

arts^{and} culture

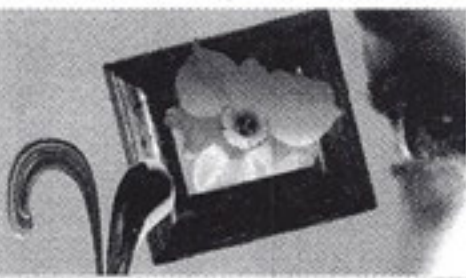


Seth Chwast, Blowin' in the wind #3, 48x24, oil on canvas



ART IN FOCUS
by Emérentienne
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If art could speak...



My feeling is that people go to the National Gallery's new exhibition, 'Seth Chwast, Icons of Cayman', not because they care about art but because they feel sorry about the artist. All right, I confess: I am the guilty one who was intrigued mostly because the artist happens to be autistic. And, oh, yes, my curiosity was fuelled when I heard that he rarely talks or looks you in the eyes. What would his paintings look like? Do we applaud them simply because they are an exploit, like we applaud the first words of a child? Isn't voyeuristic enjoyment the intention of the show? And so, much though I felt compassionate and I love to be treated to a little bit of existentialist melancholy, I went with the determination to leave my emotions at home. The only emotional effects permitted here would be the ones expressed by the artist.

And what a surprise! Supposedly, an autistic person

is suffering. Therefore, or so the argument runs, an autistic artist would produce images that are sad or furiously loud, like *The Scream* by Munch. But instead, we are shown images that are remarkably peaceful and happy. The colours are bright and yet exude stunning tranquillity: buttery yellows and velvety reds smooth the surface of the canvas alongside each other, but without ever agitating each other. Each colour belongs to a space, and each space to a colour.

Isn't this neatness, too, unexpected? We are used to art, at least since the American Expressionists, being all about dripping, smearing and letting go of yourself. So when a locked-up burst of creativity is suddenly unleashed, we anticipate images that are hurried and careless, even if they are figurative. But look at Chwast's paintings. They are so painstakingly detailed, we find ourselves confronted by extreme control and orderliness. The reduction imposed by the

artist on the universe is tidiness indeed, where clouds are compact, stones are polished and grass is sleek. The shapes are trimmed down to bare outlines, almost to the point of sketches and nullity, and to compensate, every decorative detail is rendered whenever possible, in the service of which patterns such as stripes, zigzags, and polka-dots are indispensable.

So what is the artist saying? Standing there, in front of his quiet pictorial utterances, I was reminded of the opportunity I was given by the film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* to enter the mind of a paraplegic who cannot move nor speak. Like the character in the film who feels locked inside his body as if it was a diving bell, Seth Chwast too is locked into his own world, even though he is able to move around it. And now, all of the sudden, he is giving us images which supposedly reflect his innermost. All spectators

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must have felt, like I did, that they were being granted an extraordinary privilege. Only, how are we to understand these paintings?

Let's be honest about our expectations. We wish we could decipher these images like if they were hieroglyphs, that we could find in Chwast's art the Rosetta Stone with which we would unlock the mystery of Autism. Why not? Art is often said to be a language. Linguists and art historians have compared the way elements of a painting are composed to the way words are arranged in a syntax; the repetitive patterns Chwast uses could be a set of symbols; their aesthetical relationships may reveal a structural system similar to a grammar. After all, colours and shapes are often used to signify something: blue for sky, green for grass, a dotted line on a map for a pathway or wavy lines for a river. The comparison is tempting, only Chwast doesn't paint in a systematic and conventional way. His horses are red and smile. His octopus has

caring, soulful eyes.

When it comes to contemporary art, we often turn to the artist to explain himself, so I looked for the comments on the gallery's walls. I found that they were odd in that they didn't seem to relate much to the paintings they're supposed to be about. Disconcerted, I had to check twice the position of the label for *Blowin' in the wind #3*, a staggering semi-abstract landscape sectioned into multiple parts. The label reads that 'the grass has different hues of greens', but there isn't much green in the painting; that 'the ground is brown', although there is no such ground either; and that 'the clouds are different hues of Ketchup, Tomatoes, Barbeque sauces, Mustards, Strawberry Jellies, Cherry Gelatins, Fruit Punches and Real Cake Frostings', but the painting is mostly a mosaic of blues. All at once, I felt that centuries of ambition to translate art into words was being shattered away.

The real, disappointing truth? None of us know what these paintings are saying. And why should they be saying anything at all?

Before the 16th century, artists represented the world around them in order to express something, usually God's greatness: a cathedral was a prayer in stone, images were tools to communicate an idea, art was a vehicle. Since then, however, artists like Yves Klein with his blue monochromes have shown that art can also be an end in itself, a pure aesthetic experience which doesn't always need to make sense.

So perhaps, Chwast is not saying anything after all. Perhaps he just enjoys painting, and if so, this unusual exhibition is a unique invitation to join his reverie.

This article is based on the lunch lecture given by the author on 26th November at the National Gallery. Lunch lectures relating to the exhibition then current are given at 12.15 pm on the fourth Wednesday in each month. Refreshments and Admission are C155 per person (free for members). For more information call 945 8111 or email nat.gal@candw.ky