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Getting To The Soul

By Sally Ruth Bourrie



Bill Traylor

www.artistes-singuliers.com

“Painting is the art of going to the soul by the intermediary of the eyes. If the effect stops at the eyes, the painter hasn’t gone but half the way.” – Denis Diderot

An artist can be Western or non-Western, trained or untrained, abstract or figurative. That he or she doesn’t stop halfway is what separates the clutter of mediocrity from the simplicity of *Art*.

One of art’s components that is often mistaken for its essence is technique. Good technique can often help a painter convey his feelings more effectively. Michael Bonesteel writes in his catalogue essay on Bill Traylor, whose drawings are now on view at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center: “There is no question that some learned art is so accomplished in terms of physical craft that its effects can be enjoyable.” But he goes on to observe that, “Problems occur when technique is emphasized over natural creativity ... (And) creativity—the unbridled flow of imaginative thoughts and ideas—is the essence of art.”

The techniques an artist learns in art school serve only to enhance the gifts he or she already possesses. Paramount among them must be: originality and the willingness to look inside oneself. Sometimes the painter gets lost in those technical tools, polishing them to a fine sheen rather than muddying them to nurture the seed of creativity.

Completely unschooled in art and a former slave, Bill Traylor began drawing in 1939 when he was 85 years old and worked for only three years. He drew and painted silhouettes of people and animals on blank backgrounds, usually using cardboard boxtops. He never talked about why he did it; he just did it.



Blue Man, Black Mule by Bill Traylor

www.artnet.com

“Originality does not exclude simplicity,” wrote Diderot. Traylor discards details and paints the essential truth. A figurative artist, he gives us something recognizable. But it’s more than the brand of recognition we’d find in *National Geographic* photographs. He captures spirit. When we look at Traylor’s animals and people, we connect. It’s direct and it’s quick—so quick we can’t verbalize it until later. Looking back to analyze it, we might say, “Yes, that’s what a dog does,” or, “I’ve felt like that guy.” It goes beyond merely the visual.

It’s somewhat akin to an audience’s identification with Bill Cosby’s monologues about fatherhood and family. When they chuckle, they’re thinking, “Yeah, right.” With true art, such recognition is more profound and probably a more generalized type of feeling. But the spark of recognition in front of a painting can be as vague as a smile.

A far back as Aristotle, painting was considered one of the “superior” arts because it creates an impact in one moment, as opposed to the temporal arts such as literature, music—or today, film—that require us to bear with them as they unfold over time. While that assessment is a little extreme, the initial impact we feel when we look at a painting is a critical ingredient of our experience of it.

Traylor’s animal pictures tap into even deeper rhythms that have resonated unchanged for thousands of years. The cave paintings at Lascaux, France that date from about 15,000 B.C. come to mind immediately upon seeing Traylor’s animal pictures.

As Bonesteel describes it—and this is the “secret” of true art—Traylor, who’d never heard of those cave paintings, delved “into a creative imagination transcending race or culture ... images straight out of what Carl Jung would call the Collective Unconscious.” Our initial flash of connection with Traylor’s work demonstrates that we may not be so different from Traylor’s compatriots of a half century ago nor even from our ancestors from thousands of years away.

That’s what good art does. It makes these visceral connections for us, tying us together without past and comforting us as we look to the future.

What good art is, then, in large part, is sharing. The 19th Century French painter Eugène Delacroix wrote, “Painting is a bridge between the mind of the artist and the mind of the spectator.” That bridge seems to me to be more like the gulf across which a spark can jump. As when we walk across a carpet, then touch a doorknob; a spark flashes and electrons flow—as our brains work, electronic pulses carrying messages across neurons.

One temptation is to want to “read” a painting. That’s all right to do—later. Many paintings are meant to be “read.” It’s understandable, anyway, that we would have such an inclination. In the rest of life, if we don’t know what’s going on, we’re in trouble. But when looking at art, it’s important to stay as open as possible, to be a clean slate. It’s a felt thing, not an intellectual thing, finally. All the talk and analysis must come *after* the initial gut-level connection.

The paintings of the Zhou brothers from China, also on view at the Cultural Center, feed into that temptation, for they’re composed of a number of seemingly disparate elements on a single canvas.

Each spare mark in their delicate abstractions is saturated with meaning. Their work is more complex than Traylor's but that doesn't mean it's less direct. Given that Shan Zhou and Da Huang Zhou both work on each canvas, this directness is remarkable.

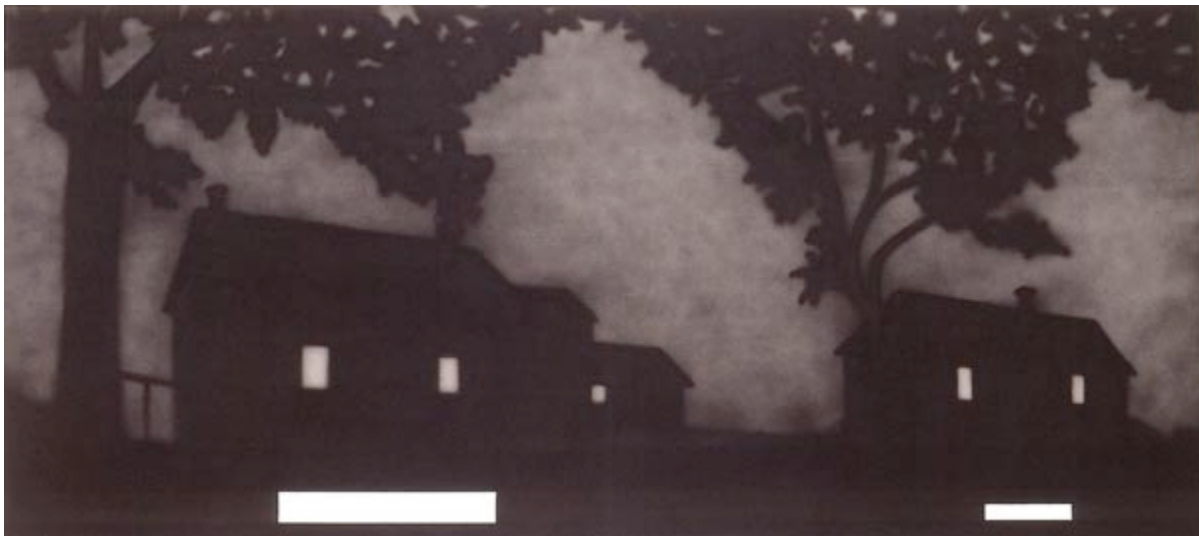
Although their paintings look nothing like Bill Traylor's you feel that same primal connection with stone here as well. The backgrounds are often sandy, the colors muted. During the Cultural Revolution, the impoverished, struggling Zhou Brothers assuaged themselves by studying cliff paintings near their home.

Like any fine artists, they've taken the external, incorporated it with their own experience and come up with something uniquely their own. It's subtle yet strong, something Leonardo da Vinci spoke of: "Energy [that] originates in the movement of the spirit."

The artist having gone more than half the way, our role as viewers in this shared experience is to complete the work of art; the possibilities are infinite and ever-changing. Along with the painter and the artwork itself, we're a team. But we as the viewer don't play our role if we control our reactions. What we can do is try to help along the artist's intentions and then augment them with our own experience.

An exasperated Diderot once wrote, *"Must a writer say all? Must a painter paint everything? Can't he leave anything at all to my imagination?"*

Ed Ruscha's (Roo-shay) new work, on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, leaves lots of open space for us to rest and to dream. Los Angeleno Ruscha is famous for his brightly colored pop paintings, which include the Hollywood sign and a Standard Oil station. He often uses words.



Strong, Healthy by Ed Ruscha
www.edruscha.com

Like Traylor, Ruscha utilizes silhouettes; but unlike Traylor's primary-colored figures, Ruscha's pictures are black and white. They're beautiful noble paintings, somewhat nostalgic yet mysterious. He invites the viewer to participate by adding white label-sized rectangles that we might want to put words into. Even if our inclination isn't to fill them with words, in the midst of Ruscha's soft images, these brilliant hard-edged shapes are unsettling and curious.

The experience of sitting in this gallery, which is fairly small as galleries go, is a quiet and touching one. In his essay on Ruscha, MCA director Michael Danoff quotes Roland Barthes: "The work of literature (or by extension, art) completes its meaning only as a result of what each reader (viewer) brings to it" There are layers and layers of opportunity to explore in Ruscha's paintings. Nothing is stated; we make of it what we wish.

So the meaning of art isn't in art history books, art criticism (Ahem! No matter how astute it may be!), or in momentary fads. Even the most creative and original artists are limited by their own uniqueness. But if they can create a vehicle—the work of art—that touches our spirits in an infinite number of ways, bringing us together with our past, our fellows, and ourselves, they've done the job. Then we can do ours.