Capturing Autonomy

HANNA NOVAK

_I see the canvas and I begin. But, you have to keep on the very edge of something, all the time, or the picture dies._

—Willem de Kooning

In a show at the Museum of Modern Art titled _Abstract Expressionist New York_, a painting stands apart from works of the monolithic artists of twentieth century America. Willem de Kooning’s _Woman I_ hangs alone, outside an adjoining gallery filled with Mark Rothko’s bursting clouds of color and the jarring contrasts of Franz Kline’s black and white canvases beyond. _Woman I_ is the sole portrait in the exhibition; it is the only painting that is directly concerned with the individual, shedding light on many facets—the contradictory, the senseless, and the self-evident—of the human being. With a wide-eyed stare and tooth-bearing grin, a woman coaxes the viewer to look at her; her mischievous air invites us into her world. _Come hither_, she beckons. Though de Kooning’s brushwork is rough and frantic, the subject is undoubtedly feminine. Large breasts are framed with dark, thick paint strokes. Hips and legs are eye-catching: cast in a palette of pinks, blues and yellows, they mark the painting’s brightest section. She could be either sitting or standing, awash in a close-to-cubist rendering of her lower half. Her arms are lost to the colors of her hips and legs, which disguise and mangle her hands. And yet, amid the abstraction of her body, she fits the mold of several female archetypes: her roguish grin brings to mind images of sultry Victoria’s Secret models, while her voluptuous figure conjures maternal associations. She lusciously repulses.

_Woman I_ hangs again at The Museum of Modern Art, in a retrospective of de Kooning’s work, along with the other paintings in this series, completed between 1951-1953. Peter Schjedahl, in his review of the exhibit, sheds light on the history of the piece’s reception. Deplored as “too hot” by the Minimalist and Pop movements that then reigned over New York’s art scene, de Kooning’s style diverged from the unforgiving eye of the artistic status quo.
and was “subsequently lambasted as vilely macho by feminists” (123). Schjedahl, however, claims the subject “gains power from every swipe de Kooning takes at her, until she is a goddess and he is effectively nothing” (123). Woman I, then, can be interpreted as a celebratory work of the woman as individual: it sheds light on impishness, eroticism, motherhood, and autonomy. The artist has fearlessly thrown himself into his work and yielded to all the facets of his subject. With each stroke, his understanding of her is deepened: he is transformed into both the woman and the woman’s most empathetic onlooker. In response to the reactions to Woman I and the other canvases in his Woman series, de Kooning said, “Maybe in that earlier phase I was painting the woman in me. Art isn’t a wholly masculine occupation, you know” (qtd. in Ottmann).

Looking at Woman I, I am reminded of a time when I attempted to transmit subject onto canvas. In my play Black and White, a man stands by a hospital bed, berating his mother as she dies in a morphine-induced, nearly hallucinogenic state. She has always been a sadistic parent; he remembers a time when she threw a knife at him in a bout of anger. The incident, which occurred decades ago, has remained an open wound; this incident and other violent episodes of the past are repeatedly brought up and repeatedly lead to more violence. Though downcast eyes proclaim shame and regret, indignant words never cease to float across the stage. The fear of being defeated fortifies the man’s will to keep going. You are plotting to ruin the relationship between my kids and me. You are making them turn against their own father. The man, in turn, proves a sadistic son: he refuses his mother water from the hospital room tap and demands that the nurses take her off morphine, despite her pleas that the pain from a recent surgery is unbearable. The character of Jirka Braun is rendered a household villain, tainted by the difficult life he and his mother have led together as refugees from Communist Czechoslovakia.

In writing Black and White, I aspired to a truthful homage to my father. I took lines of dialogue verbatim from arguments I witnessed between him and my grandmother. The character’s fears and desires replicate his. . . . Even his name is not changed, and though the actor struggles with finicky Czech pronunciations, I am unrelenting. Mimicry seems too simple a means of rendering a living person onto a dramatic canvas. And yet despite that apparent ease, the character of Jirka Braun, once on stage, is not recognizable as my father. None of his exchanges of dialogue, reactions, or movements seem genuine. He is two-dimensional; many facets of his person are left unexplored. He is a stranger with my father’s name.
Willem de Kooning and Jan Vermeer’s disparate painting styles—not to mention the three centuries that separate them—are united by the artists’ mutual ability to dissolve into their subjects. In his essay “Vermeer in Bosnia,” Lawrence Weschler explores the meaning of the individual in art through works of the seminal Dutch painter. In his canvases, Vermeer employs “conventional iconography precisely so as to upend it” (162). *The Milkmaid*, for example, is a work replete with a “prototypically Dutch celebration of the domestic virtues”: a housemaid or kitchen servant attentively pours milk into a jug, which rests on a table laden with freshly baked breads. Within her bountiful domesticity runs a strong undercurrent of independence; her robust build grounds her firmly in the work, suggesting noble stature, and she performs her task with the concentration of a scholar. “No,” Weschler tells us, “[Vermeer’s] paintings all but cry out, this person is not to be seen as merely a type, a trope, an allegory” (162). Indeed, Vermeer paints a household servant as never seen before. She is erotic: her breasts are large, straining against her tight bodice, while the folds of her regal blue apron accentuate her womanly build. The hands with which she pours are delicate, but her forearms are imposing and muscular; *The Milkmaid* would be a very different, much less sensuous work had Vermeer painted her merely holding the jug instead of pouring with it. *The Milkmaid* serves as an act of worship: Vermeer bathes her head in a pool of light. In honoring her sensuality, her roles of both servant and seductress, Vermeer renders her as an autonomous individual “worthy of our own unique individual response” (162). Teeming with the contradictions that make her real, she demands to be looked at much in the way de Kooning’s *Woman I* does three hundred years later.

To recognize the autonomy of a subject is the first step to inhabiting it: Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is another study of autonomy, but his rendering of the girl is so visibly interpretive that he acts almost as a subject himself. A girl looks forward, head turned; a headscarf cascades onto her shoulder, a tear-like pearl hangs from her ear. Weschler includes art critic Edward Snow’s interpretation of the work, which locates the painting’s power in the imminence of the moment it captures: “Has the girl just turned toward us or is she just about to turn away?” (160). Vermeer reveals that she is actually doing both. The subject’s shoulders are angled away from us; we expect a mere profile of a head. She is certainly turning toward us. Yet, if this is so, why does the cloth piece of her turban fall in front of her, not behind? This physical paradox provokes a “visual torsion precisely opposite to that of the one we’d surmised earlier: no, on second thought, she seems to be pulling away”
The girl's expression encompasses an “impending sense of loss”: a wide-eyed stare and parted lips imply a feeling of curiosity or surprise that, given the action, she suppresses, silences, and turns away from (161). It is difficult to imagine that the artist merely observed this wealth of emotion, which occurs in a fleeting moment. Could observation have transformed itself into experience? Vermeer's ability to not only look upon a scene, but to include himself in it, equips him with a deep understanding of the person he seeks to render, ultimately making Girl with a Pearl Earring a painting about “intersubjectivity”: the artist functions as both the painter of the subject and the subject itself (161). The girl's gaze is Vermeer's as much as it is hers.

Though celebrating autonomy lends itself to acts of creation, recognizing the worth of the individual is necessary to matters beyond the aesthetic. In neglecting to look beyond an individual's “symbolic” or “allegorical” meaning, we may miss his or her power to effect change. Vermeer, Weschler argues, was responsible for “finding” and “inventing” peace amidst the strife and terror that engulfed him (160). Though we may think of The Milkmaid as an image of ease and sensuality, Vermeer's canvases teem with darker symbols—roaring lions carved into chair posts, maps on walls, soldiers visiting young girls—that exhibit a rapport with their time. Seventeenth-century Europe was swept with wars and religious persecution, “replete with sieges and famines and massacres and mass rapes, unspeakable tortures and wholesale devastation” (158). Political boundaries were ever-changing, lending dark significance to the map motif in Officer and Laughing Girl and Young Woman with a Water Pitcher. The artist recognizes the conflicts surrounding him, but, amid this consciousness, he celebrates the everyday: moments that, in times of strife, become unimportant and neglected. Vermeer's focus on the complexities of the individual being emphasizes the gifts of human nature, which are often forgotten in war. Vermeer, in his creative process and his creations, advocates for empathy. Through his art, he is inventing “peace . . . and then breathing it out” (160).

But just as an individual can bring peace into an environment, he can also be the cause of violence and terror. While mentally contemplating the works of Vermeer, Weschler attends the hearing of Dusko Tadic, a Yugoslavian war criminal. The juxtaposition between Vermeer and Tadic—Tadic, in one account, is accused of having made a prisoner emasculate a fellow inmate with his teeth—forces us to realize the power individuals hold over outcomes and fates. Richard Goldstone, the Yugoslav Tribunal’s lead prosecutor, claims that “individuals bear the major share of the responsibility” and that “it is they, not the group as a whole, who need to be held to account” when a nation or peo-
I struggled with the failure of Black and White, working hard to unlock what part of my writing process had resulted in such misrepresentation of my father. Only through reading Weschler's essay did I realize that I should have taken inspiration from the masters of truthfully rendering the individual: Jan Vermeer and Willem de Kooning. I had projected myself onto my subject, filling in the parts of him that were complex and opaque with my own anger and frustrations. I had neglected to explore the unknowns of his character, because I hadn’t tried to enter them. To do so is an essential but daunting task, “a necessary evil.” It calls for both empathy and fierce observation. You have to dissolve into a breasted, wide-hipped figure when attempting to render a woman, just as you have to experience the loss momentarily visible in a young girl’s eyes to capture it, just as you must become vulnerable to violence to explore the effects of an abusive relationship.

But how? Perhaps the answer lies in Weschler himself, and in his process of “entering” his subject. In the concluding paragraphs, he sits at the resumed tribunal and looks upon Dusko Tadić. In an “aquarium” of bulletproof glass, replete with the “lawyers and judges . . . instantaneous translation devices, video cameras and monitors,” Tadić becomes the subject of his own environment, framed by the hodgepodge of legal excitement surrounding him (163). But Weschler’s focus, despite the cacophony of the tribunal, is unwavering: he, like a dedicated artist, delves into a deep contemplation of his subject. He states that he must make an “effort at transmutation,” similar to that of Vermeer’s effort to “invent peace,” if he is to render his subject truthfully (164). He must nearly forget Tadić’s context and let go of his title of the “war criminal,” must attempt to see part of himself—the humanness—in an allegedly terrible man. His eye lingers, plunging deeper into the unknown. The art of introspection leads him to the elements of the “war criminal” into which he can dissolve, just as de Kooning finds “the woman” within himself to create Woman I. Perhaps Weschler connects with feeling hatred towards another, or the desire to seek vengeance for an injustice done unto him, or the shame of being watched and scrutinized by others. A sense of empathy, a willingness to travel into the unknowns of oneself and “the Other”—Weschler’s
focus narrows from Tadic's dress to his face, and finally, to his gaze as he glances up at a monitor. For a moment, it becomes Weschler's gaze as well. It reflects a gaze I aspire to. It is a gaze—a glimmer—into the root of understanding.

WORKS CITED


