

Learning How to Love the World

Richmond and Snowber's *Landscapes of Aesthetic Education*

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To think through things, that is the still life painter's work—and the poet's. Both sorts of artists require a tangible vocabulary, a worldly lexicon. A language of ideas is, in itself, a phantom language, lacking in the substance of worldly things, those containers of feeling and experience, memory and time. We are instructed by the objects that come to speak with us, those material presences. Why should we have been born knowing how to love the world? We require, again and again, these demonstrations. (Doty, 2001, p. 10, emphasis in original)

THE POETRY AND PROSE of Mark Doty overflow with remarkable relationships to worldly things: objects, places, animals, and art. To Doty (2001), these “material presences” can be teachers; the life we find in the poetry and paintings that represent them can serve as “evidence that a long act of seeing can translate into something permanent, both of ourselves and curiously impersonal, sturdy, useful” (p. 70). While Doty’s poetry is also populated with people, ideas, and beautiful language, it is his engagement with the material world that makes me return to his work again and again. When I do, I find that I encounter the places and things in my own world differently. A lemon is not just a lemon anymore. The stories of objects and places and the subtleties of human relationships to plants and animals are a bit more evident, or I’m a bit more inclined to search for them. Doty’s poetry reminds me that our aesthetic engagements with art, nature, and place can teach us “how to love the world” (p. 10) and that the teaching is ongoing.

In *Landscapes of Aesthetic Education*, Stuart Richmond and Celeste Snowber (2009) explore how aesthetic experiences can help us learn how to love the world, both in schools and in our everyday lives. The thirteen essays contained in the book provide insights into the theory and practice of aesthetic education as well as reflections on how the two artist-educators experience the aesthetic in their own lives and incorporate aesthetics into their teaching, mentoring, research, and art. Essays alternate between those authored by Snowber, a dancer and poet, and by Richmond, a photographer with a particular interest in medieval buildings; both are arts education professors at Simon Fraser University.¹ Both authors draw on varied forms in these essays, interweaving poetry and narrative with theory and analysis. Their distinctly different

styles and areas of emphasis create a rhythm that pushes the book forward. What emerges is two complementary and yet very different visions of aesthetic experience and education: provocative accounts of what loving the world might mean, how we can learn to do it, and how we can teach it.

Snowber: The Aesthetic and the Body

I wish to unsilence the body, bring it out of its boxes, let it breathe, and have a voice, and to listen to its rhythms in the practice of life and work. To let it be a site for knowledge, a place for the deep wisdom available to us. So often in Western culture there is the understanding we have bodies rather than that we are bodies. (Richmond & Snowber, 2009, p. 152, emphasis in original)

Throughout her chapters, Snowber urges recognition of the role the body plays in aesthetic experience and the possibility of the body acting as a source of knowledge and a means of inquiry. Two themes stand out here: ritual and improvisation. Ritual, for Snowber, is an act of attending to something. She offers the example of her mother “dressing by the sea,” taking an hour to get dressed each day in the room of her house closest to the ocean (p. 34). The mother’s “physical act of dressing becomes an act of gratitude in and of itself, for it is done with mindfulness, with bodyfullness, or attentiveness” (p. 38). By approaching daily activities with gratitude and with the attention we might give to a sacred ritual, we experience physical presence and what Maxine Greene (1995) calls “wide-awakeness.” But if these opportunities for ritual exist, they are also easy to miss in the rush of everyday life: Snowber writes, “I can bypass beauty by minimizing the act of dressing by the sea, by rushing my children on to the next task, by speaking for others” (p. 38). To Snowber, experiencing the aesthetic requires not being “stuck in my own way of thinking and being” and “relinquish[ing] my way of perceiving reality” (pp. 38-39). I find something of a paradox in these words: in order to experience our experiences, we must disown the ways we experience them.

While the power of ritual to unlock aesthetic experience is lodged in its predictability and sameness, improvisation attempts to access the body’s knowledge through uncertainty. Snowber describes her use of dance improvisation as a form of performative inquiry, writing that this work “explores knowledge through the body, using its capacity to release the imagination, to uncover places of discovery, surprise, mystery, and wonder” (p. 91). In dance improvisation, it is the body that generates theory, offers knowledge, and teaches—one is literally “thinking on the feet” (p. 91). Snowber’s improvisational inquiries typically involve a set narrative, accompanied by improvised dancing, responsive to the audience and to the moment. The patterns and anomalies in the dance as performed for different audiences become data in Snowber’s inquiry.

Richmond: The Aesthetic and the Social

Art is a way of understanding experience, ourselves, and others. [...] Education for me is about empowering understanding and the self in the context of shared experience. Such capacities make it possible for us to think about and strive for the kinds of lives we would

like to live, and, hopefully, resist the importunities of global capital. (Richmond & Snowber, 2009, p. 25)

While Snowber is primarily interested in the interior landscapes of the body, for Richmond, aesthetic experience is always a window to the social. Richmond reminds us that we exist within a “global market culture [that] infects and distorts some of our deepest sympathies and instincts” (p. 13). Attention to aesthetic experience offers both access to different cultural and historical perspectives and the awareness that “no ideology is inevitable, and that philosophies and conditions of life can improve” (p. 146). Richmond here echoes Maxine Greene’s (1995, 2001) assertion that encounters with art can remind us that there are always alternatives to what is.

Richmond models one way in which he brings together social and aesthetic experience in his own life through descriptions of his work photographing medieval architecture. This activity, he writes, is a profound learning experience, but one in which a concrete result is never guaranteed:

To inhabit a while the remains of a building with a thousand years of human history is mind blowing. Thinking of the events it has lived through, all the people who have walked on its floors, the changing seasons flickering through the courtyards over centuries, is all part of the experience. The simplicity and beauty of a twelfth century abbey, reflects a meaning of being human that is both spiritual and earthy in contrast to today’s marketing culture. History teaches us that no system or way of life lasts forever, and that we can learn from different eras and cultures. Sometimes in a photograph, if I am lucky, the character of the architecture—an atmospheric quality—comes through, and this convinces me to keep working. I have no idea why this happens in some pictures and not others. (p. 27)

Like Richmond, I am committed to trying to learn from place aesthetically. I have long been drawn to landscapes, and I write poetry that attempts to consider historical events and stories through landscapes as intersections between human history and the natural world. For example, this excerpt from a poem on Königsee, Germany attempts to place my thinking about the dramatically beautiful and storied lake of Königsee, which sits below the site of Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest in the Bavarian Alps, within my experiences travelling in Germany:

The towns
become cities; the landscape
submits to cathedrals,
castles, subways,
war ruins, maps. History
is in building – put up,
torn down, bombed
out, rebuilt. But here
you feel memory move
beneath the boat, dark
and deep - where
the earth drew
herself up like
an angry dog raising

hackles around its collar.
 The green spread over
 jagged rock cannot
 hide that violence.
 It's shaped
 everything here.

I tend to focus on places of trauma, like a site in Carville, Louisiana that, over its history, has been a plantation, a leprosarium, and a prison—places in which, for me, both my everyday language and the critical vocabulary I use in academic work simply fail to say anything meaningful about the place, its history, or my experience there. Sometimes a poem can and sometimes not, and, like Richmond, I am unable to predict or control whether a poem will show something about a place. This work reminds me in my everyday and academic lives that all the places we inhabit have complex histories, known or unknown, that shape our experiences. Attention to the story of a specific place can prevent us from thinking of history as something wholly separate from ourselves, something that exists mainly in books. In a poem entitled “Afterlife,” Richmond urges, “We must be lovers of place” (p. 28), advocating a kind of attentive listening to the spaces people have shaped in the world, much like the attentive listening Snowber describes with respect to the body and nature. To “love the world,” or to love place through this attentive listening, is to celebrate but also to mourn; to try to understand what is or has been without turning away; to think about how things might have been different or might be different.

Though Richmond’s primary focus is the social, he holds that political or conceptual art is not the only way to learn from or intervene in that realm. “Whether an artist is working in a more traditional aesthetic vein, or conceptually,” he writes:

art can question, be critical, and provoke intellectual reflection. The aesthetic need not be dismissed, necessarily, as an automatic distraction from social concerns, or opportunity for pleasure in a suffering world. The aesthetic can bring a power and complexity that strengthen a work’s overall impact. (p. 117)

And students’ experiences with art, conceptual or aesthetic, can show them possibilities for participating in culture, possibilities that are ultimately political: “students as creative artists, given room to experiment, learn what free expression means in a democracy; what it is to be a citizen with a point of view” (p. 140). While Richmond does not dismiss contemporary conceptual art or lament the ways that art has changed in postmodernism, he argues that “it is the aesthetic element that makes encounters with art uniquely valuable” (p. 145). The aesthetic dimensions of art, to Richmond, are what makes an artwork more than a message. “What makes a poem a poem, finally,” Doty writes, “is that it is unparaphrasable” (2001, p. 70). All attempts to explain or represent a poem, painting, or photograph in (other) words will miss something or flatten something, lose some of the life of the original.

Aesthetics and Teaching

It is this aspect of the aesthetic that makes writing about aesthetics and teaching something of an impossible project. Through their narratives and reflections, Richmond and Snowber show us the importance of aesthetic education, the possibilities for thinking about teaching as itself an aesthetic experience, the ways in which aesthetic experience can teach, and the need to live with attention to the aesthetic as a prerequisite for teaching. However, in the commentary on the actual teaching of aesthetics, I feel a sense of tension as both authors attempt to negotiate a path that both recognizes teaching as an art with its own life and still tries to say something meaningful, or useful, about teaching as a practice. Perhaps this is always the trouble with writing about teaching – if teaching, too, is unparaphrasable, it is easy to end up with either flat, concrete recommendations or overly abstract musings. Confronting this difficulty, Richmond writes, “I feel ambivalent about this attempt to write about art teaching. It is a worthy subject, but at the same time, such a tacit, vague, and idiosyncratic business. Like art making, you just do it somehow” (p. 104). Art teaching, he says, “is about initiating others into a practice, much of which cannot be spoken” (p. 113). While Richmond and Snowber’s “collage of personal, anecdotal, and metaphorical reflections” (p. 15) presents a richly textured landscape of their aesthetic engagements as humans, as artists, and as researchers grounded in moments, places, and stories, the commentaries on teaching art and art education can feel a bit detached.

One of Richmond and Snowber’s points I find particularly valuable is the importance of encountering the classroom as an aesthetic space. As a teacher, I often find myself struggling to keep an orientation to teaching that is neither too romantic (oh the things they will learn! How they will love it!) nor too technical, caught in schedules, due dates, and the mundane happenings of a semester. I work to be open to teaching as an aesthetic experience and to find pleasure in the classroom beyond student success, however defined, and positive feedback. I work to attend to all the things that happen in my classroom outside of student performance. Though of course many of those things I could not ignore if I wanted to, I am always surprised at how difficult it is to maintain that state of sustained attention—the same kind of attention Richmond and Snowber show is required for making art, for inquiry, and for meaningful encounters with art and nature.

Pictures of the Landscape(s)

The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches...so that if you looked at them you could get a picture of the landscape. Thus this book is really only an album. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, as cited in Richmond & Snowber, 2009, p. 15)

How do we foster a connection to our own knowing, our own eros, our own bodies, our own internal landscapes? How do we continue to honor the body in all its paradox and joy as a place for discovery and wonder, a place for living into our own knowing? (Richmond & Snowber, 2009, p. 152)

In their jointly written foreword, Richmond and Snowber describe a landscape as “a terrain that can be varied in shape and features; is able to be experienced at one’s own pace; is experienced through the mind, body, and senses, and may be appreciated” (p. vii). What strikes me about the above quotations is that none refers to a landscape as something we just see or have immediate access to. Rather, these landscapes require—and invite—attentive, inquiring, deliberate exploration. “Landscape,” of course, refers not only to actual terrain, but also a genre of visual art: artists’ representations of landscapes, which are always also representations of their relationships with the world around them. Richmond and Snowber’s accounts of aesthetic engagement, and how and what we can learn from such engagement, offer us an album of attentive explorations of seen and unseen landscapes, a demonstration of learning to love the world.

Notes

1. For the purposes of citation, I approach Richmond and Snowber as co-authors rather than editors of an anthology of separate essays, but I attempt to make clear which author is speaking.

References

- Doty, M. (2001). *Still life with oysters and lemon*. Boston: Beacon Press.
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