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On Hans Hofmann and Mystery

For a number of years I have wondered where to place Hans Hofmann in history.

It used to be that I saw him as a trailblazer and a teacher, and as part of the generation I admired – the Abstract Expressionists.

Then I began to look at him differently, as an exceptionally charged example of post WW II painting. Always a surprise and always inspiring.

An image of a Hofmann painting in the Art Gallery of Ontario suddenly made me see him as related to historical painting -now I see him between Manet and Richter.

There probably wouldn't be a Richter without Hofmann; even if Richter had never seen a Hofmann – which is unlikely – it would still be true. These things take place in history, not “in person”, so to speak.

How seeing changes! And it brings to mind an element which I think is lacking in present day painting: the depth and richness of mystery.

That richness seemed to have departed from painting - in stripping painting bare to change its structure, we lost the richness. There was a richness in Pollock, but the followers fumbled it, as did a lot of Baroque painters: it became muddled and heavy, because it was ill-defined, emotionally confused.

And what of the searching of Giacometti, in his drawings? Is that not a mystery - about space – a question mark that Asks, rather than lays out? Mystery does not mean obfuscating: in painting it serves to show us what is not demonstrable.

Feeling is at the heart of richness: the emotive world of pain and suffering, joy and gladness – but there is also a world of ambition, competition, and manipulation. I think where these take precedence, the others are often muted.

It may be that, in a time of change in art we need the kind of power implied in these to wrestle with the past. At the same time it seems clear that the fundamental emotions of pain and fear, of dread, of elation, anxiety and joy et al, are the deeper and more lasting pictorial sources par excellence.

Feeling, and Mystery have been present in painting since Abstract Expressionism - in Warhol, in Judd, and other artists – although generally not cited as more than an element, if at all – and as less interesting than subject. A recent photo in the NY Times showed a Basquiat drawing of a jaw – part of the show at The School in Kinderhook. This painting is the equal of an Old Master in its erasure and re-drawing, but more than that in its cover-up of an earlier version – almost cover-up – that left a mysterious after-image – so telling, so prescient at the same time! This is what mystery in painting and drawing can do.

Once I thought Basquiat taking drugs – the drugs that finally killed him – was just a fashionable and unwittingly, or numbed, and lethal pastime. Now I know that to take drugs like that signifies great pain, and it is pure anguish that often emerged in this artist. Something that touches on Goya.

Looking at Hofmann again, and looking, carefully, at some artists like Warhol and Judd, at an artist like Basquiat, the richness of mystery has held in art.

And then, from left field comes a painter like Priya Vadhyar. She says that paintings that don't lay out everything allow for work to "transform with the viewer... this laying bare has removed the mystery of pain, or dread...elation or love. No matter how much we know, we don't really know anything. And painting bridges this gap. Here we understand. And here we are understood." Wisdom from a young painter....

The present may give us an openness to acknowledge this. I hope so!

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