorney argues that the novel may actually be a critique of such a decadent society. Ultimately the utter "undecidability" (to use Mercer's term) begs the question whether writers or artists should be what Nafisi calls "guardians of morality." As Nafisi describes Revolutionary Iran: "This displaced view of writers, ironically, gave them a sacred place, and at the same time paralyzed them. The price they had to pay for their pre-eminence was a kind of aesthetic impotence." (136) Nafisi's memoir is a compelling defense of literature, of humanistic education and debate, and ultimately the category of sensuality, beauty, and the aesthetic. For it is the well-crafted novel, that one that gives us the sensuality of experience that ultimately arrests the viewer into unwittingly opening her mind. Clearly Nafisi seems "romantic" in the words of a student about beauty precisely because she faces the repressive censorship by the Islamic Republic of "Imperial" and "Pro-Western" novels, such as the Great Gatsby. I see a connection here to Mercer's revised argument about Mapplethorpe. Mercer is also reacting to imminent censorship, but that of Jesse Helms: "black critiques of Mapplethorpe's work that stop simply at the reading of racism and racism alone can quite conceivably be recuperated and assimilated into the conservative cultural politics of homophobic containment." (203) Recently, I asked my class to describe the difference between education and propaganda. I was surprised that they took a moment to reflect before answering. Lately I've also been interested in Said's later writings on humanism, because I think he offers an answer to this question. Despite humanism's misuse of politics and public policy in the form of ethnocentrism and empire, Said asks us to remember the humanist ideal "based on the human being's capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, dully." (11) Such is the ideal of the art critique, to turn passive, reactive, defensive students into knowledge producers.

Works Cited:

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