

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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May 6th, 2015

Low Heaven

by Susan Tallman

The inventory of trauma-based art is broad and brutal. Goya's tree-born hacked body parts; Käthe Kollwitz's crumpled, grieving parents; Otto Dix's wounded madmen, etched seven years after the war and vibrating with the harrowing immediacy of a PTSD flashback; the list goes on and on. Like many people, I admire these works for their compelling bravery and I do my best to look away.

I have been lucky. These gruesome visions do not echo events I have lived. The sudden losses that broke my understanding of the goodness of the world all happened off camera: a car crash in another state, a blood clot in another country. The news always came by phone. There were funerals with no bodies, causes of death but no amygdala-searing sights and sounds.

People just disappeared. And it is intolerable.

The only sane response is the desire to make time stop—not forever, perhaps, but long enough to render precisely and permanently that new, person-shaped hole in the universe. It cannot be done, but anyone who has felt this urgency recognizes it in certain words on a page and certain arrangements of paint on canvas.

For me, stopped time looks like this: yellow-gray light exhaled across a plaster wall, sequin-bright gleams picking out a string of pearls; a pale face turned toward a window. The objects are all palpable, but their arrangement is too perfect for everyday use: the horizontal lines are exactly parallel, the angle of a forearm neatly congruent with the receding edge of the table. It is the perfection of a moment caught in passing, or of eternity, but of nothing in between.

Insofar as I have any ritual of mourning, it is this: find a middle-period Vermeer painting (after "A Maid Asleep" and before "Allegory of the Catholic Faith") and stand in front of it. "Mistress and Maid" saw me through hours of need in New York; the "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter" was there for me in Amsterdam. Sometimes this happens without any conscious plan: in England at the time of the July 2005 bombings, I simply ended up at the National Gallery ("A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal") at the precise moment the nation came to a stop for two minutes of silence.

The solace these paintings offer is not, I think, a result of their famously photographic affect, but rather of their anomalous intimacy and disconnectedness. In contrast to other Dutch 17th-century genre painters, Vermeer trims down the stage set, the cast list, and the props. The table is set for one. We are expected. But we are also irrelevant, which is strangely comforting. As the late Walter Liedtke observed, Vermeer's paintings are paradoxically disengaged from the viewer. His absolute fidelity to surfaces as they present themselves to perception results in "wilful elisions of what is known [...] in favor of what might be seen." Meaning is not embedded in allusions, events, or philosophies, but in a triangle of unexpected blue shadow under the fold of a starched white collar, painted that way not to prove a point, but because that is how it looked one afternoon, under a rain-soaked sky.

The clouds of the characteristic Dutch "low heaven" (*lage hemel*) travel fast. The light on that collar would have been gone in a moment, and the time it took to paint that shadow must have been several times the life of the shadow itself. Time was stretched and folded back on itself even at the point of creation. On the one hand, every aspect of these paintings is predicated on the devoted depiction of a specific room in a specific town in a specific year. On the other, the time-bending property of this meticulous attention to the momentary expands outward into something like a universal principle. Change the wall treatments and we recognize Vladimir Nabokov's domestic schoolroom in Vyra:

the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. [...] The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.

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