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Fig. 1

Sydney Schrader, *Her Autumn Years* installation photo, 2016
Courtesy of the artist.

Painting is a whale

By Alan Longino

Hålval

Valar vill vatten
 halrum i vatten
 lättnad i fettnad
 rymmen i späck

Hole Whale

Whales want water
 hollow in water
 lightness in fatness
 flight in blubber¹

—Aase Berg, *Forsla Fett (Transfer Fat)*

Painting is a whale when it is okay in its grandest fragility. In most environments, whales are okay with you touching them, but they are easily frightened creatures that, by too much force or too much accident or too much overt displays of pursuit or control, will make them immediately turn from you and the formal logic with which you approached them. Like the cetologist who studies whales, whose metrics and rationales for studying and quantifying other sea creatures fail when trying to understand the communities and cultures of whales, one must submit to the whale—to its terms, its histories and extra-histories—to allow its kindness and intimacy to take over, and for the form of itself to develop fully.

The older idea that form is only the visual composition, or that form is the explanation of the contained content, is insufficient for understanding painting and poetry today. Instead, what I hope to look at is the painted or written form as an ecology, one that materializes and moves along an intimate spectrum of nature and history. A kind of form that can be understood beyond itself and beyond either the painted or printed plane.

Set as my desktop background, the painting that most reminds me of intimacy or the touched essence of compassion, is Piero di Cosimo's *Persesus Liberating Andromeda*, an admittedly unlikely painting to behold such virtues. Within a triangle series of events, the viewer watches as Perseus descends from the skies in the upper right, as he then slashes at the scaly back of a sea monster to save the bound Andromeda, and ending with him and Andromeda closest to us (now in the lower right) as they enjoy the ceremony of their wedding. What is triangulated and focused on, though,

is the central, assumed foe of the story – the sea monster. Its head points, leers we may say, to Andromeda, as the body is turned away from and swells in defense to the mythic but already certain events of Perseus. The green and brown oils that cover its flesh are either the sliminess on the creature we should be in horror of or the birthing fluids still nurturing the beast into its specific role – a damned role for only a specific calling. Turned into a clown that we may laugh at with all those silly tufts of red hair cresting the nape, and already in despair at first sight, Perseus—here I may call him the father of the scene—slashes and torments it instead of nurturing or attempting to understand, and Andromeda—the mother to whom he looks for support and care—turns away from its gaze. But she does not turn away in an attempt to unbind herself or to attempt escape—she knows she is there to be duly saved—as she so much turns away from this beast in absolute embarrassment for its predicament and immediate end to its short life. The gaze that she does not meet—a gaze met by no one in the picture and which does not address the viewer—is entirely transformative of the picture and of the mythic event because, in the sea monster, referred to as *Cetus*, we see its eyes hope for some connection that would afford its short life some semblance of an actual being.

The connection that *Cetus* enjoys and that allows it to be removed from the story—which only cares about the certain events of Perseus and Andromeda—is equally triangulated by the multiple histories and definitions of language surrounding the creature. In Greek, *Cetus* was often called to as any large fish, or shark, or whale depending on its context. It is a word made fatty by its tender malleability and which equally carries over to the poetry of Aase Berg, where *Val* may equally refer to a whale, a voter, or an election. The understanding of which definition to use is dependent on the framing, context, and its movement along a fattened spectrum of meaning, as well as a history of that meaning. However, where the Greeks were insouciant in their definition—though equally fluid—Berg’s usage of the word *val* in her poems is precisely cut but still flowing, contained but understood as larger than itself, fattened but not weighty and buoyed to the surface so that it may make sense of itself. This intimacy of language and approximation of form is immediately noticeable in the recent work by the painters Monique Mouton and Sydney Schrader. For both artists, the pictures are displayed as a grouping, or merely as a group, that by similar matter—the paper, the oil, the ink and pencil—allow not for one decisive picture to arise and maintain a central hold, but instead bind themselves together into a nature that does not allow the artist or the viewer singularly to decide where the next ridge, the next line or the next picture should begin or act. The more one reads, indeed looks at, Berg’s poetry or Mouton (fig. 2 and 3) and Schrader’s paintings (fig. 1), the more they even behave like a whale. With their own coda of language and behavior, the form of it produces a culture about itself that is not dissimilar from the way whales themselves interact and form intimate bonds between themselves.

Fig. 2:

Monique Mouton, **More Near (V)**, 2015, watercolor, gesso, ink, pastel on paper, 66.25 x 60 inches (168.28 x 152.40 cm), photograph copyright Monique Mouton, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.



Fig. 3:

Monique Mouton, **More Near (III)**, 2015, watercolor, tempera, pencil on paper, 58.5 x 67 inches (148.59 x 170.18 cm), photograph copyright Monique Mouton, courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC.



As the cetologist Hal Whitehead recently discusses, in an interview with writer Rachel Allen, this interaction and intimacy within the culture and social forming of whales is noted in how these groups, or clans—all matrilineal in nature—keep tightly to themselves and do everything together, communally caring for each other's young, babysitting, and moving together, with Whitehead saying “if one turns left, they all turn left.”² The limbic systems, which is associated with emotional and behavioral effects, as well as the storing of memories, in the brain of Killer (Orca) Whales, is made up of three separate lobes. This is in contrast to the cingulate gyrus (the limbic lobe) of human brains that only consists of one lobe. In addition, the relative number of spindle cells within the limbic lobe, capable of processing social behavior and empathetic effects, is more than 4x that within the human brain, and this possibly explains why violence or competition are much less observed within these groups (though there is some).³

Whales spend the majority of their time diving deep for feeding, all by themselves, but when they are on the surface—the only place that we are able to adequately study them—they spend their whole time socializing, cuddled up in tight clusters and communicating through a very specific coda of clicks that are produced or occur regardless of what they are doing. For Whitehead and other cetologists, these clicks, which are produced by one whale and then responded to by another after a pause, form bonds between them that are performed almost like duets and are simply about bonding rather than directing or organizing. Whitehead characterizes living in these small, tightly bound communities as related to “staying for times in small, isolated fishing villages, where everyone knows everyone and everyone knows what’s going on around them . . . there’s not a whole lot of new information to convey. But there’s still a lot of talking. What is said doesn’t seem to matter; that you say it, and who you say it to, and how you say it is what matters.”⁴

In painting and poetry, where participants are often insiders or specialists, there is an environment of insularity. Everyone equally knows what is going on, and there is often not so much new information to convey. The problem, however, is the disregard for this culture of closeness and intimacy, favoring individuality and separation, procedurally categorizing by some verifiable metrics, instead of looking at what a community of contact and participation invokes and produces by its close-knit being. One solution is looked to in Friedrich Kiesler’s as-yet unpublished texts on *Magic Architecture*—what he describes as an “architecture of exuberant being”—that emphasizes “contact, not separation” and “participation, not isolation.”⁵ Even more interestingly is that, as Spyros Papapetros writes for a preface to the texts, Kiesler offers not a definition of magic, but the magic poly-potency of definitions: “the book is not about the magic of architecture, but the tectonic thought processes of magic that retraces the pat-

terns, enclosures, and (re)definitions of magic’s projective environment.”⁶ The original exuberant being of architecture is then realized as a tool that makes space and forms by its own energy. By near proximity, this exuberance—regardless of scale, be it a local fishing village, a clan of whales, a poem or a painting—may necessarily multiply definition and produce from within itself simply by forming bonds through its near immanence. It would be important to note, then, that the exhibition of Mouton’s work to which I am mostly referring was aptly titled, *More Near*, a title that precisely spoke to the ability of the paintings to bring themselves nearer to each other and produce between them a shared form that allowed an escape from each of the planes of paper, and equally displayed an almost telepathic intimacy between the paintings that spoke of an immanent form running throughout those same planes.

This immanence of meaning and production from within itself, I had originally read in the poems of Berg, but while the poems may deal with themes of surrealism and speculative futures, it is again in the language of Berg, and particularly Mouton’s paintings, that an escape, like di Cosimo’s *Cetus*, is made. Berg writes:

Mamma val

Amma val
Valyngelskal
Ge harmjök,
alla val är
samma val

Mom choice

Nurse whale
Whalebroodshell
Give hare-milk
all whales are
the same whale.⁷

In such condensed and looping language, the shared energies of these near intimacies crack through the written and painted form, like the cuts, ridges, and tears in the paper of Mouton’s paintings. It is by these energies and cracks and tears to material and lingual forms that the ability to read and look to their contents of history makes sensual their trajectory along the fluid spectrum of meaning and material. For each of the painters and poet, this material is the paper—a gentle material whose entire history is based on chains, links, and bonds, and things woven and cuddled together—that allows words and ridges to pass to the next painting or to the next poem,

effecting a similar biology and formation of culture between the works and writings. However, though influences of painting can be immediately identified in Mouton's work—I would like to think to Moira Dryer, Giorgio Cavallon, or Stéphane Bordarier—the notion to simply proceed along a linear timeline of modernity visible at the surface of the painting should be disregarded. What is regarded is the exuberance, at every scale, of the paper and of the painting to carry itself into and out of different contexts and framing devices, producing similarly exuberant cuts, tears, and forms that bind, nurture, and self-generate, because they are so near to and inextricable from each other.

For Kiesler, magic architecture was a story of human housing (though not exactly utopian like he feared it would be applied) of living like whales, and small fishing villages, in closer and closer community to one another. This was in effort that our participation in communication and being would become so commonplace among each other that hierarchies would dissolve and, by our intimacy, we would produce a being of poly-definition and grander compassion. In each of Berg's poems, or Mouton and Schrader's paintings, there is an immediate sense of contained compassion as the language and form repeat and travel through seasons and moods together, as they do in Schrader's groupings, and generates ideas by the touched intimacy they have within themselves. This generation and repetition in turn produces difference by constraint or confinement. Ultimately, I imagine, this would be the forming and binding of the group by participation of itself as an individual—a composition that Berg mentions in “all whales are / the same whale.”⁸ This participation and formation from itself is, as Lucien Levy-Bruhl determines, what allows the participant to be both themselves and other than themselves, saying “in a fashion no less incomprehensible, they receive mystic powers, virtues, qualities . . . which make themselves felt outside, without ceasing to remain where they are.”⁹ This principle of participation allows for multi-numeration, and consubstantiality and, further, as being able to exist in multiple locations. Between Mouton and Schrader's paintings, where the former's exists as individually spaced-out objects within a gallery, and the latter's as a comprehensive, uninterrupted grouping, the forms and colors of each work participate in the generation and forming of each painting beside it or among it. This participation allowing the paintings to extend themselves beyond that of a network, and into a sensible ecology where no node or area of the paintings are privileged over or independent from one another. Instead, the paintings find themselves as self-recombinatory and self-interpretive.

This sensible ecology can be realized from the cautionary phrase of great harm that Berg writes:

The Whale Squeezes Its Sluggishness Through a Certain Room.

*The white blubber; the pain. You Whale you Voter your deed breaks holes in calm shapes.*¹⁰

In this passage, I picture the whale as pinched by pincers between different rooms and passageways through a house; a house of rationale that has compartmentalized and has broken apart the whale into logical and easily understood parts—here, a dorsal fin in the living room, and here, its blubber on your bathroom stool. However, the whale is hurt and the whale cannot participate as itself (if it can even live) when it is subjected to logical interpretation and categorization—its calm lumpy shape has been broken apart by a home that cannot let it live. Its grandness is dissected by logic and its fragility has been done away with by empiricism. Among Whitehead and other cetologists, general metrics and logic have not been able to explain the social behavior and cultural formations of whales—even the way space is determined by whales is different from us, as the clicks and songs they produce travel across oceanic distances in a speed that we cannot imagine on land.¹¹ Funnily, though, it is the empirical language around whales that suggests this inevitable fact (as well as allowing one final escape from rationale), as Baleen whales, which includes the largest living mammal, the Blue whale, are commonly referred to as the taxon of their parvorder, *Mysticeti*, a word that enjoys multiple, unknowable qualities outside of itself.

For the *Mysticeti*, or *baleaneus mysticetus*, this unknowable quality is due to the same duet of definition and meaning that the words and translations of *val* or *cetus* enjoy. When dancing over the divisions of the dictionary, one finds around the prefix of *mys* - the immediately identifiable *mystic*, explaining its origin as the Greek *mystikos*, or “unknown.” This, suspiciously, is not the word that originates the life of the Mysticete into being, as its name is further implicated in mistranslation and historical entanglement. From Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium*, which was one of the first texts that sought to classify the objects and pictures in nature, the *o mus to kētos*, or “the mouse, the whale so called” was mistranslated into *o mustikētos*, “the Mysticetus,” by D.W. Rice, assuming the mouse was an ironic reference to the creature’s size or its baleen “whiskers.”¹² At any scale, the exuberance of the unknown, or the mystical, turns human rationale and mistake into its own fortune, by allowing one step further for the *mys*- to weave itself fully into this sensible ecology.

Hopping up and over on the page of the dictionary, like a foxtrot, *mys-* finds itself attached to a curious *Mysis*, an opossum-shrimp or small crustacean of the Arctic and Baltic seas that is none other than the principal food source for the Mysticete, or baleen whale. Pulling into its mouth large amounts of seawater and *Mysis*, then, using its baleen to sieve out the water, the whale traps the *Mysis* in its mouth. The *mys-*, the *mysis* and the *mystic*, adds to its weight, its blubber, its fatness, its being, and exists through its body, just as it does support its taxon and our classification of it. This is the sensible ecology that is realized, as a full coursing of causes and relations that is *not* unknowable, yet only hides itself in deep *mysticism*. As sustenance and as a word, the form spreads around the life of the whale forming bonds outside of itself simply because of its own participation, and it does not direct or organize the whale in any way, as it simply supports and gives life to it for no other reason than it wills.

In the paintings, this ecology is built upon the logic and understandings of Modernism. However, instead of attempting to will forth some form for themselves, the painters and poet allow for already given pictures to participate and will themselves about. Keeping intensely connected to each other and speaking or recombining at incredible speeds, the source of information in the pictures and poems appear simple and natural and presumably unknowable. And, it is the last part about which I am most concerned because this presumption of an art that is unknowable is one that is still being restricted to those same general metrics and classical formations that attempt to separate and reduce the artwork from its polynomial being. In the paintings and the poems, this sensible ecology runs and courses itself throughout as a visible process of gyrification—the process that forms the characteristic folds and ridges in the brain. It is as though through the paper and each of its ridges, valleys, and natural cuts—such that equally happens in either the brain of a whale or on the page of a dictionary—these excavations and excursions of language intensively circle in and out of these paintings and poems, condensing them to shared points like the oscillation between William Burroughs, “*when you cut into the present, the future leaks out*,”¹³ and responded swiftly by César Hidalgo when discussing the work of Ilya Prigogine, “*there is no past, and no future, but only a present that is being calculated at every second*.”¹⁴

A few days ago, I was thinking back to *Cetus* and the predicament in which the beast unfortunately found himself, between Perseus and Andromeda. Numerous artworks depict Andromeda’s grave situation, with the sea monster either squeezing around her body or glaring at her naked form from below. This is an intensely sexualized scene so it is no wonder that many painters and sculptors have focused so heavily on the scene. However, it is equally important to remember the original source of this entire predicament—the classical understanding of hierarchical beauty, as Cassiopeia proclaimed her daughter the most beautiful among both gods and

men, obviously infuriating the women of Olympus. Cassiopeia eventually found her fate in the stars—as she turns over in her chair for eternity—but so figured *Cass*, *cass*, I always confused her with *Cassandra*, the Trojan princess-fortune teller who suffered to have no one believe her visions of events that lay before their eyes. Cassandra, a minor character of a particular mythological set, finds herself bound in language to another set far apart, instantiated by that language into a history of mythology that extends past her particular story and persuades her character to find another present to then exist. Eventually into a present that was only foreseeable and allowable by the language she herself existed and continues to keep, made only slightly more intimate as she participates and interprets herself.

Notes:

1 Aase Berg, *Transfer Fat*, trans. Johannes Göransson (New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2012), 41.

2 Rachel Allen, “Deep Sounds: Rachel Allen Interviews Hal Whitehead,” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics*, March 15, 2016, accessed March 16, 2016, <https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/deep-sounds/>.

3 Lori Marino, Richard C. Connor, R. Ewan Fordyce, Louis M. Herman, Patrick R. Hof, Louis Lefebvre et al., “Cetaceans Have Complex Brains for Complex Cognition.” *PLoS Biology* 5 (5) (2007): e139. doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.0050139.

4 Allen, “Deep Sounds: Rachel Allen Interviews Hal Whitehead.”

5 Spyros Papapetros, preface to “Frederick Kiesler: Magic Architecture Excerpts,” *Pidgin* 19 (Spring 2015): 58.

6 Ibid, 59.

7 Aase Berg, *Transfer Fat*, 53.

8 Ibid.

9 Lucien Levy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Claire Lilian (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 76-77.

10 Aase Berg, *Transfer Fat*, 37.

11 James Nestor, “A Conversation With Whales,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2016, accessed [April 16, 2016], http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/04/16/opinion/sunday/conversation-with-whales.html?_r=0.

12 John L. Bannister, “Baleen Whales (Mysticetes),” in *Encyclopedia of Marine Mammals*, ed. William F. Perrin et al. (Burlington: Academic Press, 2009), 80-81.

13 William S. Burroughs, *Break Through in Grey Room*, composed by William S. Burroughs. Sub Rosa SR 008CD, 2001, CD. This is a collection of recordings of Burroughs and Brion Gysin discussing the cut-up method between 1960 and 1976. The audio track that recalls the phrase I refer to is “Recalling All Active Agents (with Brion Gysin),” which is an original Gysin composition that Burroughs samples and talks over.

14 César Hidalgo, *Why Information Grows: The Evolution of Order, from Atoms to Economies* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 40. This specific passage is a summation directly following an excerpt from the work and theory of Ilya Prigogine—concerning the entropy barrier our world exists in—this “entropy barrier” extending from the theory that in “the steady states of out-of-equilibrium systems minimizes the production of entropy.” This was central to the theory of Prigogine, and now Hidalgo, that information is produced, computed, and recombined naturally.

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