

The Game of Looking

Antoni Tàpies

To my young friends,

What must we do in order to look at things clearly without trying to find in them whatever people have told us ought to be there, but rather simply what is there?

This is an innocent game that I invite you to play.

When we look, we usually only see the things that are before us: a few things, often the most humble, almost lost in the middle of infinity.

Look at the simplest object. Look, for example, at an old chair. It does not seem much. But think about the whole universe that it embraces: the hands and the sweat of the person who carved the wood that was once a robust tree, full of energy, in the middle of a thick forest high up in the mountains; the loving work of the person who made it; the pleasure of the person who bought it; the weariness it comforted; the pains and the joys that it probably supported in a great living room, or maybe in a poor dining room in a working class suburb. All, absolutely all of that represents life and has importance. Even the oldest chair carries in it the sap, which, far away in the forest, rose from the earth and which will still serve to give heat the day when, having been reduced to mere pieces of wood, it will burn in a fireplace.

Look. Look deeply. And let yourself be carried everywhere by whatever offers itself to your gaze and echoes within you. Be like the person who goes to a concert, in a new suit and with an open heart, taking with him the promise of the joy of listening and hearing simply, purely, without necessarily allowing the sound of the piano or of the orchestra to represent a certain landscape, the portrait of a general or a scene from history. Often people would rather reduce painting to mere representation.

Let us learn to look in the same way as the person who goes to the concert and listens. Music is a composition of sonorous forms in time. Painting is a composition of visual forms in space.

This is a game. But playing does not mean doing things 'just so', 'just because'. And artists, like children in their games, do not do things 'just so'. In playing... in playing, when we are little we learn how to be grown-up. In playing... in playing we say things, and we hear others say things, we awaken whoever is asleep, we help the person who does not know he must see how to see, or the person who is blindfolded.

When we look at a painting, do not think only about what the painting (or anything else in the world) 'should be' or what many other people would like it to be. Painting can be everything. It can be a burst of sunlight in the middle of a gust of wind. It can be a storm cloud. It can be the step of a man on the road of life, or – why not? – a foot stamping the ground as if to say 'enough!' It can be the soft, hope-filled air of early morning, or the bitter, stale smell emanating from a prison. The drops of blood from a wound, or the song of an entire people in the blue or yellow sky. It can be what we are, what is today, now, what will always be.

I invite you to play, to look attentively. I invite you to think.

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Painting: Antoni Tàpies, *Gran cadira* (Large Chair), 1989.

