Book Review

The Image on the Wall

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Norman Bryson. *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. 192 pp.; 65 color ills., 11 b/w. Price: $25.

Readers may find this title reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *The Mark on the Wall*, in which the female narrator in her living room contemplates how "the masculine point of view" governs women's lives by imposing itself as a standard.[1] Rather ironically, by the end of this piece, a male voice informs her that the mark on the wall is in fact a snail. Similarly, we ask: What is the image on the wall? Why is it ever there in someone's house? In *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Norman Bryson answers these questions by putting the history of the table under the spotlight, sharing Woolf's rumination over a seemingly trivial subject with a feminist critique.

As stated in his introduction, this four-essay book aims "not just to settle for the inherited discussion but to try to move that discussion into our own time and to ask what still life might mean, for us now."[2] Bryson eventually champions the still life as a node of the grand historical narrative and our mundane, creatural existence, two conditions he describes with Charles Sterling's terms 'megalography' and 'rhopography.' While some of his arguments deserve more challenges from our time, many others can still inspire the critical discourse within art history.

In the first essay, *Xenia*, Bryson reviews the decorative scheme in ancient Rome to highlight the issues of representation and power. His analysis starts from the texts of images. While paintings mentioned in these texts are lost in antiquity, they still hint at a mode of seeing that divides nature and culture. In Philostratus' *Imagines*, a local art historical guidebook for Roman students, one mural translates the cultural interaction between the host and guests into food, which originates from nature. Another wall painting reverses the dynamic by showcasing how the prey becomes processed by human hands for later consumption. Following this thread, Bryson brings up a story of competition between two painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasios, in *Natural History*. Staged in a theater, this story has a narrative device that ultimately blends nature with culture. Bryson then wraps up his analyses in the first half of this essay with *The Republic*, emphasizing how paintings, in the simulation of the Idea and material reality, can cross different boundaries.

As such, Bryson echoes the culture-nature division as he moves to discuss how power manifests itself in the representation of specific scenes in murals. Perhaps aware that his re-representation of paintings based on text alone is somewhat problematic, in the second half of *Xenia*, he shifts his focus to surviving images in Campania, a small town in Southern Italy. Together, these images are on the wall to blur the boundary between the exterior and interior, nature and culture. The wall paintings also reflect the taste of aristocrats and imperial patrons in tribute to the Greek model. With sufficient material wealth, the upper-class Roman viewers have the power to control and define reality. Even the wall paintings they patronize could absorb and resituate the original religious meanings of murals in Greece into Roman patterns of consumption. Transcending from the content, the mural as a medium becomes a transition from the artificial to the natural.

In the second essay *Rhopography*, Bryson challenges the predominance of power in *Xenia*. He proposes a second mode of seeing that reverses the traditional hierarchy: It focuses on the overlooked—our routine and domestic life, instead of the unique, heroic narratives. As in the case of all binaries, routine life defines itself in the presence of greatness. By guiding the viewer's attention to the everyday, these still life paintings, in their lack of individual drama, are on the wall with the potential to overturn the dominance of megalography. In the example of Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627), Bryson suggests there is little human presence in his larder (cantarero) still life. To Cotán, who lived a monastic life, painting itself was a ritual-like discovery, utterly reverent to the creation of God. In comparison, the ceramics depicted by Francisco

1 Virginia Woolf, "The Mark on the Wall," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 77–83.

2 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7.

de Zurbarán (1598–1664) evoke the familiar touch of the human hand, but with the strong chiaroscuro shading, they appear fragmentary, alien to our vision. Regardless of their differences, these two artists share an ambition to position still life to a comparable level to religious paintings.

Unlike the Spanish approach, Caravaggio inherited the prospect of *Xenia* in his theatrical artworks. Bryson attributes such theatricality to what Stephen Bann suggests as 'presentation,' in which the paintings distance themselves from the real world and reinvent another set of reality within the frame. Cubism finds such a capacity to be useful, as it seeks to isolate a purely aesthetic space under the consciousness of artists. Entirely out of its practical function, all kinds of food make their way into the painting as signs from the real world. Bryson then introduces the final solution for a trade-off between the grand and the trivial—being nonchalant. Chardin (1699–1779), for example, pays equal attention (or inattention) to each brushstroke in his still life. The blurry effect of his paintings fits into the discussion of vision mechanism at his time, once again returning our vision to a creatural level. All these artists embody the conflict between rhopography and megalography, and it seems there is no middle ground or possibility to compromise.

Before tackling the grand-trivial conflicts, in the third essay, Bryson turns away to examine the role of consumption in still life production. Entitled *Abundance*, this chapter focuses on the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life. With the oversupply from prosperous trading, the Dutch found themselves wrestling with the moral implication of lavish consumption. Paintings of homemaking, flowers, and meals in the Netherlands were hung on the wall to help this thinking process. Bryson divides the domestic scenes into paintings of order and disorder: while the former promotes the ethical codes of families, which justify the sumptuousness enjoyed by the household, that of disorder expresses its anxiety over consumption, though itself was one of the very products. These paintings with human action hint at varying degrees of affluence at the time, contemplating how to understand the plethora of material possessions.

In parallel to the homemaking scenes, Bryson retrieves the nature-culture divide in the still life of flowers and vanitas, but builds up tension by examining the consumption of these self-contradictory paintings per se. In the Dutch tradition, flower paintings are usually a miscellany of diverse types in full blossom, drawn from the vast colonial network and expanding economic spaces, which cannot be possible without human operation. The exchange of cash as well as the scientific accuracy made both the subject matter and the paintings loaded with values, not only monetary but also intellectual. The same applies to vanitas, paintings that signify the brevity of life, but turn out to be more ironic. The motifs of vanity in these paintings are replicas in verisimilitude, to the degree of substitutes, of their originals. The more realistic they look, the more indulgent they can be to the viewers. Bryson proposes such an internal paradox as the "fundamental semiotic structure" of the still life,[3] where the signified and the signifier contradict. Only in such contradiction can the transcendental truth, such as *memento mori*, reveal itself.

So far, megalography and rhopography never come into dialogues on the same picture plane, but in the fourth essay, *Still Life and 'Feminine Space,'* they finally reunite. Deemed as waste, objects in the still-life had a hold of familiarity to viewers as part of our cultural memory. Their everlasting shapes have a solid presence in history, which in some ways are the imperishable version of megalography. Some artists are even bolder in juxtaposing the two into one scene, just as Velázquez did in *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (Fig. 1). Contrary to such a grand title, it seems the two ordinary women in a kitchen matter more in the foreground, while the resurrection of Lazarus went unnoticed in the corner as an image on the wall. The spatial separation reminds us that the great and the mundane either never collide, or are always one, in the miracle of God.

Aware of the intricate relationship of all the binaries he has examined thus far, Bryson concludes that these divisions are all cultural constructs. Culture for a long time preferred to celebrate heroic individuals, which are usually male. The female sex, confined in the household routines such as the two in Velázquez's painting, gains little justice and attention from history. Under a patriarchal ideology, the space within the still-life is women's domain: domestic, near to our body, trivial. The genre itself is also the most appropriate for women artists, according to the male-dominated canon. But as Bryson points out, the domestic space under the hands of male artists, and women's position in the hierarchy of artmaking, carry a sting of irony as they are "imagined through the values of the 'greater' existence from which they were excluded."[4] The subjects in paintings and the female artists under critique register little agency.

To build on that, I assume it would be more provocative if Bryson had indeed turned his attention to women still life painters, the truly overlooked. In the last chapter, though he gives them credits for the sheer volume and excellency of their works, not much of these artworks goes into his list of illustrations, let alone analysis. Without going too far into the debate about how problematic the gender binary itself is, I imagine it would be more intriguing to cast new light on both sexes with a more balanced weight under Bryson's razor-sharp analysis. Possible questions for new directions are: In the works of female still-life artists, is there a similar sense of 'the uncanny,' as Bryson quotes from

3 Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 150.
4 Bryson, 178.

Figure 1
Dieogo Velázquez, *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, c. 1618.
Oil on Canvas, 60 × 103.5 cm. London, National Gallery. Bequeathed by Sir William H. Gregory, 1892.

Freud? Do they have a slightly different semiotic structure? What do they say about the conflict between megalography and rhopography? How do women art critics and scholars view and react to the position of still life in the hierarchy of arts? These hovering questions are the internal paradox of *Looking at the Overlooked*. They guide us to ponder on the mission suggested by the book title, about how we position ourselves in viewing the image on the wall—after all, we may as well be trapped in a similar living room as Woolf's narrator does, but this time we can at least stand up and observe the snail by ourselves.

In conclusion, though the four chapters in *Looking at the Overlooked* seem to be relatively independent, they are still connected by shared concepts and progressive logical links. It is best to understand these essays as the layers of a sphere, each nearer to the core of analysis than the previous one. In Bryson's inquiry about still life paintings, which are conventionally petty and unremarkable, he muses over the issue of representation, the word-image relationship, the culturally constructed nature of dichotomy, and gender ideology. With his crisp, elaborate proses, he pushes the readers to think again about the connotations of still life, and reflect more on the past of art canon.

Bibliography

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