Peter Sacks
PAINTINGS

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essay by Louis Menand
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Paul Rodgers / 9W
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Peter Sacks’s most recent work raises important questions about cultural history, about painting, and about the place of art in contemporary life. But we can’t make sense of the way Sacks addresses these questions unless we begin as naïve readers with the simple experience of seeing a Sacks. The text is the best path into the context.

Someone recently said that a work of art has the greatest impact when it makes the feeling part of the brain talk to the thinking part. Feeling and thinking are not, of course, terribly discrete. Thoughts are always furry with feelings. The brain fires up in many places at once. But the observation does get at something that is so central to the experience of looking at an interesting painting (or listening to an interesting piece of music, or reading an interesting poem) that stating it sounds simplistic—which might be why it is not stated often enough. There is, in experiences like these, a click of apprehension, a moment when the hook snaps into the lettuce, or the boomerang comes back to the hand, a point at which you say to yourself, “Oh yeah.” “Oh yeah” is not quite the same as “I got it.” Some artworks present themselves as a riddle you need to solve. “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” “I got it.” But some works present themselves as a language you might (or might not) wish to understand. The Red Studio: “Oh yeah.”

And the awareness that you are understanding does seem to be lodged somewhere between a sensation and a cognition. It’s supersensible but subarticulate. The phenomenology is difficult to transpose. Trying to explain what it is like to be affected by a certain painting or musical composition is like trying to explain what it is like to speak French.

The analogy to language is helpful only so far. For one thing, the language of a work of art is more like an idiolect. You rarely respond to simply a painting; you respond to a painting by someone. It’s not that art speaks a private language. A painting is not a diary written in code if it does seem like that; it is not likely to hold your attention. You are interested that the painting is by someone; you are usually not very interested in the particular someone the painting is by. The sensibility matters; the personality does not. And the language of an artwork is not a foreign one. It’s not even an unfamiliar one. A work of art is a thing you have never encountered before that is made out of things—forms and materials—you encounter every day. The uniqueness is essential to the attraction. The familiarity is essential to the effect.

So what is it like to see a painting by Peter Sacks? In art theory, the place of the spectator can be a matter of contention. The issue descends from an eighteenth-century distinction between the kind of art that is present all-at-once (sculpture and painting) and the kind of art that is experi-

What It Is Like to See a Sacks
by Louis Menand
There is also something hued or worn about them, which is part of their ferocity, like a person whose age has become impossible to guess. They appear created, scarred, decapitated. They seem somehow to be recovered pieces, found objects, artworks excavated from somewhere else, lost, found.

The objects are not paintings with stuff stuck onto them. They are paintings first and foremost. The paint is not transparent; the canvas is not a window through which you can see the world. The paint is opaque. (Perhaps no shapes are.) They add structure to themselves; their surfaces are active. There are no semblances of things above them, except for the fact that they are all-at-once. The paintings are luminous objects—an “all-at-once” presence, within; indifference to the spectator is part of their preoccupations. The method of the initial apprehension is more complicated; for, materially conceived, the paint is an inchoate mass of colors and shapes—cumulus-crowded, at a distance, and the layers of paint produce multiple local sightings. (And if the painting appears lit from within, it is because it has been well lit.) For although the paintings themselves are the object—an “all-at-once” presence into question—and let’s associate the first kind with the Artistic Expressionist Pollock, Rothko, Kline, Newman, Still—and the second kind with Pop Art, Minimalism, conceptual art, mixed-media, and the eklec-

tic production of post-abstract expressionistic art, we might say, following this schema, that Sacks’s paintings are luminous objects that take seriously the fact that they are not experienced in time.

So the place begins accounting for what it is like to see a Sacks is the place, in real time, to see a Sacks. This can happen (or it can) from some across-the-room distance, and the immediate impression has to do largely with scale and color. They are imposing, highly saturated canvases. There is an inverting of time thing three about them. But you don’t simply fall into a Pollock, either. Seeing a Pollock from far is different from seeing a Pollock, either. You expect to stand cautiously in front of a Pollock... So the place to begin accounting for what it is like to see a Sacks is the place, in real time, to see a Sacks. This can happen (or it can) from some across-the-room distance, and the immediate impression has to do largely with scale and color. They are imposing, highly saturated canvases. There is an inverting of time thing three about them.

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The somewhat overpowering qualities of scale explain some of the characteristics of the art. The South African background helps to explain some of the characteristics of the art. The more recent work is less Africa-referenced, such as a piece on the move and distortions of those mementos in the direction of certain kinds of emotions which I couldn't name. Many of the materials on the canvases are of landscape or with works of art in a gallery or museum. "The first images I made were on the pages of a bound notebook," he said in an interview in 2006. "They were entirely private. They were both memory-tos on the move and distortions of those mementos in the direction of certain kinds of emotions which I couldn't name. Many were of landscape and architectural details." He has maintained this practice of notebook keeping for more than thirty years. The entries in the notebooks are both visual and verbal. Sacks also copies out the texts in the paintings are typed out on rolls of cloth using a manual typewriter, a laborious (also noisy) physical process. The texts are not clipped from a book; they are made, in the same sense that the fabric on the paintings is "made" by being cut or burned. If the words in the paintings are too schematic, run through the body of the artist before they go onto the canvas. "Writing is the pursuit of art forms," Maya Lin has written. "When your thoughts and intentions are conveyed as directly as possible to an other person, no need exists for a translation. Words can be the most direct means of shar- ing our thoughts." Not many writers would agree with her. For most writers who care about writing as a form, lan- guage is cursed by reference. It is context not content. It is preeminently a sign, and where there are signs, there is ambiguity, polysemy, decon- struction. Writers dream of a text that has the implacable in-the-worldness of a work of writing.

The entries in the notebooks are both modes of referring, ways of bearing witness, of rendering an account. Sacks has done most of his recent paint- ings in Normandy, in a farmhouse near Oma- ha Beach, a former site of the D-Day landings. Some of the materials on the canvases are objects he found along the beaches; the clothing and lace he purchased, used, in local shops. Most of the materials are historical garments, and most date from the nineteenth century. Sacks sometimes burns the fabric when he affixes the text to the painting, but the texts are not clipped from a book; they are made, in the same sense that the fabric on the paintings is "made" by being cut or burned.

A well-known contemporary artist once asked Sacks why he didn’t use assistants to type out the texts. One answer might be that this would be to treat the texts as qualitatively separable from everything else on the canvas — shapes that anyone could type, even though not anyone could do the brushwork. But it is important that the words are not produced by indepen- dence means. The words in the paintings are, as Linoprint, run through the body of the artist before they go onto the canvas. Sometimes he makes what he calls “private anthologies,” for example, a selection of po- ems by Emily Dickinson, “written, drawn, and painted in a plain-stand 19th-century French prayer book,” or notebooks of lines from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, words of Whit- man’s Leaves of Grass, of Wittgenstein’s “Notebooks 1914-1916,” of Albert Camus’ last novel. He has typed out almost all of Kafka’s The Trial. For all the impress of the natural world that his paintings exhibit, Sacks’s visual imagination has always been intertwined with writing and with the act of writing. Painting and writing are both modes of referring, ways of bearing witness, of modeling an account.

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landscape art or a melody; an object that does not only refer, a thing whose thereeness is im- mediate and whole. But this desire for escape from ambiguity, whether it is the artist's dream or the writer's, is a version of the old distinc- tion between art of presence and art of interpretation. And this is the distinction that Sacks and Warburg both understand.

The way the texts are handled in Sacks's art has partly to do with degrees of scru- tability. In their paintings, the words are not strictly design elements but, they are primarily design elements with words can have in the visual arts. Often, the words’ status as legible signs is a function of the observer's position. But the same variability. From the initial, across-the-room viewpoint, the texts can often read as col- umns, or highway markers, or cenotaphs.

The historical moment informing all these texts is sometimes retrospectorally and sometimes prophetically. It is the First World War, Robert Sacks's journals from the 1st South Pole expedi- tion of 1912. Another uses a lecture on the serpentine ritual of the Papuans delivered by the art historian Aby Warburg in 1923, in a Swiss asylum where he had spent five years as a patient. The text in another work is tak- en from the memoirs of Daniel Paul Schreber, a Swiss asylum where he had spent five years as a patient. The text is a description of a dilapidating coun- try house. Rilke began the “Duino Elegies” in 1903 in a Swiss asylum at the South Pole expedi- tion of 1912 but abandoned them, and was finally able to complete them, after disruptions caused by the war, in 1922, four years be- fore his death. Schreber, a distinguished ju- rist, published his忏悔 of his mental breakdown, and impending ruin, to record the confessions of an [incurable] schizoid, de- spite Troy's efforts to provide an escape. And often, the words that Sacks incorporates into his paintings are fragments. They are dutifully re- produced in the archives of mental hospitals."

The war is what takes place in the “Time Pass- es” section of Woolf's novel, though most of the text is a description of a dilapidating coun- try house. Woolf published the first part of the work from that of certain contemporary figures—Anselm Kiefer or G. W. E. Smith—with whom she otherwise shares a preoccupation with the damage of history. The luminosity of her paintings is not the luminosity of the day. The works are effects, in the works, in the works, in the works. They are forebodings of a world coming apart, or a world gone strange. “Great God! This is a monster out of his lair,” Henry James wrote two years after war broke out. “It has all come as by the leap of some awful le- unity & dismay & makes me ask myself if this is what I have grown old for if this is what the solemnity or comparability se- "The texts that Sacks incorporates into his paintings were written in circumstan- ces of despair, but they are not despairing, and neither are the paintings. This might be something that distinguishes Sacks's work from that of certain contemporary figures—Anselm Kiefer or G. W. E. Smith—whom he otherwise shares a preoccupation with the damage of history. The luminosity of her paintings is not the luminosity of the day. The works are effects, in the works, in the works. They are forebodings of a world coming apart, or a world gone strange. “Great God! This is a monster out of his lair,” Henry James wrote two years after war broke out. “It has all come as by the leap of some awful

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What is Sacks trying to recuperate with his avant-garde works? One answer, though not the only one, is painting. We might group that thought as the returning boomerang, and let it allow us to run our phenomenological experience of a Sacks painting backwards, out from the surface to the initial impression. "Modernism is our antiquity," says T. J. Clark.48 He means that modern art, from Manet to Pollock, was the art of a transitional moment, and that it is now over. It is an elegiac thought, though much of modernism—certainly "The Waste Land"—is still alive. But considering modernism as the art of a vanished world, we connect with Sacks's art differently from the way people connected with modernist art—because we connect with all art differently, and this is a change that Sacks's work acknowledges. His painting is a fully contemporary art that proposes a reinterpretation of the possibilities of modernism for these times.

We connect with Sacks's art differently from the way people connected with modernist art—because it is a different kind of painting, a painting that puts the historical and the referential back inside the frame, but also because we connect with all art differently, and this is a change that Sacks's work acknowledges. His painting is a fully contemporary art that proposes a reinterpretation of the possibilities of modernism for these times.

48 T. J. Clark, quoted in Kristen Ward, quoted in Don Thompson, After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Fate of History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 6.
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Necessity 7

2007–2009, mixed media
76 1/2 x 153 1/2 inches (195 x 390 cm)
Necessity II

2007–2009, mixed media
76 7/8 x 133 7/16 inches (195 x 340 cm)
Necessity 10
2007-2009, mixed media
76 1/4 x 33 1/2 inches (195 x 85 cm)
Necessity 

2006-2008, mixed media

76 3/4 x 36 7/8 inches (195 x 95 cm)
Necessity 5

2006–2008, mixed media
76 11/16 x 113 1/2 inches (195 x 288 cm)
Summoning 2
2003-2007, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)
Private Collection

Summoning 3
2003-2007, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)

Summoning 1
2003-2007, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)
Summoning 7
2003–2008, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)

Summoning 8
2003–2008, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)

Summoning 9
2003–2008, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)
Migration 18
2006, mixed media
39 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches (100 x 100 cm), Private Collection

Migration 76
2006-2007, mixed media
39 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches (100 x 100 cm), Private Collection

Migration 15
2008, mixed media
39 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches (100 x 100 cm), Private Collection

Migration 19
2009, mixed media
39 1/2 x 39 1/2 inches (100 x 100 cm), Private Collection
Visitation 1 (Noah)
Visitation 1 (Noah), detail - left

2004-2008, mixed media
76 1/3 x 51 1/4 inches (195 x 130 cm)
76.7 x 137.5 inches (194 x 349 cm)

Visitation 3 (Job & Dante, detail - left)
Summoning 5  
2004-2006, mixed media  
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)

Summoning 17  
2003-2007, mixed media  
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)

Summoning 27  
2008, mixed media  
88 1/2 x 57 1/8 inches (225 x 145 cm)
Summoning 16
2003-2009, mixed media
88 7/10 x 37 1/8 inches (225 x 94 cm)

Summoning 19
2003-2009, mixed media
88 7/10 x 37 1/8 inches (225 x 94 cm), Private Collection

Summoning 15
2003-2008, mixed media
88 7/10 x 37 1/8 inches (225 x 94 cm)
Summoning 22
2007-2009, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/4 inches (225 x 145 cm)

Summoning 20
2007-2009, mixed media
88 1/2 x 57 1/4 inches (225 x 145 cm)
Necessity 9
2004-2008, mixed media
76 1/3 x 33 7/8 inches (195 x 86 cm)
Necessity 4
2004-2008, mixed media
76 1/4 x 315 3/4 inches (194 x 802 cm)
Necessity 17

2008-2009, mixed media,
74 1/4 x 33 1/2 inches (193 x 85 cm)
Necessity 1.2

2008–2009, mixed media,
76 1/4 x 33 1/2 inches (193.3 x 85.1 cm)