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David Driskell and Marsden Hartley: A Phenomenology of Formless Forms

"The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness."
-Merleau-Ponty, quoting Cézanne, in *Cézanne's Doubt*

In his essay "Eye and Mind" (published January, 1961), Maurice Merleau-Ponty cites the words of André Marchand, after Paul Klee:

In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me.... I was there, listening.... I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it.... I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out (*Primacy* 167).

Through David Driskell's *Blue Pines*, 1959 (plate 1, below), we are thrown into a universe penetrated by elegant whorls of Van Gogh-like hatched cobalt blues and variegated greens, seemingly enveloping a central spine of modulated siennas, random vermilion, and a compliment of unexpected turquoise. Thin vertical stripes of browns and red patinas enframe this airborne world-view. Driskell's canvas speaks in formless forms, while inviting us up into the higher reaches of the pines of Maine, where ground drops away, and the sky seems within grasp. We are as though suspended in mid-air, weightless, floating amongst these vibrating color fields of blues and greens, and against tranquil grays.



plate 1.

In speaking of the forests of Maine, Driskell has often spoken of this realm of human spirit, endowed with freedom, far removed from the strife and oppression encountered far below, in the realm of the ground, the earth, man.

John Russon writes that such works of art “use oil paint and canvas to *make visible to us our own perspective*: in witnessing this work, we see what it is like for us to see. The work thus gives us a “portrait” of the act of experiencing, and, in seeing what the painting shows us, we are enabled to see into the nature of our own experiencing” (Russon 12). In *Blue Pines*, we soar with

Driskell up and amongst the soft-edged spaces of our own being, the canvas a connecting link between the artist and the viewer's imagination/intuition. We look out over the ground of earth, the lakes, out into the vast limitlessness of the blue-gray sky. Russon suggests that while a landscape painting undoubtedly "portrays 'the real world', in so doing it equally portrays what is necessarily an *experience*, a *perspective*." (12). In standing before *Blue Pines*, I sense I am experiencing an unconcealment which Driskell himself experiences in the being-with these towering green-blue giants. There is a simultaneous unconcealment of myself *as* myself, and of a reflexive Kantian disinterested judgement of beauty of nature, of being, taking place. One could say there is a sense of 'ordinary magic' occurring as well; ordinary in the sense that there is no hidden rabbit-in-the-hat, but rather a phenomenological unconcealment, an unconcealment of wonder and nowness. There is a phenomenological reduction in the givenness of the image of Driskell's *Blue Pines*, where we and the pines return to ourselves through the dance of encounter-ment.

In Marsden Hartley's *Brilliant Autumn Landscape #28*, c. 1930 (plate 2, below), we are given to something altogether different. We find a palette of warm, reassuring colors: reds, oranges, yellows, and siennas, interspersed with a small field of rich cobalt blue and the occasional green. Hartley has created, as Russon says, "a perspective on our objective experience", that is, our experience of the world as an object for our detached speculation..." (13). We have entered into a space of, as Heidegger says, "inconspicuous familiarity" (14). Maples, elms, pines, and spruce all coalesce into formless color fields that soothe due to the familiarity Heidegger alludes to. Calm waters coarse around smooth rock; there is the suggestion that we are standing on a mud flat at low tide, distant sea grass bending to the wind. Light reflecting off

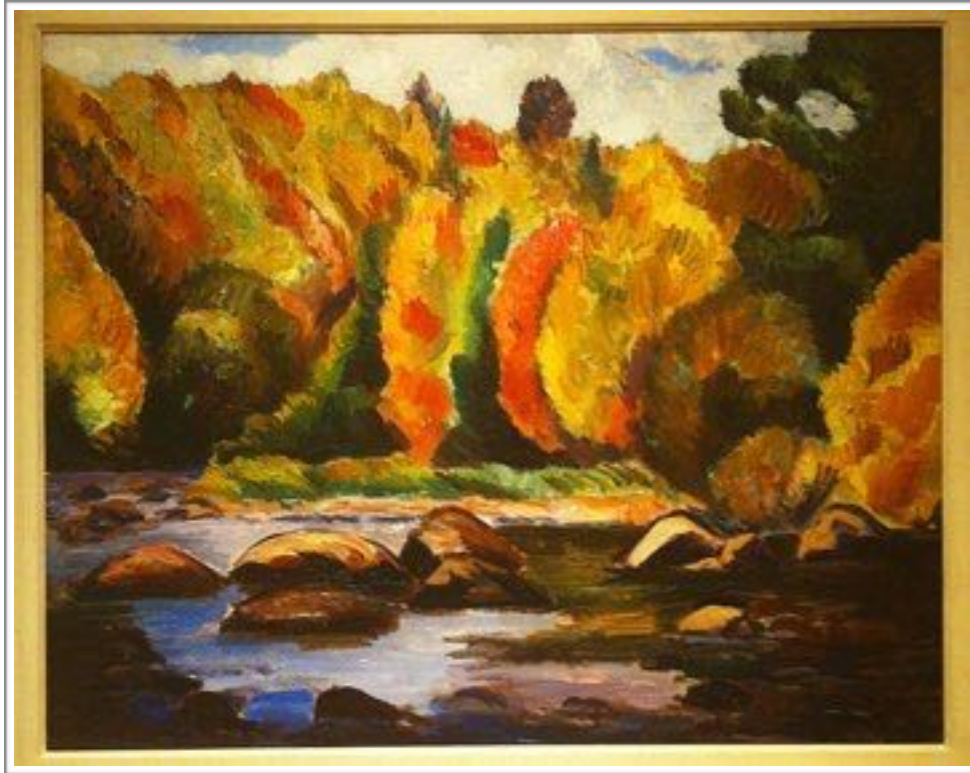


plate 2.

veneer of rock contrasts with dark patches of the mud floor of the tidal basin, while the languid surface of the receding (or incoming?) tide mirrors the sky and clouds above. The light is that of a late autumn afternoon. There is undoubtedly a foreshadowing chill in the air as the sun, already low in the sky, recedes behind us.

These two works, redolent of the richness and profundity of *l'entourage* and the very mirror of *Nature*, for these two Maine artists, recall a passage from Merleau-Ponty, who writes, “we never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought — almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth.” For it is, he continues, “the realm of perception which initiate[s] us to the truth” (*Primacy* 3). Marsden and Driskell unconceal their distinctive worlds of perception for us, laying bare their dialogics of

critical thinking both concealed and unconcealed in their canvases. Hartley's truth could be said to reside in the warm colors of a still autumn day, while Driskell's is found up above with the wind, and spacious, formless forms. It could be posited that Hartley, in this case, is painting *immanence* — a quality of being within the mind, in the mud-bottomed tidal basin and warm autumn foliage; while Driskell that of *transcendence* — the state of being above and beyond the limits of material experience, in the upper reaches of the towering pine and the vastness of the vista beyond. Driskell seems to be positing the profound questions Merleau-Ponty asked: "What is depth, what is light...? What are they — not for the mind that cuts itself off from the body but for the mind Descartes says is suffused throughout the body? ...what is that instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cézanne's words, he 'thinks painting'" (*Primacy* 178)?

Driskell, in this instance, goes even beyond 'thinking painting', to *being* painting. Drawing one last time upon Russon, we could say that Driskell, "in effecting the *epochē*, has effectively entered a 'new land', with a new terrain to survey, and the experience is thus more of an epiphany than an inventory of already acquired items..." (Russon 22). We are indeed the richer for being invited into Driskell's world-view.

WORKS CITED

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