

*Galanter's consideration of the relationship of beauty, community, and interpretation draws not only on a detailed analysis of Mark Doty's "Souls on Ice" but also on representations of experiences at Madame Tussauds and the Whitney Museum of American Art. (Instructor: Victoria Olsen)*

## HUMANS AND DOGS AND FISHES! OH MY!

Andrew Galanter

**M**y dad is not made out of wax. This did not stop a woman from once thinking otherwise. September 2010's hottest party was my thirteenth birthday at Madame Tussauds, the perfect medley of my two favorite things: celebrities and wax. The invitation was exclusive, extending to an elite group of one friend, my dad, and my grandmother. Seeing so many dead celebrities can take on the air of a funeral home, but you can't spell 'funeral' without 'fun.' And if a day of idly looking at the ideal idyll of your idols doesn't sound fun, then you may as well be dead yourself.

We had paused to regain our sense of direction when it happened. My dad, immobile, stared at a floor map. A woman zeroed in on him. She extended a wary hand toward him. My dad jumped. She jumped. He blinked. She scurried away. I'd pay double the entrance fee to find out her thoughts. Just which famous person did she think my dad was? Surely her mental plaque didn't read 'Suburban New York Dad. Father of Two. Accountant.' If the alive could pass for the unalive, it took one trip to the Whitney Museum of American Art to show me the reverse was just as possible.

It's a living room on pause. A woman sits on a chair, surrounded by art buffs and modest "Writing the Essay" students alike who are held rapt in a communal experience equal parts mundane and beautiful. The mundane refers to the woman's activity, or perhaps more accurately, lack thereof; her posture is casual if not slumped as she contemplates the day's mail strewn haphazardly on her lap. She sports

a blue floral print dress—Phidian drapery in the temple of the everyday. Onlookers aside, she is not alone: a dog lies curled at her feet (meticulously flip-flopped), nonchalantly demonstrating hallmark canine torpor. Beautiful is the scene's uncanny aliveness; each of my steps toward her felt like the dot of a question mark as I shamelessly hummed Bon Jovi's "Dead or Alive." This balance between the inanimate and animate is Duane Hanson's *Woman with Dog*, on view in the Whitney's Human Interest exhibit (Hanson). The exhibit explores the very notion of portraiture, and Hanson's creation is no exception as it masterfully presents a microcosm of our quotidian experience. At the piece's core is a stunning representation of life from various inherently non-lifelike substances. It's a math equation with a surprising sum. To say that polymer plus oil added to vinyl cast could look so much like life would shock even the Einsteins among us. This 'aliveness puzzle' suggests that living and breathing might not be central to what we call aliveness. There is some external force that allows us to experience this beautiful stillness as the unplaceable condition we call humanity.

This sensation of beautiful stillness is no stranger to poet Mark Doty. It's the underpinning force of this stillness, and the desire to uncover its origin, that drives him in his essay "Souls on Ice." The essay documents the sprawling creative process of his poem "A Display of Mackerel," a work inspired by the titular image as seen at his local Stop & Shop. It was love at first sight. He writes: "They were rowed and stacked, brilliant against the white of the crushed ice. I loved how black and glistening the bands of dark scales were, and the prised sheen of the patches between, and their shining flat eyes" ("Souls"). This image would become the base for the poem's lexicon, an artistic vocabulary that seems to hinge on three words: "splendor, and splendor" ("Display"). For Doty, splendor is interpreted in exceedingly visual and beautiful ways. No longer are the fish merely "black and glistening" ("Souls"); instead, they are "the wildly rain-bowed / mirror of a soapbubble sphere" ("Display"). Gone are the "shining flat eyes" ("Souls"), replaced with the vivid image of "sun on gasoline" ("Display"). This sense of beauty is not tangential to the splendor Doty experienced, but, rather, its prerequisite. Had the fish seemed dull or nondescript, Doty's eye would never have been drawn

to them; beauty serves as a distinguishing characteristic that hints at animate substrata where none would have previously existed. If such beauty was the first half of our aliveness puzzle, it was up to Doty to solve the second: how do the fish retain beauty even after death?

Fish are animals distinctly known for their aliveness. Indeed, the very word conjures up associations of brilliant groups of brightly colored schools flitting between reefs. But behind the display case of Stop & Shop, the fish are anything but that. At least, at first glance. Doty breaks ground by seeing past the fishes' physical form and clarifying their emotional context. It isn't their individual colors or patterns that make them beautiful, but rather their grouped dynamism. If their collective identity is the source of our awe, then it shouldn't necessarily preclude dead fish too; as long as the fish remain grouped, whether they are living or not is wholly incidental. This is what Doty realized when he looked upon the display case of fish. For him, the dead fish behind their clear case coffin were still evocative as "the vehicle . . . to help [him] think about human identity" ("Souls"). Despite being sold at Stop & Shop, they were still together, albeit in a markedly different state. Their power came not from a temporary state, but from the permanence of their group identity. This realization—that "the one of the kind, the singular, like [his] dear lover, cannot last. And yet the collective life, which is also us, shimmers on"—helped comfort Doty after the death of his lover from AIDS ("Souls"). Viewed in isolation, Doty's loss would seem singular and harrowing. And while a metaphor may not have erased his grief, he could have begun to understand its context. In a very real sense, Doty's loss was part of the larger AIDS epidemic. The power of his lover's life belonged to and lived on in the larger gay community. Just as the dead fishes' remarkability remained undiminished, so should the human life Doty lost. Metaphor taught Doty that dying does not exclude "splendor." Beauty is a constant protected by group identity.

Given Doty's understanding of what forms aliveness—the intricate intersection of and interplay between beauty and community—we are better equipped to understand the disarming vivacity of *Woman with Dog*. Where the woman's soul lies suddenly comes into focus. It is in her aesthetic appeal. The potential of finding collectivity within her identity keeps it sustained. At first, this 'collective' seems

at odds with Hanson's apparent intention of capturing a single human being. However, such community lies not in her form but in her context. The woman is checking her mail, a daily ritual with universal connotations. We see past her specific action to the times when we have done it ourselves—the excited beeline to the mailbox, with opening letters taking on the revelry of unwrapping presents—so that she becomes “a container for emotion and idea, a vessel that can hold what's too slippery or charged or difficult to touch” (“Souls”). Not only have we all excitedly opened mail, but we have sat lazily in a chair. We have had our beloved pets nearby. If not reminding us of ourselves, the piece evokes other people we know. Maybe the woman is our mother, our grandmother, our aunt. Indeed, the very fact that she is titled ‘Woman’ provides a blank space over which we can all overlay our own emotional frames, showing us that “our glory is not our individuality . . . but our commonness” (“Souls”). We have seen Doty's beautifying force breathe life back into dead mackerels. Hanson underscores this force's power by capturing life where none had ever existed. It is not the woman's individual clothes, actions, or appearance that make her lively, for she was never alive in the first place. It is the larger ideal of domestic serenity that they evoke, a community that extends to onlooking art buffs and occasional “Writing the Essay” students. Doty allows us to see the unnamed woman's humanity just as he saw his own poetry—as “a *made* version of an experience” (“Souls”).

If humanity is made, what does it say about its makers? Perhaps it suggests humans are hardwired to seek humanity in the distinctly inhuman, playing a game where the realistic representation of life is the objective. The very existence of an institution such as Madame Tussauds—a museum dedicated to recreating the likeness and image of famous humans—seems to affirm this. A sense of humanity can be created from the inanimate. But nowhere is it written that the union of beauty and group identity is the rule and not the exception. These exceptions are evident at Madame Tussauds. Walking through the museum is like being a human pinball, perpetually bouncing off celebrity bumpers. There is no denying the aesthetic composition of wax Elton John's sparkling suit. And yet, the fact that I remember not his form itself is revealing. While the aesthetic composition is present,

it lacks the second part of community. No longer can we fill in the blank spaces with our own experiential references, as we did with Hanson's piece; the spaces are already filled, the product of a media culture where we can see a celebrity on stage just as easily as we can see her eating lunch. Beauty and community work together, and removing one lessens the effect of the other. There's a reason wax Elton is at Madame Tussauds and not the Whitney.

The intertwining of beauty and community is richly paradoxical. Community may be a powerful force, but it seems most potent when bolstered by our individual experiences. Hanson's work remains evocative because we get to mentally build the community ourselves. Take that freedom away, as Madame Tussauds does, and you're left with the air of a funeral home. Doty's mackerels are not strangers to this paradox. Doty was struck by the fishes' collective identity, but ultimately stayed invested because he could overlay the individual death of his lover on top of them. We did not have the same experience, and thus may not have been as spellbound had we been in Doty's place. We bring our individuality to established group identities, creating unique experiences that can be interpreted according to the values of the viewer. Doty looks at fish and sees a poem. I look at fish and see dinner.

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#### WORKS CITED

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