

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 20, 2007

Friday Poem

Filed under: circles n\` bunnies,poetry — alecsothblog @ 5:09 am



from **SELF-PORTRAIT IN A CONVEX MIRROR**

by John Ashbery

As Parmagianino did it, the right hand

Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer

And swerving easily away, as though to protect

What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams,

Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together

In a movement supporting the face, which swims

Toward and away like the hand

Except that it is in repose. It is what is

Sequestered. Vasari says, "Francesco one day set himself

To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose

In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers . . .

He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made

By a turner, and having divided it in half and

Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself

With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,"

Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait

Is the reflection once removed.

The glass chose to reflect only what he saw

Which was enough for his purpose: his image

Glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle.

The time of day or the density of the light

Adhering to the face keep it

Lively and intact in a recurring wave

Of arrival. The soul establishes itself.

But how far can it swim out through the eyes

And still return safely to its nest? The surface

Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases

Significantly; that is, enough to make the point

That the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept

In suspension, unable to advance much farther

Than your look as it intercepts the picture.

Pope Clement and his court were "stupefied"

By it, according to Vasari, and promised a commission

That never materialized. The soul has to stay where it is,

Even though restless, hearing raindrops on the pane,

The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,

Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay

Posing in this place. It must move

As little as possible. This is what the portrait says.

But there is in that gaze a combination

Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful

In its restraint that one cannot look for long.

The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,

Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,

Has no secret, is small, and it fits

Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.

That is the tune but there are no words.

The words are only speculation

(From the Latin speculum, mirror):

They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.

We see only postures of the dream,

Riders of the motion that swings the face

Into view under evening skies, with no

False disarray as proof of authenticity.

But it is life englobed.

One would like to stick one's hand

Out of the globe, but its dimension,

What carries it, will not allow it.

No doubt it is this, not the reflex

To hide something, which makes the hand loom large

As it retreats slightly. There is no way

To build it flat like a section of a wall:

It must join the segment of a circle,

Roving back to the body of which it seems

So unlikely a part, to fence in and shore up the face

On which the effort of this condition reads

Like a pinpoint of a smile, a spark

Or star one is not sure of having seen
As darkness resumes. A perverse light whose
Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its
Conceit to light up: unimportant but meant.
Francesco, your hand is big enough
To wreck the sphere, and too big,
One would think, to weave delicate meshes
That only argue its further detention.
(Big, but not coarse, merely on another scale,
Like a dozing whale upon the sea bottom
In relation to the tiny, self-important ship
On the surface.) But your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what's there
And nothing can exist except what's there.
There are no recesses in the room, only alcoves,
And the window doesn't matter much, or that
Sliver of window or mirror on the right, even
As a gauge of the weather, which in French is
Le temps, the word for time, and which
Follows a course wherein changes are merely
Features of the whole. The whole is stable within

Instability, a globe like ours, resting

On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball

Secure on its jet of water.

And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,

No words to say what it really is, that it is not

Superficial but a visible core, then there is

No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.

You will stay on, restive, serene in

Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning

But which holds something of both in pure

Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything.

above: Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror, c. 1524 by Parmigianino

11 Comments

1. wow.

Comment by mary — July 20, 2007 @ 7:34 am

2. Ashbury demonstrates once again that language trumps image, Mary's articulation notwithstanding.

Comment by Uncle David — July 20, 2007 @ 7:53 am

3. Alec: I have been waiting for you to bring up the self-portrait. I was at Jen Beckman last week and I noticed one that fit in oddly. It also did make me put a lot of pieces together; you were on your game earlier than I. I had read about it but never asked.

How about a week of self-portraiture (photographers that do and photographers that don't) in the inevitable blogosphere...

Comment by David Wilson Burnham — July 20, 2007 @ 8:02 am

4. So good, I can hardly stand it. Love Ashbery ever so much. Great choice, AS.

Comment by Jen Bekman — July 20, 2007 @ 4:53 pm

5. I used to be such a huge Ashbery fan and haven't read him in years. Thanks

Comment by Joe Holmes — July 21, 2007 @ 10:14 am

6. Sorry to be so mundane in the face of great poetry but wouldn't that be Parmigianino's left hand?

Comment by Stuart Alexander — July 21, 2007 @ 3:46 pm

7. "Sorry to be so mundane in the face of great poetry but wouldn't that be Parmigianino's left hand?"

That's been bothering me, too, Stuart... I'd never read the poem together with the painting before! So much play is made by Ashbery of the hand and the properties of mirrors (and "One would like to stick one's hand/Out of the globe, but its dimension,/What carries it, will not allow it" is **so** relevant to the previous blog on "straight vs. manipulated" photography) that you have to suspect it's deliberate. If not, it's an error of a similar order to Tennyson thinking trains ran in grooves, not on rails...

Comment by Mike C. — July 22, 2007 @ 5:14 am

8. From Parmigianino's perspective, it is his right hand (we are looking at the reflection of a mirror).

Comment by Ondine — July 22, 2007 @ 8:26 am

9. Ondine, sit in front of a concave mirror with your right hand closest to the mirror and tell me if the image you see matches the painting above.

Comment by Stuart Alexander — July 22, 2007 @ 9:00 am

10. When one looks into a mirror is your good side the right side? For me the good side is the right side that is right.

Comment by Christine — July 23, 2007 @ 9:08 pm

11. M.C. Escher (and Uncle David) have confirmed that smarty-pantsberry was wrong:

Comment by Alec Soth — July 29, 2007 @ 5:55 pm