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Recent Writing about Art
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Fluid by Liza Ryan

There is something intriguing, if not frightening, about the back of a woman's slightly bowed head, surrounded by trees, hair blowing every which way by a strong gust of wind. I find something unnatural about this, the movement of her hair, the apparent stillness of the branches around her, which, upon first glance, offers up a vaguely uneasy feeling. It isn't until later that I feel able to put a finger on what it might be that makes this photograph appear "not quite right". Beside the figure is a large tree, the thick gnarled branches, the most solid aspect of this photograph, reach from the top of the right side of the image to about the middle, mimicking the flow of the woman's hair. Both solid in their darkness, gnarled in the irregularities of the bark and coils of the strands of hair. The background subtly cuts the work in a diagonal half with the blurred and out-of-focus outline of the horizon. A hill sloping from the mid-lower left to the upper right, creating an almost perfect triangle of light sky. Triangle, triangle, triangle. The woman's hair, the almost perfectly segregated 3 sections of lightness, the slope of the hill, the perfect triangle of the whitest white of the piece found in the exposed nape of the woman's neck. Even the collar of the shirt is ridged in little black triangles.

My first question (which I end up never answering to satisfaction): does this mean anything? Triangles? Should I think about it as meaning something and then make up a meaning as an exercise of focus? A forced concentration, which will change the shape and meaning of my explanation the longer I stick with it? There is something in that idea which makes me rather angry, though. Like with this entire exercise. Write creatively about something that was made creatively. I have enough trouble grappling with my changing opinions and thoughts about this piece, let alone, to also focus on how I might make my personal writing more creative. I think my train of thought is going to have to suffice as creative enough in this situation. Stream of consciousness.... which reminds me, triangles. To move the viewer through the work physically and figuratively? Like a circle? Always coming back to

a similar “point”? Get it? Triangle. Point. I think it’s better that I just wait: notice what I notice.

The longer I am in the presence of this work the more I notice the difference in viewing it from close up and far away. In both situations, I notice that nothing is in focus. The best you can get if you’re looking for something clean and clear and precise is the startlingly white nape of the neck and then the dark, dark hair, curling and shifting around it. But that ones eyes are draw to those moments in the work as the most crisp and clear is interesting. I have the feeling that these parts only appear more crisp and clear because they are the most color-saturated aspects of the image. The most “contrasty” and pure. The farther away I get from the work, the more it comes down to an issue of lights and darks as distinguishing what you see and what you don’t. The darkest, most “clear” part of the photograph is the triangle surrounding the white back of the women’s neck, which consists of her shoulders and black shirt, with the other two sides of the shape made up of her separating hair, coming to a point in the one unruly piece that has flown straight into the air. The clearest white is the triangle of skin exposed by the wind. Both of these clearer (yet still blurry and unfocused so, I suppose, technically not clear at all) spaces draw the viewer’s eyes up and into the trees. Is that what the triangles are for?

As one’s eyes are drawn up from the human figure and into the convoluted branches of the tree, the many wind-blown tendrils of the hair are noticed as they, in their similar shape, movement, and naturalness, seem to dare you to separate them from their surroundings. The relationship between the body and nature is suddenly brought to the forefront of the work. The boundaries between the two are suddenly recognized as fluid and, possibly, insubstantial. Within this recognition I am suddenly reminded of a quote about Liza Ryan’s work that I found in a review on portlandart.net and hastily jotted down. It goes: “Ryan’s work explores the liberation of the human psyche from the dimensions of reality, focusing on the psychological experiences of release and dispersal,”. Somehow, I feel that this quote could be a perfectly satisfying description of this photograph. All aspects of that idea are embodied right in front of me in this piece.

While there is a very obvious human element in this work, there is also a strange sense that the reality of the situation presented is not there. Here is where I go back to my initial reaction in regards to the hair. It just doesn't make sense in a real world, but in a world of metamorphose and blurred boundary lines; it appears to fit just perfectly. It is the dramaticness of the exposed neck that makes me uneasy I think. Where is this wind coming from and how does it move the hair in such a way as to create a situation where it truly appears that the human shape and the natural are coming together as one, while placing the control of the moment in the natural aspect of the wind? It must be blowing from directly behind the figure, thus making me feel as if the viewer and the wind are one and the same. The connection between nature and the human figure (the trees and the woman's hair) is directly reflected back at, and "into", the viewer, who is now not only a human viewer, but also the wind that is informing much of the work.

When discussing her work, Liza mentions an innate human desire for the natural and the awe that is inspired in one by nature and how these feelings play with the terror and fear that one experiences when fully surrounded by the natural world and experiencing a strange desire for the loss of the self within this environment. This image gives off an overwhelming sense of the human being subsumed by something else, something less human, more natural. While the set-up of the piece gives me a sense of voyeurism, I don't necessarily feel any uneasiness about this. I am more fully aware of a connection with the work. I feel more as if I am experiencing the same terror of the physicality of the human within this enveloping natural world. The vulnerability that I feel is shown in the alarming whiteness of the subject's neck is not hers alone. In my position as the source of the wind, I feel a sense of vulnerability, as well. There is a loss of self that I'm experiencing in my forced position as the wind exposing the subject's vulnerability, which leads, in part, to my uneasiness.

I think that I am also uneasy about my inability to escape this feeling. The irregularity of the composition of the photograph (the back of the head, the blurred and incomplete background) leaves everything to the imagination. Who is this subject? Where, besides the simple answer of "outside" is she? The image seems

stolen from something larger. Something that had more of an ability to tell me the full story. The photograph seems to deny its ability to inform the viewer and demand that the viewer inform them self. These feelings cannot be felt for you. The movement of the hair, the branches, all pull at your attention and draw it off the image making it impossible to ignore one's curiosity as to what else is there? How does the rest of this story go?

It feels like it's about transformation. There is definitely the transforming of the viewer into an active participant. Which leads me to the idea of control. Maybe I'm being too influenced by my many talks with Liza Ryan and the readings I've done and lectures I've gone to in reference to her work, but I do know that she grapples with control an awful lot. The more I think about my uneasiness in confronting this work and the more I try to think about why exactly I feel this way, I start to think that maybe it has less to do with the fact that things actually "bothered" me about this work, and more about why they were bothering me.

One of the issues I have with this work is the inability to feel satisfied with the fact that nothing is crispy clear and it all has a sort of hazy fuzziness to it. At first I wrote it off as simply me being frustrated with the inability of the artist to pull it together and present a "well executed" photograph, while still being able to exhibit in a gallery (where's my gallery show!?!?), but the more I thought about it, the more I thought about the intentionality of this. The same thing with the single bit of hair in the center that is flying straight up. Something about its straightness, its centeredness makes it stand out in a way that just bothered me to distraction. Again, I wrote it off as the artist's inability to pick a more "attractive" shot. Maybe because it grew on me or maybe because this is what it was doing all along, but I got to a point where I decided that it only drove me crazy because I couldn't fix it. I had no control over it. And suddenly, I feel a connection with the image in that I, like the subject, feel out of control. I see the subject's vulnerability in the wind at their neck and their inability to separate themselves from nature as their moment of lacking control and mine comes from my powerlessness to escape "being" the wind at her back and my incapability to "know" what's happening and why the image is presented as it is. In this way, the idea of control is not something I'm simply

recognizing in the work through a set array of signs or symbols; I'm actually feeling it.

When I came into the gallery all of the other days, most of the time I wasn't even there specifically to look at this piece. No matter what I was doing, however, I always paid attention to it, whether through fleeting glances in between focusing on whatever I was really in the gallery for, or a deep, contemplative stare while standing directly in front of it. I could never write anything down, though. Something about the idea of being pushed to write down my thoughts on and impressions of the piece made me anxious, nervous, and stopped everything. It is now, the last day before this writing is due that I am able to sit down in the same room as this piece, not directly in front of it, not strictly close up or far away, but wherever I choose, that I am able to start to write. To really focus on what has attracted my attention before. I find it necessary to have ample time to approach a work from one's own angle, one's own time, on one's own free-will.

For me, looking at artwork needs to be done first and foremost with an intention only to look and then later to feel and analyze these feelings. The minute that a paper or an analysis needs to be "officially" created from my act of looking is the minute my act of looking becomes skewed and experience becomes public, not personal, thus changing, I think, how one views the work. Especially with a work like this. It is imperfect in its technical aspects which, when I'm trying to write analytically, really bothers me. Yet when I'm just looking, for myself, I kind of like the softness and approachability that it offers in its "imperfections". This is an interpretation (mine). This is indicative of the artist's feelings (I think). Feeling that this experience with a piece of art belongs to me is what puts me at ease and makes it "real". Being in a gallery, analyzing a piece that is far beyond my ability to create can put a strain on how I interpret. For this reason, for me, it has been important that I didn't approach this show, and more specifically, this piece, too quickly. It has also shown me that 5-6 pages aren't nearly enough.