

Exercise: The Song in the Frame



Photographers look at too many things.

Duane Michals

Alright, time now to get a taste of the way how master artists (and a few non-masters) worked.

Looking at accomplished work has always been a great way to get something moving in your own mind. It can push you beyond your constructs and habits and limitations and can carry you to who knows where?

The trick, though, is to take it in viscerally, not superficially. You don't want to just get the *look* of what you see and miss the heart of it altogether.

Still what we'll do is just an exercise, and imitation can be just a useful stage. For a while my idea of a successful portrait was one that looked like an Irving Penn out-take. In the end I got past



Benign influence: on the left is my early portrait of the actor Manu Tupou. On the right is a portrait I made in a prison years later.

the Penn externals while extracting the nourishment from Penn's great qualities — the ferocious directness of his gaze, his willingness to literally arrange his subjects (a no-no according to another influence, Cartier-Bresson), and way he used the energy of the frame to create a vibrant tension.

When I came out the other side of this phase I had digested some of Penn's energy to carry forward in my own portrait work, and I left the look behind. (See above.)

I am still woken up and nourished by looking at what other artists have done, though these days it is mostly painters that get my attention, maybe because painting is so deliberate that I assume it is done more consciously

One bright day I had this idea for a way to go beyond merely looking at work. I went to my local museum, the Yale University Art Gallery, with my iPad and a drawing app. I walked through room after room, crossing centuries and media, stopping whenever anything caught my eye. Then, using the app, I tried to capture it in a few quick strokes. I wasn't after content, just energy.

It turned out to be a wonderful way to slow my thoughts down, to look carefully, to bring into myself something of the artist's process. On the following pages are a few of my responses to works by Cézanne, Degas, Reynolds, and also to some photographs of friends of mine. Further along there are works by Sol LeWitt, Al Heald, and William Kentridge that really challenge the whole exercise.

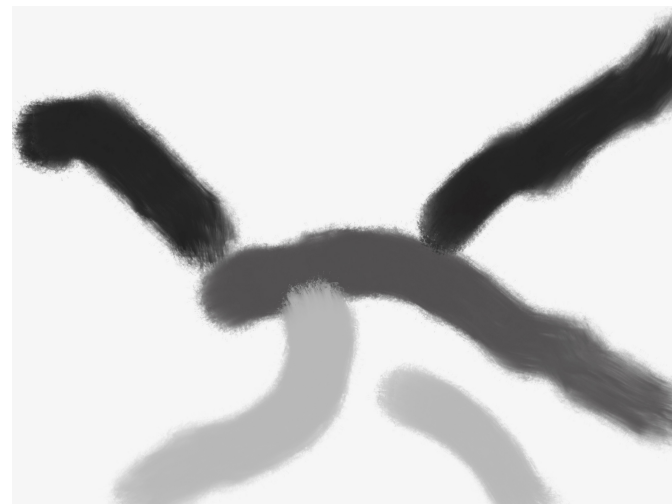
Obviously you can do this with reproductions, but some subtle energy arises when you're in the room with the actual paint. It makes a difference.

Look over these examples, then try it yourself.



Yale University Art Gallery

Here's an example. Paul Cézanne pulls us into the landscape with a centripetal force. (Three lines didn't cover it.)





Paintings seem to be structured rather deliberately, while photographs are done much more quickly, but the energy organization is obviously at work in both media.





Photo: Thatcher Cook





Yale University Art Gallery

Edgar Degas has always seemed to me to have a strikingly photographic way of framing things. It so often feels as though he'd seen something out of the corner of his eye, whirled, and snapped it with a camera. This painting is all fragments of horses and people. Four out of five of the jockeys are looking out of frame in different directions. It is a painting of the excitement of something that is about to happen. Degas toyed with photography but his photos never had this kind of fly-away energy.



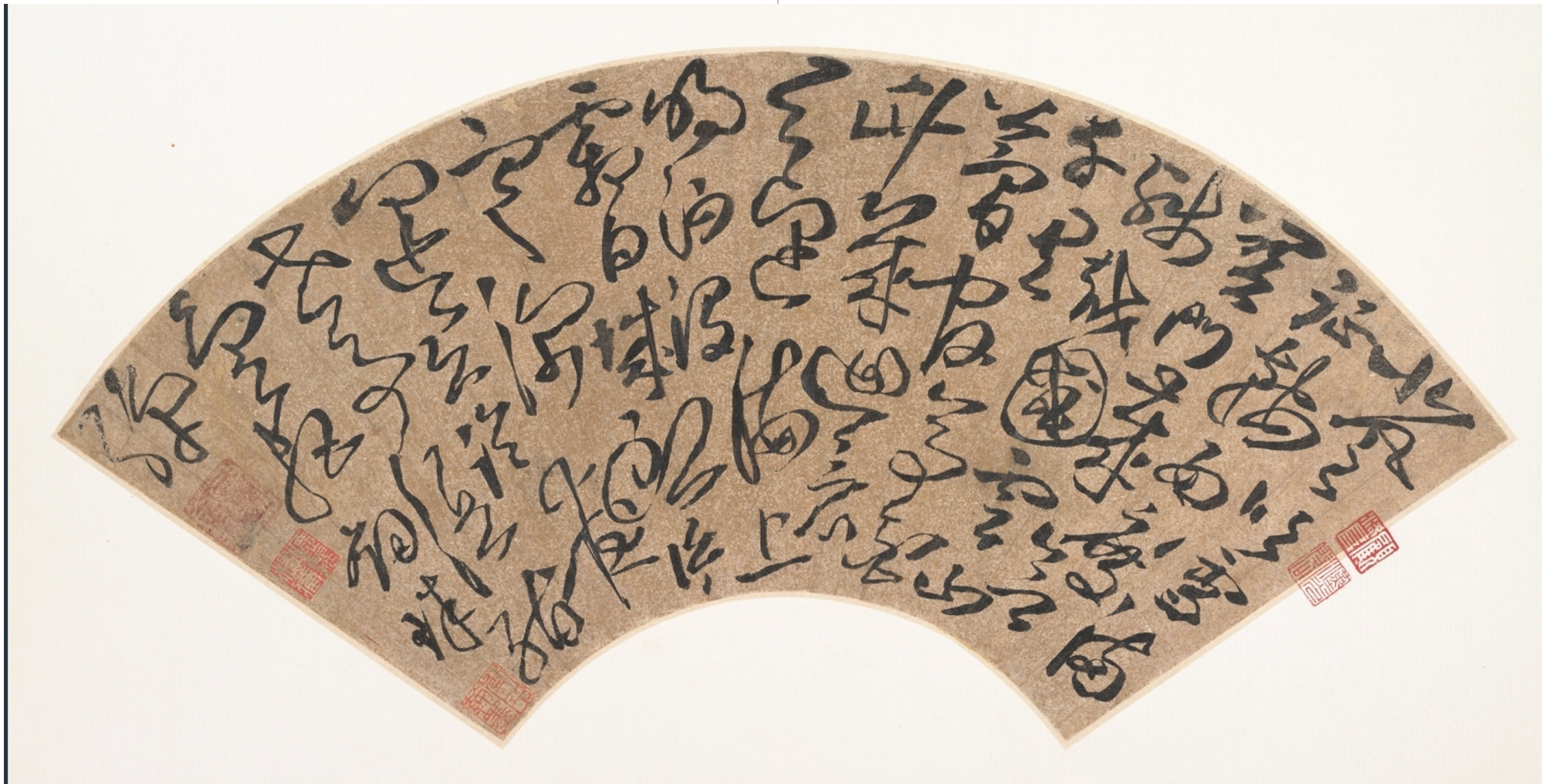
©The LeWitt Estate, Artist's Rights Society (ARS) New York

Visual works almost always have some kind of door into them and a path through them. But this one, *Brush Strokes in All Directions*, by Sol LeWitt, seems not to have any entry point or way through it. I find myself landing on the surface and wandering across it, and that's the experience.



Yale University Art Gallery

In contrast to the Sol LeWitt painting, this one by Al Held invites the eye in through several doors and dances it through its dizzying spaces. It'd be interesting to see it realized as an amusement park ride.



Zhu Yunming, www.metmuseum.org

This Chinese calligraphy is in a style known as Drunken Cursive. Its surface appears as dense as the Le-Witt at first, but if you look more closely you see that the characters flow through every bit of space right to the end, with great awareness of all neighboring characters. It appears effortless, but it is not.

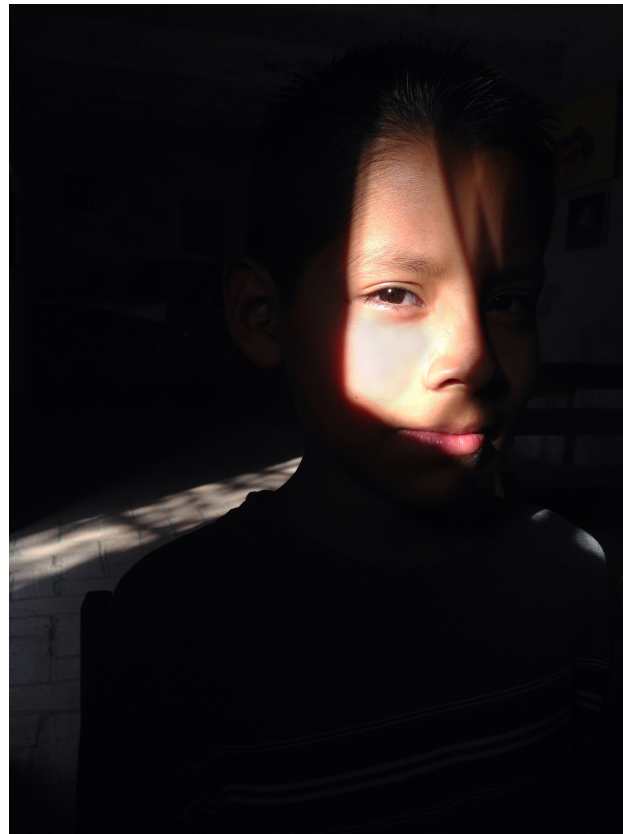


Topkapi Museum, Istanbul

The eye is a primordial attractor. Here are three images that use its power. The first is of the Turkish sultan Yıldırım Bayazıt I (which means something like *Thunderbolt*). I was captivated by the way the painter had brought so much energy to a head-and-shoulders portrait, using the swirling energies of the turban and the robe, cleating them all to the eye at the dead center of the painting.



Ekin Bilal



When I saw Ekin Bilal's photo in a class, I saw the same thing—in Istanbul, as it happened. Later I saw Eva Alicia Lépez's photo, and there it was again, another great example of how composition brings energy to an image.

Eva Alicia Lépez

A few thoughts from the three composition chapters:

1. Composition is *in* you. You don't have to learn it. It's there and it works. Go find it.
2. No one can paint three dots on a page with no connection because the *mind* — the painter's, the viewer's — will make connections. Call it *making sense* or *finding sense*, it is just part of what the mind does.
3. Pictures get effect from the things in them *and* the spaces between.
4. If your usual way of seeing and working is interrupted, your eye/mind will come up with some other way, and it will often be delightful and perfect. Whether you interrupt it yourself or your plans collapse in spite of you, see more, see anew.
5. We try to eliminate uncertainty and surprises, but surprise is exactly what the artist wants. As the poet Robert Frost said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader."
6. When our art plans get knocked aside, we think something is going wrong. It's not. As you'll see.
7. We work every day work to eliminate uncertainty and surprises, but surprise is exactly what the artist wants. As Robert Frost said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader."