

"La Scala" by Paul Reynard, 1988. Pencil on paper. 30" x 42".

Beyond Beauty: an Interview with Paul Reynard

Material for Thought: In everyday life we find ourselves so bombarded with artistic imagery, from the merely decorative to the intentionally offensive, that it's no wonder, I suppose, that we are so rarely moved by it. We seem to have lost an understanding of what art can bring to our lives. As an artist who has worked and exhibited both in the United States and abroad, and who is also in touch with young artists through teaching, how do you see the place of art in contemporary life?

Paul Reynard: This is a complex question, since the word "art" is used nowadays to denote a myriad of creative activities requiring varying degrees of skill. To add to the confusion, there is a tremendous difference in attitude between the Western world and other cultures or traditions in which the notion of art as we understand it today has no meaning at all. On the other hand, this creative activity has taken place since the beginning of humanity. It seems to respond to a specifically human need that finds its source in the feelings.

In a way, your question could as well be formulated as "What is the place of love in our society?"

The final purpose of a work of art is not entertainment, but the transmission of, or an opening to, an inner mystery that the painter, the composer, or the sculptor feels compelled to explore through his own craft. Something is then expressed in a language without words that speaks directly to your heart, and you feel yourself "in question," as so many people have felt when looking at the Lascaux paintings or the Mona Lisa.

MFT: You mentioned love. How do you see the relationship between love and art?

PR: One is contained within the other, you might say. When viewing a great work of art, you respond to the call of a concealed, invisible vibration which is beyond the notion of beauty. You feel invited to share this vision, even to participate in a process where the center of gravity is in the feelings. It is very much like being in love.

MFT: When you say you feel yourself "in question" in front of the Mona Lisa, what do you mean?

PR: It is not a question for the mind. It is a state. I am struck by what Andre Malraux had to say. He defined a work of art as something that has "a present." The Mona Lisa was painted centuries ago, and yet one recognizes that something is still present. In contemplating this very old painting, you meet something that was present at the time it was painted and is still present the moment you see it. What is behind it that finds an echo in me now? How can such a piece of art pass through centuries without losing its power?

MFT: Would you say that the great work of art acts to change one's state?

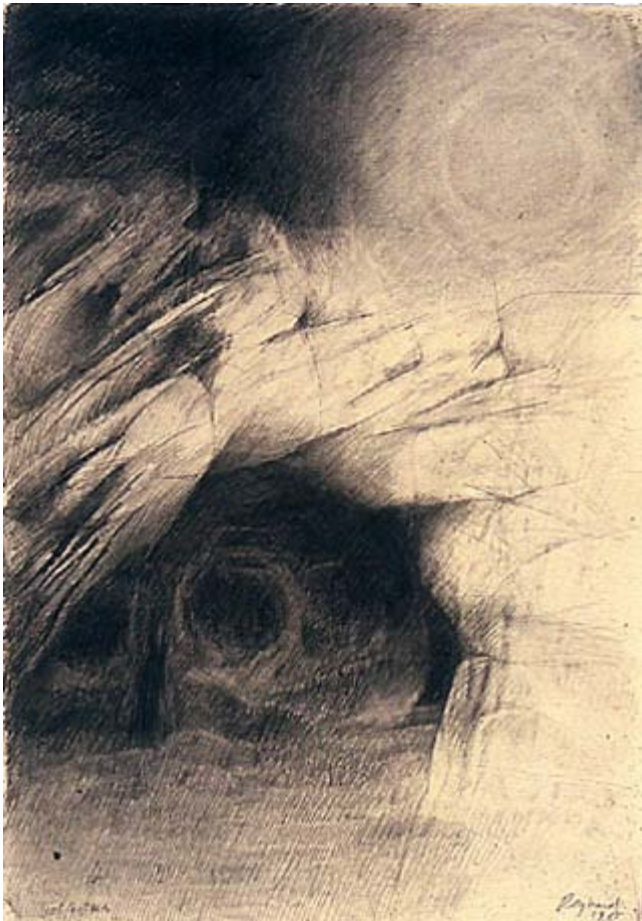
PR: Sometimes, yes, if I am sensitive enough, I may receive an impression of a sort of timelessness.

MFT: Nature also gives us impressions of beauty and timelessness. What is the difference between a leaf on a plant and a masterpiece of art? Where does nature differ from art? Is the artist a little version of God, or is there something particularly human in art?

PR: The purpose of art, I believe, is to reveal the existence of a different level of reality, a reality that is beyond form. At the same time it inevitably ends with a form, be it a painting, a poem, a song. Maybe it is this ability to perceive two different realities at the same time that is specifically human. Do you know the extraordinary painting by Mu Ch'i, a Chinese master of the thirteenth century, called "Six Persimmons"? It is just a still life, six persimmons, but something else manifests itself through the perfection of the craft, and you are drawn beyond any sense of beauty or aesthetics. It is like a timeless meditation.

MFT: So would you say that the whole question of beauty is a secondary one?

PR: We inherited the notion of beauty as an end in itself from the Greeks. The fact that beauty sometimes comes as a result does not imply that it is the purpose. In any case, "beauty" remains a highly subjective notion.



"Golgotha" by Paul Reynard, 1988. Pencil on paper. 30" x 42".

MFT: If it is not beauty, then what do we need from art?

PR: Our modern civilization does not provide food for our feelings. Most Western education is a striking example. The mind is developed, sometimes the body is taken into consideration, but the feeling is almost never attended to. Feeling needs to develop as well. It may be that the primary role of art is to fulfill this need. Art is a way of acquiring -- through feeling -- knowledge that is in relation to the inner meaning of life. I've always remembered a certain quote by Levi-Strauss, whom nobody would accuse of being a mystic. In *The Savage Mind*, he says, "Art lies half-way between scientific knowledge and mythical thought. By his craftsmanship the artist constructs a material object that is also an object of knowledge."

MFT: How do you understand knowledge in art? I think that it is related to the idea of question you spoke about earlier. It is not the same kind of question one feels when looking at a leaf, for instance.

PR: No, because a leaf is complete in itself. A work of art is of necessity incomplete. It is a way of learning. What may appear, ultimately, is a new understanding of the artist about himself.

MFT: The Mona Lisa is not finished, then?

PR: Something was left open.

MFT: Is this unfinished aspect a very subjective experience for the artist, or is there a real certainty behind this experience?

PR: There is something very real, which has to do with your engagement in the work; you

experience a feeling of a very specific quality that gives meaning to what you do. But usually this connection cannot be sustained for very long; unconsciously you are driven toward resolution and completion. The thread is broken. You had better accept the result, incomplete as it is, because what might be added would bring nothing new and

might distort or even destroy what has been reached before. You wish to express something and try to do so through a medium -- oil, paint, canvas -- knowing that there is a limit to what the medium can convey.

MFT: You say you wish to express something. Is there a sense, then, of whom you are painting for when you work?

PR: Not really. Painting is a kind of necessity, acting as a mirror.

MFT: But of course you do sell the paintings; you do offer them to the world. In some sense, through your paintings, there is communication.

PR: One of the big differences between our culture and cultures of the past is our frenzy for communication. Even the telephone is becoming obsolete. No more need to hear a voice. We have fax, e-mail, and the Internet. An extraordinary amount of information is communicated through the world every second, but exchange has become very scarce. Art does not try to communicate; it calls for communion.

MFT: Is all art, then, religious?

PR: Actually, a lot of what is called "religious art" is nothing but propaganda. But the answer to your question is "yes," if by religious you mean the evocation of an Unknown.

MFT: Can the development of art also be experienced as the development of a relationship between a deeper and a more external part of myself?

PR: Yes, any expression of quality is the result of this relationship between two opposite worlds, between two levels of reality. A direction is followed. And, as the years go on, it deepens or changes. It is in accordance with what one wishes to express that the technique also changes. Even from one painting to another, something may need to be enlivened again. The sensitivity is deepening, the feeling is becoming, so to say, more exact, and the technique needs to correspond, to be refined, attuned, in the same way a musical instrument needs to be attuned in accord with what is going to be played. What remains recognizable from one piece of work to another represents what is essential in the artist; it is his signature, his own voice.

There is another aspect I would like to touch upon. When I see that the painting is not going to go any further, there is a split. What I did does not belong to me any more; it is no longer my child. It becomes like a message sealed in a bottle thrown into the sea. Perhaps someday someone will find it and will read the message. But for me it already belongs to the past. A kind of death has taken place which frees me from identification with my own work.

MFT: At the moment is there a recognition of the distinction between the subjective and the less subjective?

PR: One recognizes the difference between personal images of individual fantasy and the trace left by an experience received from a different level of reality. Our museums display the full spectrum, from pieces hanging on the walls like corpses that were dead long before they were signed, to small bits of stone of unknown origin which are nevertheless still charged with energy even today, and able to reach us and to open our hearts. Even though we may not understand their hidden content, we feel the invitation to stand in front of their mystery. It is like another creation within the creation, revealing, in a way, our own immediacy and the real significance of a true representation. ><

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