

Alternate Reality

By

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Abstract.

Alternate Reality is a self-analytical study in self-portraiture in light of a mirroring notion that can materialize thoughts and emotions, and represent out-of-place reflections of the portrait, surrounded by symbolically charged forms of animals and organic shapes. The mirrored image represents an unspoiled and immortal vision of existence, with death being the only concept that is absent.

My Background as an Artist.

I have grown up in a place where people have always fought with their environment in hopes to make it a better place to live in. As an artist my work was part of this challenge with my environment. There was so much to complain about the society, and I could have talked about all these through the medium of painting, but instead, I chose to ignore all the problems, and just tried to cheer up the viewers with my paintings. I felt we were so tired of hearing about problems.

By painting landscapes full of happiness and joy, I tried to decorate my environment. After a while, I realized that by excluding every painful memory from my work, and filling the work with as much beauty as I could think of, I was just making the existence of pain look brighter. My work was illustrating the existence of a collective consciousness in my society that was aware of the severity of its own crisis, but unable to talk about it.

In my work, I wanted to speak with a class of the society that did not want to hear about the problems and political matters which were already being discussed everywhere. I tried to find a language intelligible to ordinary people. I started to pay attention to the everyday life of people and their interactions, and made human relations the central theme of my work. I took notice of what speaks to the average person and tried to incorporate that into my work. I specialized in natural scenery as well as cartoon settings, such as the ones found in Walt Disney cartoons.

I appropriated some cartoon characters especially the ones that reminded me of joyful memories. Then I scattered them on the surface of the painting to create my imagery. Narrative features of Iranian traditional miniature also appealed to me. I built the structure of my work based on the structure of Iranian miniatures from the Herat School and the Safavid School of miniature. Two outstanding painters from Herat and Safavid schools are Kamaledin Behzad and Mirza Ali (Figure.1).

A description of my work.

In each of my paintings, I depict a landscape with my figure in the center as a male figure sitting next to a female figure. I try to represent the figures of the couple on the surface of the canvas as if the couple is sitting in front of a mirror. In fact, I start the composition by painting my portrait in a three-quarter position exactly as if I were to look at a mirror. Then I paint the female portrait by extracting the feminine elements of my own portrait.

I show this couple in the center, and always try to find a place for them where they can sit, be it a bench, a fallen tree trunk, or the back of a horse. I do this in order to on one hand, represent them in the formality of a marriage setting, and on the other, use the sitting position as a means of reluctance to interact with the animals that have occupied the landscape around their figures.

The animals around the figures are engaged in activities such as hunting, hugging each other and proposing to each other. They contradict the firm and formal position of the couple that refuse to involve in the jumping and running activities of the animals. I make use of this firm sitting position to make a distinction between reality of the figures, and unreality of the utopian landscape behind them.

Process of My Work

These paintings are started by placing a mirror on the wall in front of the chair in which I sit and pose for a three quarter portrait. The position of my figure in these paintings is of a reluctant nature. I appear as a sedentary figure in a suit, who is stuck between the studio behind him and the garden in-front of him, and keeps his firm sitting position as an anchor in

the middle. In my painting, I keep the male figure in a sitting position, to make a back and forth shift between the studio behind the chair, and the garden in front of him inside the painting.

The process of my painting develops slowly in a smooth flow of thoughts and ideas in the shapes of the objects that I paint one by one until they fill the space around my figure and turn it into a garden. When I determine the shape of one object, the shape of that object helps me find out how the object next to it is going to look like. In this case, the process of my painting resembles the style of existentialism in writing, in which the writer puts together the thoughts and ideas that are flowing in their minds in the shape of the words that smoothly develop paragraphs and pages. The words in this style and in the same manner the objects in my paintings do not have to be part of a unity in the beginning, though when we try to make sense of the complete paragraph or painting they seem to interact as a whole. One outstanding figure in the style of existentialism that helped me develop my style is Albert Camus.

My Work in an Art Historical Context

In my practice of portraiture, I try to experience the portrait from within rather than depicting the outward look. In this case, as a historical reference, Gustave Courbet is a great example of a painter who chose his subject matters among the people in their own environments, but experienced them in his studio through the process of painting. Courbet did not paint the scenes of nature and people by looking at the reality outside, but instead imagined them in his studio. By limiting his practice to the space of his studio and secluding himself from outside he narrowed his experience down to the body of painting, only the physical space of his canvas and studio.

Among the contemporary painters I am interested in the ones that have created an imagery which is familiar to the ordinary people. I like Roy Lichtenstein's pop art works (Figure.2) that are inspired by comic strips and comic books. Fernando Bottero's (Figure.3) humorous characters that are taken from the popular places among people such as bullfighting scenes.

I am also interested in Tilo Baumgärtel's work (Figure.4) and his narrative approach. The source of inspiration for his narrative approach in the first place was the 1940s comics, and in this case I can find a relationship to the presence of Walt Disney in my work. There is also a sense of playfulness in the use of surreal relationships in his work and the strange places he juxtaposes them. This playfulness is what I am trying to achieve in the strange relationships in my work as well.

The characters in my work including the female figure all have allegorical functions, and I find a connection between the allegories that I make in the form of animals engaging in human acts, with the allegories used in medieval paintings.

In Garden of Paradise (Figure.5), a painting by an anonymous Rhenish painter is one such example. From the enclosed garden that is itself an allegory of the Virgin Mary, down to smaller elements, everything has an allegorical meaning and stands as a symbol for the story behind the painting.

In Garden of Earthly Delights (Figure.6) by Hieronymus Bosch, "the relationship between man and nature is a vision of humankind living in harmony with nature in a way that defies reality. This painting is in a state of permanent 'becoming', and the only thing that is absent is death. Food is a predominant motif in this picture, whereby eating and copulating both represent the nurturing of life that prevails in this Paradise. There are no children in this paradise. People seem to crawl out of the fruit and plants fully formed, as though spared the labors of childbirth. By ignoring the negative aspects that burden earthly life, Bosch creates a vision of unspoiled and immortal existence. Nature, too, is idealized in this scene, and growth is as unthreatened as ripeness and beauty. Garden of Earthly Delights is not an image of redemption overcome, but a utopian vision of a world that never existed" (Belting 53).

In terms of the consistency within a series of work, the tapestries known as The Lady and the Unicorn (Figure.7) is one example that I can refer to as my source of inspiration. They have the same color palette in every piece, and I find it a really strong effect in them that the designers had this devotion to this color palette and composition of the tapestries. The story always happens on top of an island surrounded by a red area resembling a garden of beautiful

flowers and playful animals. When there is consistency in any series of work and the artist has a devotion to make a good number of a series of work in this level of uniformity, that work finds an additional quality and helps the pieces to reflect each other in their narrative.

Concluding statement.

Although the technique of my paintings is representational, my subjects do not represent reality. They are mechanically built in the process of mixing and matching colors in my studio. The fact that my paintings reflect my own figure, creates the illusion that the paintings are metaphorical mirrors put in front of my figure living in an alternate reality mediated entirely through the medium of painting.

The reality presented in the paintings is a utopian reality with no logical sequence between its compartments, and does not represent the realistic relation between animals and human in nature, because I do not choose to paint only the objects that I know how to paint. I paint whatever comes into my mind, and most of the time I do not have the knowledge of how to paint it. As a result, the outcome looks like the image in my mind struggling to become reality.



Figure.1. Mirza Ali, Safavid School of Miniature.



Figure.2. Fernando Botero, Dance in Colombia



Figure.3. Roy Lichtenstein, Drowning Girl (1963). On display at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure.4. Tilo Baumgärtel. The News from Yesterday, 2009.

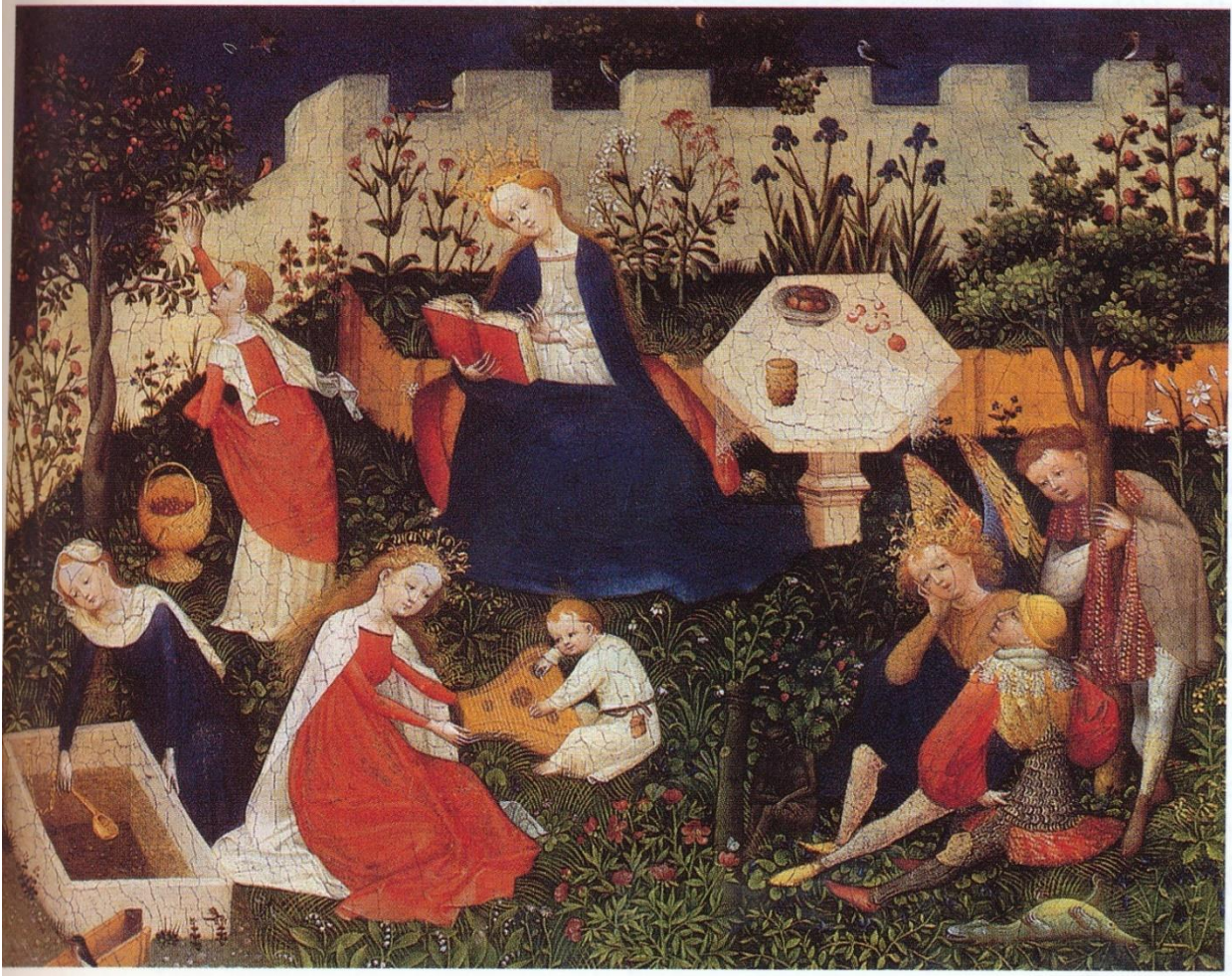


Figure.5. Garden of Paradise, anonymous Rhenish painter. Dating from c.1420



Figure.6. Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights.



Figure.7. The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries, tapestry of the taste. These tapestries represent one of the 5 senses in each piece.

Annotated Bibliography.

Camus, Albert. "The Adulterous Woman." *Exile and the Kingdom*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1991. Print.

The Adulterous woman is a short story by Albert Camus. The story is not exactly categorized as an existentialist story but it has many of the characteristics of this style. The Adulterous woman, is the story of Janine, who happens to be in a bus at about 8 o'clock in the morning, and no information is given before that time except for the housefly which has been flying back and forth from a few minutes before that time. Janine who keeps asking herself "why did I come here?" is all the time trying to make sense of this journey by illustrating the current environment for us and connecting it to her memories. The story ends with as much ambiguity as the beginning with a comment from Janine saying "it's nothing".

Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. California: University of California Press, 1980. Print.

Fried describes a concept in 1750s painting in France known as absorption. He illustrates this concept mainly through paintings of Greuze and Chardin. Fried makes his argument based on Diderot's thoughts, and places the concept of absorption opposite to the earlier movement of Rococo in which subjects seemed to be on a theatre stage looking at the beholder.

Fried mainly talks about the absorptive aspect of Courbet's paintings. He doesn't consider the other factors that could have contributed to the new style of painting. One such factor could be the potential effects of the culture of France and rise of a middle class society appealing more everyday subjects.

Belting, Hans. *Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights*. New York: Prestel, 2012. Print.

The Garden of Earthly Delights is a triptych painted by the early Netherlandish master Hieronymus Bosch. Art historians and critics frequently interpret the painting as a didactic warning on the perils of life's temptations.

This painting is famous by its enigmatic subject matter and its modern freedom with which its visual narrative avoids all traditional iconography. Writers who have published books about this painting describe it as an erotic derangement that turns us all into voyeurs, as a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty. A paradise that does not exist anywhere because it has never become reality. In the painting Bosch gained a personal freedom which was both no longer medieval and not yet modern.

Delahaye, Elisabeth. *The Lady and the Unicorn*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2007. Print.

The tapestries represent 5 senses, each panel representing one of the senses. We find a uniformity in the 6 panels of tapestries that artist has kept with devotion to the consistency in color harmony and the composition. If we look close at the composition, we find a scaffold that is the same in each panel but every time is obtained with different elements. Sometimes it is the opposing trees on each side, sometimes the two banners facing each other, and sometimes it is a tent or pavilion in the center. The scaffold of the background is like a hidden shape of an arch, which the designer builds every time with a different object.

The tapestries have a decorative pattern in the meadow of the background which is woven in red color in all of them. The color of the background is very significant and resembles the red meadow of Persian carpets.

Crary, Jonathan. "Modernity and the problem of the observer." *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992. 1-25. Print.

Crary talks about the modern vision and photography, and in a broader sense he argues that the modernist vision is uprooted not in the advent of photography but before that, in the interval between the Renaissance and the Modern period. He tries to turn the attention from the representation of the object to the vision of the subject. By describing the concept of vision he tries to amalgamate the representation (i.e. paintings) with the subject (that is the observer), and to distinguish the meaning of observer from spectator. He describes the spectator as the one who looks at, and the observer as the one who is involved with the representation.

Mitchel, WJT. "The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies." *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 281-301. Print.

Mitchel compares photography and language, and characterizes photography as a 'message without a code', a purely objective transcript of reality. He brings the issue of the language entering photography. He mentions Victor Burgin's notion of "photography as invaded by the language" (51), and argues that "what he seems not to consider is that this invasion might well provoke a resistance or that there might be some value at stake in such a resistance. Some real motive for a defense of the nonlinguistic character of the photograph" (51), and he quotes from Roland Barth: "It is through an understanding of the mode of imbrication of denoted and connoted messages that it may one day be possible to reply to that question" [photography] (20). Mitchell explains that "one connotation always present in the photograph is that it is a pure denotation; that is simply what it means to recognize it as a photograph rather than some other sort of image. Conversely the denotation of a photograph, what we take it to represent, is never free from what we take it to mean." (284).