



Art and Mysticism

Paul Stiles

Paul introduces the reader to the mystical experience of art – direct perception of beauty, which we can all experience.

I confess from the outset that I am uncomfortable with the word 'mysticism.' It is an important word, there is no doubt about it, but it has taken on meanings in addition to the one that I am looking for, and I do not necessarily agree with all of them. By 'mysticism,' I mean the direct perception of the nature of reality. Now reality is a virtually inexhaustible well of concepts, the very concepts that define its nature. For example, one might speak of interior and exterior, or say that these are opposites, or differentiate opposites from complements.¹ Or one might speak of principles of stasis and change, of being and doing. Or one might move through various states, from the definite, through the indefinite, to the infinite. Now I know of no other word that encompasses the unveiling of all that I have just mentioned, than mysticism. Nor, ideally, should anyone who has a talent for this type of thing shy away from being called a mystic, any more than he would object to being called a musician, or a mathematician. In fact, we are all mystics to some degree, as long as we can reel a single concept out of the well. It is our natural birthright to understand *what is*. It is therefore with great sadness that one notes how badly 'mysticism' has been corrupted, such that it now encompasses every New Age fad this side of the Henge; or how it has been used in the past to refer to experiences that bear the marks of mental illness. For exploring the nature of reality has nothing to do with the loss of rationality, but is, on the contrary, its highest expression.

Having said all that, in this paper I want to talk about an uncommon form of mysticism—uncommonly recognised, at least, although perhaps more commonly experienced. And that is the mystical experience of art. We are used to thinking of mystics as people who acquire deep knowledge of reality through inward contemplation, but contemplating the right painting can teach us much about the nature of reality, too. In effect, a painting extracts certain principles of reality found throughout the natural world and artificially concentrates them within the narrow confines of a picture frame. In this way, art can deliver an uncommon dose of mystical insight. When it does, we call that direct connection to reality 'truth,' the underlying principle of all authentic art. Naturally, this connection is old news. So it is not necessarily that the relationship between art and mysticism is new, but that we have not conceptualised it as such. Instead, much of the mystical experience of art has been classified as either spiritual or aesthetic. In the former case, the distinction is between knowledge and being. Mysticism teaches us about the nature of things; spirituality encompasses how this knowledge effects who we are. There are various stations along this path, various means of

moving down it, and various levels of understanding that result. In any case, the spiritual path is wedded to the mystical experience, but is actually a separate concept.

The aesthetic experience is, on the other hand, a certain subset of mystical experience. It is the direct perception of beauty, as opposed to truth. In fact, a third form of perception now becomes apparent, based on the three classic ideals: the mystical perception of goodness. In sum, the direct perception of what is true, beautiful, or good is the very nature of mysticism. Mystics, in turns out, are natural Idealists. To put it another way, if one is tone deaf to the nature of things, one becomes a banker.

Surprisingly, all three facets of mysticism, and hence of reality itself, emerge from certain works of art. Indeed, this is what gives art its power. But instead of trying to prove this verbally, I would like to practice what I am preaching, and take a direct mystical approach, one that the reader can experience, too. By this I mean that if a work of art, like a painting, can stimulate a mystical experience, then we ought



State of Life

to be able to take a particular painting and have that experience together, right now. Why not?

This is *State of Life*, by Steve Perrault. Perrault is an interesting anomaly in the art world, a former monk who left his monastery at age thirty, became a psychotherapist, and then turned to painting in mid-life. Since then he has enjoyed great success in a relatively short period of time. He works in the genre of metaphoric realism, in which his exclusive subject is the interior life of the human being. Virtually his

¹For those thinking that mysticism is the perception of the unity that transcends opposites, I certainly do not deny this, I am merely suggesting that the term be expanded beyond this summit.

²See www.sjperrault.com.

entire oeuvre utilises the motif seen here (two others are depicted below).²

State of Life presents the viewer with a powerful image, one able to provoke many deep and meaningful impressions. Without trying to analyse why, let us open our minds to this painting and simply list what these impressions are as they strike us, one after another. A quick sample might look like this: *purity, simplicity, principle, clean, sharp, distinct, precise, deep, order, bliss, longing, serenity, color, calm, bright, alive, open, aware, visionary, light, warmth, sea, sky, beauty, white, blue, red, ideal, real, being, here, now, affirmative, self.*

This kind of conceptual pointillism creates a cluster of ideas that surrounds our mind like a billowing cloud. This cloud, of course, refers to the scene in the painting. It defines *what* the scene *is*, in both part and whole: the sea *is* blue, the walls *are* sharp, the scene *is* serene, etc. And the term for that—for *what is*—is *reality*. So this cloud of concepts is our first cut at reality. It is our initial awareness of the scene. Note the distinction between this reality and the material reality of the painting, the oil and canvas it represents. We are talking about a purely *visual* reality, the reality of the *image*. The image is drawn from the painting, but should not be confused with the paint.

From here we may draw a few more conclusions about reality. First, visual reality is an inexhaustible well of ideas, be they principles, or qualities, or elements. Our quick sample list could be extended for this one painting, and multiplied by others. Second, this well amounts to a *realm* of its own. Third, this realm is a world of *light*. Light is the carrier wave, the source of all those impressions that break upon our consciousness. Darken the room, and they disappear. Finally, while visual reality draws upon many ideas, it forms a *whole*. All impressions ultimately fuse into a single image.

Before we move on, we can draw one last important conclusion from the above. Visual reality is a term that qualifies 'reality' based on a particular sense, vision. In separating the image from the thing, it also separates itself from what is tangible. I say this because the traditional distinction between the material and spiritual sides of life follows this same logic. In other words, tangible reality is material, while visual reality is *spiritual*. For this reason descriptions of visual reality take us away from the technical language of the modern Western scientific intellect, and into a more symbolic, pre-modern, and Eastern way of thought. From our limited viewing of *State of Life*, for example, we may already say that the image is the doorway to spiritual reality, the portal to a unique realm, a world of principle and light.

The Interior

Now let's return to *State of Life* for another level of interpretation. What makes Perrault's work so captivating is that it symbolises the aspect of reality most important to us all: the human interior. He does this by placing a striking architectural form in a natural setting, and using it to express certain spiritual dynamics. The form may be a room or a patio or an abstract boundary, as in *State of Life*. In any case, it defines a precise geometric space, whose pristine walls evoke human qualities, such as vibrancy, honesty, and modesty. This space contains metaphors for the state of the soul, often in the form of polarised principles. The walls transition from light to dark; they express both containment and expansion; veiled passageways beckon, while sheer, impenetrable barriers resist progress; sharp angles are married to curves. There is a profound relationship between interior and exterior. While the form contains a world of

opposites, it is open to another realm, and swept by exterior light. Reflective places of cool and quiet reserve are suddenly broken by surprising views through doors and windows, effecting a change in emotional state.³ Idyllic vistas of perfect calm offer a promise of hope and peace. As the artist puts it, 'the self is not a room, it is a window.' The otherness of this outer realm is underscored by the purity of the ideal form within it, a mysterious, surreal presence that hints at an other-worldly source.

From here we can ascend to yet another level of interpretation. We can expand upon our awareness of the image to include our relationship with it. The order and calm of *State of Life* encourages the viewer to meditate upon it, and to discover the meaning in it. What is this strange structure? What is the meaning of the red table? Why frame the island in the distance? The image becomes a mystery to be unfolded, engaging the viewer, and turning him into a participant in it. In effect, we fall into the image, and become part of it. In fact, in a brilliant touch, the bright red table in the painting symbolises this. It is our own conscious awareness, as if it were standing in the scene itself. This fascinating device is found throughout Perrault's work, where it responds to its environment. Here, contained by the form, it seeks the light. In other works it seeks shade, or rest, or change, or even appears to be watching the view, reflecting various moods or states of being.

This growing awareness is encouraged by the simplicity of the white architectural form, which is so spare that it has effectively been reduced to a set of principles. Liberated from distractions, the viewer focuses on what is essential, breeding spontaneous insight. At some point, the subject of the painting becomes apparent, and insight becomes introspection. We realize that in looking at *State of Life*, we are staring at ourselves. It is a burst of reflexive being: an image of our own interior, located in the external world, which we hold in our mind. We are naturally moved to investigate the nature of this spiritual subject, to ponder questions of inner experience and vision, promoting self-discovery. 'A work of art,' says the artist, 'can be a place to acquire truth not found in written words or teachings, but in personal insight.' While exploring the dynamics of our own being, we may further catch sight of what lies beyond. The soul is the well of all that we are, and at the same time the presence of that which we are not, a divine artifact drawn from the well of reality.

In this way, the experience of the painting becomes its own spiritual path, a model of the larger path we all must follow through our lives, and thus, another form of imaging. In effect, when we study the painting we embark upon an inward journey, which, to an appreciative eye, offers its own rewards. The fog of the interior lifts in the presence of the spare architectural form. We are able to define ourselves. Order, balance, and harmony promote a sense of well-being, of *goodness*. We see the grand vista that surrounds our limited existence, reaffirming life's value. We are left feeling more hopeful about the world and ourselves, and thankful for it. This gratitude passes from our eye, through the image, to the reality behind it, the transcendent source of 'the way things are,' a presence that is communicating itself to us, with a glance back.

Beauty

So we have discovered truth and goodness—but what about Beauty? The term requires some explaining first.

To see Beauty is to be dazzled by Reality, as if by a blinding light. If a painting concentrates the principles of reality

³Perrault's 'artist's statement' reveals or confirms some of these insights. See http://www.sjperrault.com/artist%27s_statement.html.



Path of Progress



Seeing Inside

effectively, then the result is metaphysical amazement. The mind of the viewer is simply overwhelmed, at least for awhile. Unlike a blinding light, however, the mind enjoys this experience. It likes being swept off its feet. And it admires any artist that can manage to do it. At the same time, the mind can be stunned by ugliness, too. So Beauty has another quality. It is an innately *positive* swamping, a deluge from above, as if the mind cannot climb so far so quickly.

This is where we connect to Reality. The dynamic behind Beauty is the union of *what* and *is* that defines Reality itself. Reality is what-is, a unified being, and when you add that hyphen you suddenly create One. It is this sudden holistic integration that strikes us as Beauty, that connects us to Reality, that we define as Truth, that we feel as Good, and that provides certain works of art with their spiritual power—as Wordsworth put it, ‘a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused.’⁴

In the case of *State of Life*, we are overwhelmed by the dazzling cloud of impressions that the painting generates, as if it were a living being. This cloud contains tremendous meaning, encompassing the nature of our own *human* being. Accordingly, it resonates with us. It touches the mind, the self, the soul, all at once. In effect, all of these positive aspects of being wonder at the image of themselves. They are split open, forced outwards, and left in awe. In opening up to Reality, we are left wondering about the meaning of our own existence.

In this way Beauty is inextricably bound up with the idea of spiritual progress, with the motion of the soul along life’s spiritual path. Beauty enlightens us, and transforms us. Like a metaphysical signpost, it shows the way. It becomes our helper, our aide, our spiritual guide. It is a means of spiritual formation, of purifying the soul. In rare cases, it can even trigger an epiphany, a sudden spiritual transformation of the viewer, such as famously occurred to Paul Tillich when first seeing Botticelli’s *The Virgin and Child with Singing Angels*. Years later he wrote: ‘That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth.’⁵

Of course, power is something that can also be lessened. In such cases, the dazzle dies down, the mind is able to process reality at a normal, humdrum rate, and we find ourselves staring at something that is merely pretty, like a lamp powered by a weak bulb.

State of Life further reveals Beauty in both of its earthly forms—and cleverly so. The artist uses perspective to focus the eye through the window at a distant idyll. In this way the artificial Beauty of the pristine architectural form is related to the natural Beauty of a tropical island. The eye moves quickly from the former to the latter, a motion in depth, as if they were two different levels of the same principle—which, in a sense, they are. In this same motion, the painting appeals to the soul’s innate longing for perfect Beauty. Baudelaire explains:

It is at once through poetry and across poetry, through and across music, that the soul glimpses the splendors situated beyond the grave; and when an exquisite poem brings tears to the eyes, these tears are not proof of an excess of joy, they are rather the testimony of an irritated melancholy, a demand of the nerves, of a nature exiled in the imperfect and desiring to take possession immediately, even on this earth, of a revealed paradise.⁶

Here Baudelaire could be describing Michelangelo, whose artistic genius was accompanied by an immense dissatisfaction with the world. Not surprising, for an idealist.

Conclusion

We began this article by talking about that problematic word, “mysticism.” Have we just had a “mystical experience” by looking at a particular painting? Certainly our perception has involved a lot more than paint. We have seen into the depths of this image and found much that pertains to reality itself. No physical science can explain this. No social science either. I am not sure what can. I do think this “art mysticism” opens the door to some profound questions about the relationship between image, mind, and reality. These are metaphysical questions, spiritual questions, religious questions. All we have done is open the door to them. Every painting is a potential portal. And so, too, are the eyes.

Paul Stiles is developing a series of videos on the relationship between depth perception and reality. He is particularly interested in getting feedback from SciMedNet members on this work. The videos are available to members at <http://www.screencast-o-matic.com/channels/cXetFvVru>. The password is ‘depth.’ Paul is available at zaharaone@gmail.com.

⁴From Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey

⁵Anthony Monti, *A Natural Theology of the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 106-7.

⁶Maritain, Jacques. *Art and Scholasticism*, Chapter 5. Accessed 17 December 2010. <http://www2.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/art.htm>.