

## A Kind of Contemplation

What kind of activity is contemplation? At the birth of modern European aesthetics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the word 'contemplation' indicated the appropriate activity of a sensitive person towards the beauties of nature, and by extension towards those of art. It was leisurely, and consisted of rapt yet unstrained attention, an easy play of the imagination, and an 'agreeable' sense of mutuality and companionship of the mind with nature. In part as a result of the impact of the aesthetic thought of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the sense of aesthetic or artistic response as contemplative incorporated the thought that such absorbed attention is 'disinterested', that is, free from the urgencies of needs, desires, and moral imperatives; and 'passive', in insisting upon a uninvolved and wholly distanced access to works of art, themselves conceived as coherent worlds unto themselves. Now, nothing has been more discredited by the upheavals in artistic taste of the past half century than the conception of aesthetic response as passive and disinterested. But this dated conception of contemplation is after all just a recent episode in the perennial search for and of the *vita contemplativa*. Is there a contemplative art freed from disinterest and passivity?

Danae Mattes and Frances McCormack are leading artists in the Bay Area in the attempt to restore some sense of the contemplative to making and perceiving paintings. For both artists contemplation is a kind of watching and noticing, but accompanied by an imperative to engage with what's seen. Both posit the continuity of artistic perception with everyday perception: the former is a condensed and heightened, but not substantively distinct, form of the latter. This in turn facilitates the transfer of artistic perception back into life, thereby enriching it. The contemplative arts are nothing alien to life; art and life are mutually sustaining and stimulating.

Within this shared, very general conception, each has developed a distinctive conception of engaged perception embodied in her poetics. For McCormack, what is noticed in contemplation is so to speak the non-focal aspects of the perceptual passage from a thing to its surroundings, and this spatial transition is itself figured as a thing of the play of light. Her world is fundamentally crepuscular, where in everything the diurnal and the nocturnal pass into each other. A passage is also to engage, an invitation to engage with something imaginatively; but access to an imaginative beyond is partially checked by a further revelation in contemplation: the intricacy of things, whose icon in her work is the tangle of tendrils. Just as the philosopher Theodor Adorno said of the composer Alban Berg, McCormack is the master of the smallest passage. A newly emerging element in her work, long marked by Matisse's sense of painting as paradise and Cézanne's sense of it as an infinite task, is the presence of the late works of Georges Braque, where regions and planks of blacks on the verge of becoming radiant provide structuring counter-rhythm of the surface polyphonies.

Whereas McCormack's contemplation takes as its object those zones where the garden passes on one side into the carpentered world, and on the other into

wildness, Mattes attempts throughout to maintain contact with the element, and above all water. Having worked for many years in ceramics, in painting she withdraws the element of fire and liquefies the clay for its properties of supporting the flow of water across the canvas while registering the waters' ebbing and coursing. Along with refusing to transform the clay with fire, she likewise keeps the clay from becoming the vehicle of easy metaphors, such as clay-as-flesh. Clay binds-- first of all to itself, in forming ridges; then to the support, so that even at the base of the deepest cracks one does not sense the canvas as a distinct substance, but only as another form of the protean clay. The contemplative acts embodied here and encouraged in response are those of ceaselessly mobile vision: at every point there's the suggestion of aerial and side-on views, and each of these further both distant and close-up. Mattes's imagination is fundamentally seasonal; one thinks of Rilke's call for transition "O Tree of Life/Where is your winter," and the intimate sublime of Thoreau's description of the spring melt, where the incipient flow of the river communicates with the flows within ourselves.

McCormack's nuanced passages, Mattes's luxuriantly restrained hydraulics: It is a major part of the achievement of these artists to have re-vivified the sense of participatory contemplation in our stressed world.