

Sheilagh Casey

Why I paint the way I do, and *ut pictura poesis**

For many years I worked as a journalist. The timeliness of journalism provides a bittersweet contrast to my interest in ideals: things that don't change. While reporters and editors like to say that they are on a quest for "the truth," they are, most often, on a quest for a few facts. The best that news stories can do, no matter how well researched and carefully assembled, is to attain a fragment of an episode.

Poetry is allowed to get closer to the truth of human experience. This fact alone could account for the passion with which so many people declare a hatred of the form. Good poetry simultaneously exposes both the paucity of words—their inability to ever be more than signifiers—and their materiality—of sound and significance. The tingle of the spine is "the Word made Flesh." What a distraction! The enchantment must be resisted if it gives us pause in our busy lives. A visceral truth has a power that cannot be understood rationally. This power can only be felt. Poetic power transcends logic. While logic is a beautiful tool, like any tool it has its limitations.

Some of us, odd creatures that we are, crave that very tingle. It becomes the signal that we are alive and can communicate from soul to soul. It insists, even in catastrophe, that we live in enchantment; indeed, we are made of it.

Because, like my fellow humans, I am a willfully ignorant baboon with a strange hair growth pattern, I believe, despite any evidence to the contrary, that painting can be like poetry. (It's one of the oldest arguments in Art, and many disagree.) A visual signifier can have the power of a word.

One difference between the poetry of words and that of pictures is that there is no handy dictionary for visual signifiers, no etymology of each one. Images do not come with translations. Instead, they serve as their own translations. Supposedly, if you have working eyes, you can read it. In practice, this doesn't work quite so simply. I think it is worth the attempt.

I am constantly seeking in images the precision, concision, compression, dilation, and resonance that a poet seeks in text. I want my paintings to continue to convey a multiplicity of meanings, all of them true, even after they have been interpreted. In this search, I simply paint, beginning occasionally with an image in mind, and occasionally without a plan. The process changes and soon, an image forms which can beckon more work or suddenly declare completion.

I'm using colors, layers of opacity and transparency, line, shape, form, and playing with things blatant or half seen, seeking an object with gestalt. Sometimes I get very close. Sometimes I shrug and move on. There is no perfection.

When I paint, my concerns are anything but current events. They are myths; ancient things; symbols and their fugitive qualities, the realness of light, dark, color, contour, shadow; proximity and communication; growth and decay; life beneath the surface. I'm just painting. Nothing new here but the way I do it.

*"How a picture is like a poem"—Horace, *Ars Poetica*, c. 19 BCE