Yellow:

Musings of an Art Writer in the Absence of Museums

Not long ago, in the carefree age before lockdown, I was killing time at a Wal-Mart, waiting for my oil to be changed, when I began to feel a weird sensation. Joy?

I’m standing in the checkout line when I notice the man in the next line wearing all yellow, in all different shades. A fez-like hat the color of ripe mango leads my eye to his nubby ochre jacket, which is slashed by the strap of a pale lemonade cross body bag that flops against billowing egg yolk-hued pants that would look well on a circus performer. The woman he’s with sports pointy-toed yellow shoes, the cashier, a mustard colored shirt under a neon yellow vest. A daffodil purse dangles from the arm of the woman in front of me and on the conveyor belt between us lies my prize, an 89-cent notebook covered in pure primary yellow. It feels like a sign, but of what?

I exit the store feeling a little high and am nearly flattened by a semi with a bright red cab, towing a long orange truck. That’s not so strange but, as if in a dream, there are *no words on the truck.* No logos, no ads, no messages, no pictures. Just rust, and color. After all that yellow, orange is an amazement. At home I try to write it down. This feeling is what I go to museums for, though it often doesn’t happen.

Now, museums aren’t an option. My last museum visit was on March 6, when I saw Vaginal Davis’ video installation, The White to Be Angry, at the Art Institute of Chicago, then topped it off with the opening of the El Greco exhibition. The experience of seeing these shows back-to-back was like eating an overly rich meal with too many courses, delicious but hyper stimulating almost to the point of nausea. Profane and scared thrills scraped against each other, frothing up passion high and low. Still, it was fun to think about and I’d planned to go back. Now the museum is closed indefinitely as is every other art venue in my city and state and, probably soon, the country. I could look at El Greco online but I think I won’t.

I’m looking at other things now, or looking for things to look at. Frankly, I’m enjoying the break. I’m resting my eyes, as the WGN TV puppet Beauregard Burnside the Third used to say when he was caught napping. If my last museum experience was a feast, this feels like a fast. At first you’re hungry, then you’re not. When you start eating again, things taste better and whatever doesn’t, you’re happy to relinquish. I’m wondering what I’ll crave when museums and galleries reopen.

I’m accepting visual pleasure as it comes to me, like Wal-Mart yellow. Nature, food, the daily fashion show that is Dr. Deborah Birx’s parade of elegant scarves – these present a steady stream of visual pleasure. There are other, smaller things, too. In the past week I have been the beneficiary of two small art gifts.

A chalk drawing appears in our driveway, a greeting from a neighbor child. A few days later, another drawing, from another small girl, is delivered to my sister’s front door. My sister lives alone. She has schizophrenia. A caregiver goes weekdays but I’m there on Sundays. Last Sunday she told me to lift the virus up and let people out of their sickbay beds and when I ask how I should do that she says, “By having fun.”

We’re eating lunch when the doorbell rings. A little girl stands at the bottom of the steps holding a lumpy envelope that contains an ornament with a suction cup for attaching it to a window and an aggressively crayoned drawing of a gate-like rainbow on pink paper. The rainbow, which is not pale or pastel or feminine or neat and looks more like a forest fire than a rainbow, surrounds a note. Hi. My name is Emily. I live across the street and I always wondered who you are.

I always wondered who you are. It really says that.

Lately I’m thinking about art differently, not feeling so overstuffed and jaded. I’m still thinking about El Greco but I’m also I’m thinking of yellow and the red and orange rectangles that almost turned me into one. I’m thinking of chalk drawings on cracked cement and how, in the pictures I took of them with my phone, they look like cave paintings and thinking that everyone draws, not just “artists.” I’m thinking of Emily’s William Blake-ian rainbow and her carefully worded message to my sister: I always wondered who you are. Don’t we all wonder that? Oddly, social isolation may offer a chance to find out.

Margaret Hawkins

April 2020