

Peter Clothier, The Buddha Diaries, Wednesday, August 29, 2007

And now for something . . . completely different – though nothing ever is. As we shall see...

Ellie and I walked down the hill yesterday, late afternoon, to enjoy a glass of wine with our neighbor, the artist Marcia Hafif. A painter in the tradition of minimalist, monochromatic work, she's just completing a new series of bichromatic paintings and has them hanging in her living room. I didn't count them, but I guess there are perhaps a dozen of them, each square divided vertically into two non-equal parts whose graduated width evokes the rhythmic progression of a spare, musical composition as the eye follows the series around the room. The paintings have a silvery, silken glow to them, with barely perceptible modulations on two subdued colors, both difficult to name; one is a kind of subtly mauvish grey, the other a reduced celadon green. They would have the fluffy seductiveness of cotton candy, but for the carefully-structured formal context that lends them a quiet sobriety and depth. In keeping with the history of Hafif's work, their Zen-like reductiveness induces a state of meditative attention and serenity, but there's a gentle quality in the touch that keeps them from being severe. Up close, the artist's hand is everywhere evident in the patient brushwork and this, I think, is where the viewer is invited into the work. This is the chink in the formalist armor where we come in contact with the human presence and the human values that give the work its depth of content.

Not an adequate description, perhaps, because such work defies attempts to translate it into language. I was reminded once again of the seeming contradiction in my aesthetic passions: while I'm attracted to the work of artists who persist in looking to the human form and to the landscape that surrounds us, I also get that frisson of recognition, of acknowledgement - that YES! – with reductive, even monochromatic work like Marcia's. It's the response that tells me that what I'm looking at has something vital to tell me about my own humanity.

Outdoors, on Marcia's deck, with a glass of wine, we got to talking about art, and music, and literature – but not in that awful academic way, that one-upman trade of esoteric information and display of intellect. Our conversation came, I think, out of mutual experience and the process in which we are engaged in our creative work, and the ways in which that process is fed by others who have walked the path before. So Marcia could speak easily about Fra Angelico and the painting he had made for himself, in his cell, beside the window, competing with that light source, so that its whiteness – the painting's – became central to its meaning. And somehow this gave another dimension of meaning to the work we had just been looking at, and led to more thoughts about painting and writing, and engagement with the medium as having meaning in itself. And how emotion is conveyed more vitally not by the heavy sighs but by the unspoken subtleties – which brought me back, again, to thoughts about Jane Austen.

All interesting stuff. Thinking back to yesterday's entry, and the anger, and the reticence about giving vent to it, and wondering how "Buddhist" it might be, I realize that the relationship between passion and dispassion is a close one indeed. The idea that passion can be experienced perhaps more deeply through restraint, that equanimity does not imply removal – this idea is one that's worth exploring.

I trust I haven't bored you all today, with my aesthetic speculations. To me, they're anything but abstract, like Marcia's paintings. Very present, very real. See? As the French say, Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose. (Approximately: The more things change, the more they stay the same.)