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Embodied: Marion Wagschal's Paintings

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Mind, body and spirit. In a statement about her work, Marion Wagschal describes her paintings as metaphors that embody these three notions. It's an interesting starting point for talking about painting, because of these three words, only one is unequivocally concrete and tangible to the senses. That, of course, is body. Mind, a neurosurgeon might tell you, is merely what we call the bodily functions of a particular organ. Spirit, well, a cynic or an atheist would tell you that spirit is just an illusion. This is a comfortable myth that we cling to as a society because we are afraid of the truth: all we are is body, and our bodies are temporal, fragile, and fleeting.

I'm neither a neurosurgeon nor altogether an atheist, though I do cling to cynicism more than I should, and I don't believe the version of the truth I articulated in my first paragraph. But I am not altogether sure where I stand vis-à-vis this age-old debate. I know my body will die, that my mind will cease to function, that my corporeal presence will eventually transform utterly. I also know that matter is eternal: that the stuff I'm made of can be neither created nor destroyed. And that gives me a certain amount of satisfaction. But spirit? That's another question.

It's the central question of humanity, I would suggest, that of spirit. It is even more compelling than the philosopher Martin Heidegger's somewhat plaintive question: "Why are there things rather than not?" Spirit is distinctly human, it is, many would argue, the spark that makes us human. A body is always a body – but one need only be faced once with the lifeless body of a loved one to know that "something" has been extinguished. Something is gone. And a truthful person will likely articulate that what is gone is, simply, the person we knew and loved. Whether we can quantify it or not, identify it in our physiology, or root it in a system of knowledge or belief, spirit *is*, at least in our language and our emotions. Frankly, that's enough for me to concede its existence.

Wagschal's statement mentioned above, from the catalogue of an earlier exhibition of work, says this about painting: "As a sensuous medium which contains meaning embedded in pleasure, painting embodies a metaphor of mind, body and spirit."¹ We'll return to the question of that metaphor, but first I'd like to look at her conflation of paint with pleasure, a contention that only a painter of a certain temperament would make, and one that might well mystify a non-painter. After all, the sensuousness of paint, beyond the optical, is something known only to the creator of a painting, the viewer looks, and one hopes, thinks, but touch and smell do enter into the equation, nor do taste or hearing. A painting is an optical experience, a distillation of effects, a summation of hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions, presented in a static, apparently unchanging form. To viewers, a painting, whatever its genre, is focused – it appears to stop time, to arrest our motion, to defy the entropic imperative of matter.

¹ "Artist statement" in Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure, Plattsburgh State Art Museum, 2005

Yet how does a painting imbue meaning in pleasure? And can it? I'm not a painter, but I agree with Marion on this point – what meaning is imbued in a painting is embedded and conveyed by the response that the painting evokes in the viewer. An illustration: On a recent trip to the National Gallery in London, I visited one of my favourite paintings, a small panel by Rembrandt van Rijn depicting a young woman crossing a stream. In the image, she is dressed only in a thin white shift, which she has gathered up around her upper thighs to avoid it getting wet. As with so many of Rembrandt's paintings of women, this figure is bathed in a rich golden light. In fact, her skin seems to glow both from some internal and external radiance. Quite simply, this is a painting in which I bask: sensuousness and pleasure indeed. And somehow, she stays in that same river – I change, yet she does not. I know that this is an illusion, of course, yet it is one that still feels true, and in that feeling of truth I find great pleasure and hope.

The pleasure is a thrill of recognition, a sense of the lasting spirit of another human being, a connection made across culture and language, across time. The content of the painting need not be beautiful, uplifting, challenging or even recognizable as content per se. But it must be arresting, it must speak beyond itself, to me, as viewer. For me, and I suspect for many, that connection is the truth in painting.

Paintings are complex metaphors, notoriously difficult objects to quantify or qualify. After all, the phenomenology of a painting is extremely difficult – it never is simply a painting but rather a collection of impressions, expectations, representations, materials and contexts – changing with every viewer, outlasting its creator, fixed in form yet mutable in meaning.

Take “Spill,” a remarkable canvas by Marion Wagschal in the collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. In the lower foreground, two young men wrestle, rolling around on a floor strewn with books, magazines, videotapes, cds and the bedclothes from the bed that occupies the top half of the painting. The men, or boys, are dressed only in their underwear, and one has the other in a headlock. On the bed is the figure of an older man, dressed only in pants and curled up with his back to the boys. It is left to us to decide whether he is asleep or just ignoring the fight going on beside him. The composition, a triangle of tangled bodies, moving diagonally across the canvas from the top middle to the lower left, is pristine in its geometry, chaotic in its depiction. The wrestling figures almost seem to have tumbled out of the bed, oddly, given that it is obviously too small for all three men. Rough-housing or something more sinister? Sexual play or just energy being expended? These questions are left there; thankfully, Wagschal doesn't provide any answers.

The sense of menace or strangeness in this painting is a common strategy for Marion Wagschal. One is never spoon-fed an idea or opinion, but rather led to a point where one must draw their own conclusions, make their own inferences, and, frankly, deal with their own limits as they grapple with these uninhibited and powerful paintings. Whatever the subject matter of her paintings, and whatever the context depicted within the compositions, there is one constant in this work: the stubborn, persistent presence of the human body. Wagschal's depictions of the body are specific and signifying – she paints the figure yes, but actual ones, not inventions. These are not personages – they are people. She may invent the contexts, or imagine their settings, but still, there is a distinct sense, facing a Wagschal painting, that there is *someone* there. That sense of presence is, I suspect, where the notion of spirit enters into play in these works. And it is

where the mind animates the body that the spirit enters into matter, where the breath of life, the spark, turns mere material into something living.

Facing a painting by Marion Wagschal one is hit with a sense of truth, of matter-of-factness, or almost banal familiarity, despite the unease and awkwardness engendered by these works. They seem as familiar and surprising as a figure I might meet in the street.

There are many things to take away from an encounter with a Marion Wagschal painting. There is the sheer, almost physical, pleasure of reveling in her virtuoso paintwork, of her elegant geometries, of her complex and compelling narrative fragments. These paintings speak of our place in the world – my place as a viewer, any viewer’s place rather than speaking of painting’s place in the world. Oh, these works speak eloquently of painting and its history, of course, evoking a wide range of artists and their works. For me, and this is admittedly idiosyncratic, it is Rembrandt that I keep thinking about in looking at a work by Marion Wagschal, though I feel the ripples from Marion’s dipping into multiple histories in every canvas. These paintings are immersed in history, as, of course, are we.

So what are some of the truths that one can take away from these encounters? Perhaps the most compelling one goes to the heart of the mind/body/spirit nexus Marion insists upon. For buried in it is a weak link: ultimately, the body will always betray us.

The body, in all its particularity, fecundity, strength and fragility, will fail. In her sensuous treatment of paint, in her sure drawing and carefully impeccable sense of colour, Wagschal captures the body in moments of extreme vulnerability, stripped of all pretense, merely present. These figures are freighted with sadness, with a kind of weariness that is not specific so much as general, that speaks to knowledge and to self-awareness, to the sure fact that she, you, and I will die.

There is a difference, of course, between a sense of sadness and a sense of despair, just as awareness of mortality is not hopelessness. In an interesting, almost alchemical synthesis, these paintings, as with all great painting, make us aware of our limits and hold out the process for transcending them, in some manner. Matter is neither created nor destroyed – it just is, eternally. We are fleeting, but what we are made of, the brute matter of us, endures.

In her newest work, Marion Wagschal takes on the pageant of life and death, of our few moments on the world’s stage, with startling power. *Dottore*, a massive canvas with multiple figures, is a tour de force. The foreground is taken up by a reclining figure on the right, looking out at us with an almost puzzled look on his face. A large, corpulent man, he appears to be swaddled. He also is being attended by two bizarrely attired figures: wearing Punchinello masks, these are doctors, seemingly, manipulating the man’s limbs. To the left, another large male figure sits in a chair, also covered with only a swath of fabric around his loins, depicted as if he is breaking down with grief. The rest of the painting is populated with several other figures: lovers, other “patient” seeming figures, a classically costumed woman, a man with a dog, and a musician, also masked, playing a violin behind the crying figure in the foreground.

This strange, dreamlike setting is still recognizable as a medicalized space, albeit somewhat fevered and disjointed. The emotional punch of this painting is remarkable – the almost serene figure on the right, the distraught one on the left, (Are they the same person? Perhaps) are bracketed by a third figure, bearded and with longish hair, yet large like the other two males. He too looks out from the canvas, but disinterestedly, as if he is seeing something that simply does not apply to him. He fondles the head of a German Shepherd, abstractedly. There is a swirl of activity in this painting, and your eyes jump from point to point, but always back to the two central figures, always back to the two poles of resignation and despair. This enigmatic painting is haunting – it speaks chillingly of death and decay, of the loss of dignity, and of hope, which can be part of the process of dying in our culture. The doctors, bizarre and off-putting in their long-nosed black masks, work busily, yet their humanity is gone, obscured by their masks, obscured by their roles.

These paintings are an attempt to embody meaning, to embed it in the brute matter of oil on canvas. For us, viewers, paintings are, as stated above, optical. For painters, these objects are indeed sensuous and physical, synaesthetic experiences. That bodily aspect, the sheer demanding labour, the time, the thousands of individual decisions, all of these combine to create those metaphors Wagschal talks about. Mind, body and spirit – combined, for us, into an idea – meaning embedded in pleasure. This painting is a conversation, with history, yes, but mostly with us. It is a form of thinking, of philosophizing.

In Plato’s dialogue *Theaetetus*, which deals primarily with the question of the definition of knowledge, the philosopher has his protagonist, Socrates, tell a story of another philosopher, Thales of Miletus. Thales was out walking one night gazing at the stars and, not paying attention to his surroundings, fell into a well. A maidservant who saw this laughed at the famous man, mocking him for being “so eager to know what is happening in the sky that he could not see what lay at his feet.” Plato has Socrates add this cautionary caveat, “Anyone who gives his life to philosophy is open to such mockery.”²

Of course, such sage advice applies to more than just the academic discipline of philosophy (which had a much broader definition for Plato and his contemporaries than it does today). All of the arts – liberal, fine, or whatever other description you want – risk such mockery, and, often, invite it. What is art if not a product of a desire to see more than what merely lies at our feet or, at least, what conventional wisdom tells us is at our feet? Artists are constantly falling into wells, and to appreciate their art in any meaningful way, we, too, must follow them. Risking laughter is just the price of admission.

What’s more, in order to talk or write about art, one inevitably ends up with philosophy. Philosophy, after all, isn’t a thing so much as a process, and if one is thinking and writing about visual art, about music, about science, theology, economics, or any human creation, one is philosophizing. Call it what you will (lately the approved title, at least in the arts, seems to be “theory”), thinking about anything with any sort of persistence is, inevitably, philosophy.

² Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Francis Cornford (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Library of Liberal Arts, 1957), 174, pg. 85

The Oracle of Delphi said that there was no man wiser than Socrates. Upon hearing this, Socrates concluded that it was his own sense of ignorance that made him wise – his wisdom consisted in knowing that he did not know anything, but in persisting in questioning to arrive at knowledge.³ That model of wisdom still holds. Thinking is a seeking, then, and thinking about art is as much a seeking as any other form of thought. Writing about art, too, is a process of seeking, a means of articulating the experience of an artwork. And, like Socrates, those of us who try such articulation must always be aware of our inevitable failure to arrive at any satisfactory conclusions.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, talked of philosophizing with a hammer – and of living beyond good and evil. For Nietzsche, art, like philosophy, is about passion and transformation:

One is an artist at the cost of regarding that which all non-artists call “form” as content, as the “matter itself.” To be sure, then one belongs in a topsy-turvy world: for henceforth content becomes something merely formal – our life included.⁴

Topsy-turvy indeed. Perhaps, like the world Alice found down the rabbit hole, truly thinking – about paintings or other ideas – means entering a new world, one that does not follow the norms and conventions of our daily lives. And, like Alice’s Wonderland, perhaps this new world is a kind of distorting mirror of the every day, its very strangeness allowing us to learn more about the world at our feet. Those of us who write about art hope to lead our readers to an experience like that of Alice’s sister after hearing of Alice’s adventures in Wonderland:

So she sat on, with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality – the grass would be only rustling in the wind, and the pool rippling to the waving of the reeds – the rattling teacups would change to tinkling sheep-bells, and the Queen’s shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy – and the sneeze of the baby, the shriek of the Gryphon, and all the other queer noises would change (she knew) to the confused clamour of the busy farmyard – while the lowing of the cattle in the distance would take the place of the Mock Turtle’s heavy sobs.⁵

Form is indeed content, and content form – by so seeing the world, one hopes, we can truly see it as it is, not as convention and habit would have us believe. Thales, then, has the last laugh – he may be all wet, but he can see the world around him more clearly than the laughing Thracian maid credits.

Thinking about art is a species of reverie, like Alice’s sister’s sympathetic daydream. Facing a painting such as Marion Wagschal’s *Dottore*, thinking about it, letting it work on you, is akin to a waking dream, yet it is one that makes sense if you will only listen.

³ Plato, *The Apology (The Defense of Socrates)*, in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse (New York: New American Library, 1956), pgs. 423 - 446

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pg. 433

⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Racine: Whitman Publishing Company, 1945), pg. 112