CRAE - RCÉA
2010 (37) 23-36

Abstracts/Résumés pp. xv-xx

Finding the "Details that Matter" in the Appropriated Works of *Las Meninas*

Linda Apps
Simon Fraser University

Carolyn Mamchur
Simon Fraser University

Artists are constantly in a state of selecting. Selecting – to shape, to clarify, to discover, to make visible. A continuous flow of decisions must be made about inclusion and exclusion rendered simply as what to introduce, what to keep, and what to omit. Descriptively capturing what one wants to say requires an attentive and refined focus. The gathering and culling of details is a delicate process that results in the calcification of an idea.

Researcher and educator Murray (1968) describes this selection process in the art of writing as the searching for specifics. Strunk and White (2000) refer to it more precisely as finding the "details that matter" (p. 21). In visual art, this selection process is where the artist sifts through her physical and conceptual toolbox to answer the nagging questions: Is this the direction in which I want to take my subject? How does this colour, this line, or this object work when I position it here? Does it enhance? Does it disrupt? Does it do the job…of enhancing or disrupting? In the moment of creating, decisions may appear to be made simply and/or spontaneously. However, the

complexity of these acts in the excavation and rendering of a topic are rarely simple or spontaneous. Rather, they are borne from years of experience, preference, and often, painstaking trial and error. Sibley (1965) posits that the salient features of any work of art are effective because all elements have been placed exactly as they are (p. 39). Similarly, Murray (1995) suggests it is the linking and patterning of specific details, not generalities, that builds an image from which a reader constructs meaning or experiences a feeling (p. 77). Every detail is accountable in reifying the overall aesthetic.

It was the selection of specifics that struck us when we walked into the Museu Picasso in Barcelona in the spring of 2008. The exhibition "Olvidando a Velázquez (Forgetting Velázquez). Las Meninas" was a captivating exhibition featuring the work of Picasso and 25 additional artists who had appropriated the original Las Meninas painted in 1656 by Diego Velázquez. The rooms were flush with artistic interpretations from Dali to Sussman of Velázquez's seminal work of art.

Of and Between Remembering and Forgetting

The title "Olvidando a Velázquez" was derived from a comment Picasso once made, as recorded in Jaume Sabartés book L'Atelier de Picasso, while creating his own body of work based on Las Meninas. " 'Suppose one were to make a copy of Las Meninas, if it were I, the moment would come when I would say to myself: suppose I moved this figure a little to the right or a little to the left? If the case arose, I would do it my own way, forgetting Velázquez' " (Brown, et al., 2008, p. 237).

As we wandered through the gallery, what we found particularly interesting was not situated in the analytical history of Las Meninas, but in the body of interpretive work that stretched out before us. We were interested in how these artists had come to the work anew and how they had negotiated forgetting Velázquez while remembering themselves.

The act of remembering and forgetting occupies a liminal space, which is both mindful, and aggravated. Irwin and Sameshima (2006) describe spaces of liminality as agitated

and unsettled (p. 7). The educator William Pinar (2003) reiterates an explanation of liminal space by Ted Aoki. "This is, Aoki explains, a space of tension, both 'and/not-and,' a space 'of conjoining and disrupting, indeed, a generative space of possibilities, a space wherein in tensioned ambiguity newness emerges'" (para. 47). The artist comes affected. In this case, affected by Las Meninas and the compounded interest of a life. In this place of liminality, with Las Meninas as host, the artist renegotiates a landscape from the vantage point of her own fulcrum. Muniz (2005) speaks of such a space as a place for artists to move beyond and transcend the original work of art in order to forget it (p. 92).

To transcend the original Las Meninas and emerge anew is not an easy task given its history. In its popularity as a cultural icon, De Diego (2003) suggests that we may be "trapped by its legend" and the attribution of traditional Western values of "genius" and "masterpiece" (pp. 151-152). Issues of masterpiece and genius aside, the painting of Las Meninas is formidable. As Utley explains:

> No single satisfactory explanation of its power to stir the senses and move the mind has ever been given. The reason for this mystery lies primarily in the contradiction between form and subject. By its very size – it is over 9 feet high….and yet the subject appears to be entirely without pretensions – an informal group portrait in an artist's studio. It is likely that no single interpretation will be able to answer all the questions about the picture. Like every great work of art, Las Meninas is renewed, not depleted, by time, and seems to offer each new generation a prescient summary of its own spiritual and intellectual concerns. (Brown et al. p. 238)

One is struck by the two qualities that Brown (2008) outlines as the most captivating "the sense of arrested motion that is conveyed by the casual poses, and the outward glances of some of the figures" (p. 238). The cast of characters literally catches your eye: the young princess Margarita María, her two meninas (maids of honor), the dwarf playmate, the dog, the chaperone, the bodyguard, the palace official standing in the doorway, Velázquez himself, and finally, the mirrored re-

flection of the unseen king and queen speculated to be standing where the viewer now stands. A cacophony, that for the moment, seems suspended in silence. It is difficult to forget an image that seems to see the viewer before the viewer sees it.

The original Las Meninas ended with a question mark, leaving the viewer slightly undone. The viewer is left wondering if she should say something, if she should respond in some way to galvanize the characters and the event back into motion. In this postmodern era where we struggle to define space, demand things be left undone, interrupted, incomplete, left with question marks so that audiences can participate and fill in gaps to engage more physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually with the form, there is this painting, from 1656, from an era that was not postmodern but rather from an era still teetering at the end of paid craftsmanship. Las Meninas left a question mark looming in such a way that artists could not leave it alone.

Artists gather objects, shapes, and images as writers gather words. They come to the creative act with their bag of specifics that contains a collection of tools, knowledge and memories – their bag of specifics that they dig through. Murray (1995) describes writing as being constructed from an inventory of specific details that are based on accurate, revealing information collected from observation, memory, experience, interviews, reports, books, articles, tapes – a vast abundance of resources (p. 48). From these details, an interpretation is extrapolated and comes to occupy its own space. Here connections are or are not made. Without a connected pattern, the subject is left lingering in a pool of assumption, never fully articulated, only suggested.

In an interview for ArtCity, the black artist Michael Ray Charles (not one of the artists in this exhibition) discusses two of the objects he has collected over the years: a “coon jigger” toy, and an image of Little Black Sambo (2002, vol. 2). As he speaks to the interviewer, he handles the objects quizzically – items to be used, fondled or simply eyed from a distance. Murray (1995) reminds us that effective writing is rooted in personal

experience (p. 11). For Michael Ray Charles, the "coon jigger" and Little Black Sambo are far from innocuous. Instead, they are emotionally charged objects embedded in a personal and historical trajectory.

The exhibition artists visibly came with their own memories, their own subjects, their own specifics. Cristobal Toral brought his suitcases and somber colours of emptiness. Michael Craig-Martin brought his everyday objects and multitude of intense, flat colours. Louis Crane brought his chaotic figures that eye each other suspiciously and longingly. Salvidor Dali brought (this time) a quiet surrealistic ethereality. While mediating the specifics applied by Velázquez, the artists attended to the potency and credence of the specifics they would select to bring about the realization of a subject.

Within the structure of the appropriated Las Meninas' lie the individual artists' crafted styles and their autobiographies, personal and unique; histories, trajectories, and objects that trigger emotional responses for them and in return hopefully for us. Velázquez was never really forgotten, or Picasso or the previous eras of Spanish paintings, or the trajectory of a history of Spain. Serra, the director of the exhibition, knew the curatorship of this exhibition was an amalgamation of contemporary interpretations in dialogue not only with the work of Velázquez but also with the work of Picasso (Brown et al. 2008, p. 237). The artists were not trying to escape history but to engage with and contribute to history. Las Meninas provided the structure and the impetus and the liminal space provided the place for the artists to work through the tensions of making the Las Meninas their own.

Moving Among the Interpretations

What was fascinating about the *Las Meninas* exhibition was the display of artistic individuality united by a common theme. Somewhere between the seduction of the original *Las Meninas* and a need to make it one's own, a shared commonality was formed that echoed through the rooms. Although the exhibition was extensive, we focused on the appropriations in the section entitled "*Meninas* comtemporáneas" – works completed in the later half of the 20th century and early 21st

century. We stood in a sea of macabre, pop art, surrealism, maquettes, sculpture, minimalism, all taking from, and taking on *Las Meninas.* Although we were familiar with the work of some of the artists, we stood with no history or research that explicated the artists' desires or reasons as to *why* they felt a need to take on this particular leitmotif.

We could appreciate and experience each piece individually or as an embodiment of the exhibition. While the works met tacit requirements constituting an interpretation, they also met tacit requirements that laid claim to the name on the wall that accompanied the work of art. The chosen specifics aligned with the artists' personal oeuvre and with the other pieces in the show.

Utley (2003) uses three categories to position the works of art:

> We can assign them to one of the three following trends: artists who referred to the painting as (1) an icon of world art to which homage was paid on artistic grounds; (2) as a work to be adapted and transformed to serve and validate the artist's own artistic, personal, social, or political agenda; or (3) as a testing ground for the application or theoretical concepts of perception and of the interaction among artist, viewer, and subject. (p. 171)

It was true. The room was a reflection of Goya, of Picasso, of Velázquez, a reflection of global representation, of the art world, and of the Las Meninas, all the while never losing sight of the individuality of the artists. Or as Picasso states, " 'I would do it my own way, forgetting Velázquez' " (Brown et al. 2008, p. 237), " '…it would be my Las Meninas' " (p. 244). The contemporaries openly and respectfully evinced a plethora of references to Spanish painters, art eras and socio-political times then and now. And this was but a small sampling of the many appropriations of Las Meninas that have recurringly intrigued and provoked artists. For more than a few, Las Meninas has become a leitmotiv in their oeuvre and each work will carry its own socio-political weight and purpose (Utley, 2003, p. 171).

While Utley's categories and references characterized the

works and intentions of the artists, we found that based on the specifics, the works of art would be arranged differently. The back and forth movement that generally occurs when viewing an exhibition became a comparison and referencing among the interpretations of *Las Meninas*.

We began searching for the specifics that both differentiated and united the various interpretations. We juxtaposed Toral's depiction of abandonment by absence alongside Sussman's seemingly spiritual and emotional abandonment and Crane's overt fear of abandonment. It was in the specifics that we could find both the originality and the commonalities. In writing, details make the story specifically yours, unique to you. However, the premise or general statement of life behind the story is what makes it universal. We were looking for both the masterly crafted specifics and the universality that became more or less overt depending upon how we grouped the works of art.

As we scanned the images we also sought the familiar; what had been appropriated and retained from the original Las Meninas. The entourage of characters was a salient subject. Foucault (1970) goes into great detail regarding the focal points of the original work of art based on the arrangement of characters. The arrangements and selection of characters among the works varied greatly. The Margarita María, a common motif on her own, became one of the primary subjects for the expression of selected details and ways of representing. While not familiar with the artistic and/or sociopolitical intentions of each artist, we were arrested by, and curious about, the images before us. We were disturbed by Morimura's dwarf-like, unnatural image created by the replacement of the delicate Margarita's head and hands with his own. We were eager to run our palms over the smooth, sophisticated, sensual elegance produced by Valde's wooden sculpture. We were reminded of the fragility of a small child as we witnessed one of Toral's suitcases singled out and wrapped in a white cloth with light pink flowers in one corner, all held together haphazardly with a piece of string. We were seduced by the rich chocolate outlining of Muniz's Margarita and the graphic, candied pop art of Antonio de Felipe. We felt stretched and

broken viewing the fragmented, cubistic Margarita of Richard Hamilton. The legless, stumped Margarita of Witkin's bore a look somewhere between sadness and disgust. Was this sadness at her demise and disgust at us for staring, or disgust at her demise and sadness for us who feel a need to stare?

Faced with this array of redefined images of the Margarita, we felt the opportunity and space to reassemble and construct our own interpretations of who this small princess might have been. Who was this Margarita who could have nails and barbs or lemon candied hair or who had become a compilation of broad brush strokes and lines that distorted her appearance beyond recognition? Who was Sussman's Margarita who now turned herself away from the stare of the viewer? Rather than simply becoming absorbed by how individual artists selected and omitted in order to represent, rather than being caught and held by Witkin's nails and barbs and de Felipe's lemons, we formulated a Margarita borne of nails and barbs and lemons, and knotted wood, and broken shapes and diverted eyes; a fragile yet durable Margarita. Perhaps this is what Murray (1968) means when he says, "Readers are hungry for an abundance of accurate, specific information that allows them to do their own thinking" (p. 33).

If, as Hall (1989) suggests, the "best detail is implicative in motion, and appealing to the senses" (p. 3), then these artists offered up the best detail and implied meaning filtered through layers of brushstrokes, polished wood, paint, stone. The details that brought life to the seemingly frightened, anxious characters of Louis Crane, the twisted darkness of Witkin, the poised, haunting figures of Sussman, were all implied. Through implication, the senses are assaulted, aroused, settled. The audience has a way in. The liminal space grows, no longer circumventing a dialogue, but rather a multilinguistic discourse.

As we moved between the works of art, we went through the remaining characters, pondering and comparing, revisiting and edifying our own remembrance of Velázquez. Not only were the artists selecting their own specifics, they were filtering through Velázquez's specifics, deciding what to retain, re-

present, eliminate, make visible, obscure, realizing and aware of the implications these decisions would have. Hall (1989) reminds us of the importance of quality over quantity regarding details (p. 7). Because they are masters of their craft, we can rest assured that the artists have carefully, thoughtfully chosen their details; that they have given us what we need to do our own thinking.

Later, we would look more closely at the work of each artist to see if we could better understand their selections, to bring some clarity to the intersection of searching for specifics and interpretation. Why suitcases? Why a dead dog? Why the rims of a pair of glasses? We wanted more than mere speculation. We wanted to sidle up to how decisions were made. What constituted the details that mattered? It was the specifics that drew us into the individual works of art and held us there. In the words of Stunk and White (2000), "The greatest writers…are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter" (p. 21).

Entering the Disrupted

Those who take the time to visit galleries, generally make an honest attempt to understand and interpret what they see before them. The difficulty is, that unless training in aesthetics is extensive, the viewer will at some time likely find herself before a work of art without adequate knowledge to fully interpret and appreciate it. We all have the ability to have an aesthetic experience, however, comprising an informed aesthetic interpretation and understanding is a much more demanding and complex task. Most aesthetic researchers agree that to fully appreciate and interpret a work of art, knowledge and/or investigation into the history of art, applied theoretical concepts and an artist's personal and professional biography are beneficial, if not essential (Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Lachapelle, Murray & Neim, 2003; Sibley, 1965; Wolcott, 1994). The more informed, the more discerning the viewer can be.

At times, during our viewing of the *Las Meninas* exhibition, we found ourselves standing in front of paintings without adequate knowledge. While we were not devoid of learned aes-

thetics and experiences with other great works of art, there were many artists that were new to us. We were engaged in the phase of experiential learning that Lachapelle, Murray and Neim (2003), refer to as "constructed knowledge", the combination of "mediated knowledge", all the knowledge, experiences and assumptions the viewer brings to the encounter, and "objectified knowledge", the artist's intentions projected through his/her selection of formal qualities and materials that result in a product (pp. 85-87). While the researchers propose a much more comprehensive, informed model for developing aesthetic understanding, their definition of constructed knowledge seems to describe the position we found ourselves in at different times throughout the exhibition.

While a definitive set of skills required to effectively view a work of art remains vague, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) claim that the level of skill of the viewer to determine meaning in a given work of art also determines the point of entry for the viewer's aesthetic experience (pp. 148-150). In our encounter with the art works of *Las Meninas,* the specifics became a natural point of entry for appreciating the art for two reasons: first, all the works of art shared a common subject thereby accentuating the chosen specifics the artists used to make the work their own, and second, the concept of specifics was a component of a larger body of knowledge we already held around writing process. From this vantage point we were able to enter the works of art and focus on how the artists had utilized specifics to create their interpretation of *Las Meninas*.

At their most basic, specifics can be identified as elements such as line, colour and shape. At their most complex, specifics become an intricate codification system (surpassing line, colour, shape) uniquely assigned and applied by the artist that lead us through any number of emotional, spiritual, intellectual and/or physical ways of knowing. A system of codification may in all, or in part, be explicit or implicit to the viewer at any given time for various reasons. While a viewer may make correct or incorrect judgments in regards to the weight and importance of the details in an interpretation, there may well be parts that will forever remain personal to the artist, undis-

closed, and only speculated upon. The decodification process becomes more complex than simply decifering the meaning behind a colour or a style of line. It also becomes a process of attempting to decifer the intentions of the artist displayed as elements such as colour and line. As viewers, we attempt to not only appreciate, but to understand deeply in order to connect with the artist.

As a result of interviewing 52 curators, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) found that while the curators often preferenced one dimension (perceptual-formal, emotion, intellectual and communicative) for encountering visual stimuli over another, the possibilities for interpretation were "limitless" and were often predicated on personal interest (p. 49). From there, the curators embarked upon what one curator equated to as "sleuthing" (p. 43) into a historical, biographical, emotional, perceptual and intellectual investigation of the artist and the work of art. Wolcott (1994) claims that interpretation becomes speculative and that there is little understanding of the artist's intentions, personal, theoretical and philosophical views without contextual information (p. 18).

Whether interpretations are speculative or not, attention to specifics becomes an important consideration if, as Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) report, having the knowledge and ability to decode an artist's visual media can result in shared states of being (p. 2). *Sleuthing* may not always begin at the sophisticated level of Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's curators, but reaching a shared state of being is a challenge worth pursuing by both the artist and the viewer. Specifics can become more than an entry point, they can become a roadmap into both the art and the artists and a guide for mapping questions for future aesthetic encounters. While some viewers may be at more of a loss than others, the elements, specifics, details that matter, when constructed well, can draw a viewer in and initiate the process of questioning and investigation. For as Lachapelle, Murray and Neim (2003) posit, "knowledge is embodied in a work of art each time the artist makes a decision regarding the work's message, subject matter, stylistic qualities, structure, medium, format, materials, and production processes" (p. 87).

Conclusion

Just as curators sleuth through works of art, it can be assumed that the appropriators of *Las Meninas* did so as well, adjusting, applying, centralizing their own specifics along the way. Their decisions were not random but informed, reformed and regenerated. By disrupting the organic unity of Las Meninas they brought renewed attention to their own specifics, and found the details that mattered. All the details these masters used, mattered. Specifics can be pivotal points prompting investigation into the biographies, histories, and intentions of the art and artists. Lyas (1997) takes the position that it is only after having grasped the articulated expression that one can consider how the specific elements contribute and how varying them would mar the effect (pp. 72-73).

However one wants to label or assign importance to specifics, carefully worked through specifics do much more than assist an expression or an experience, they grasp the metaphor behind the painting that touches what is fundamentally human.

Note: Photographs of some of the referenced works can be viewed on the official website for Olvidando a Velázquez. Las Meninas at http://www.museupicasso.bcn.cat/meninas/presentacio_en.htm.

References

Brown, J., Villegas, S., Portús, J., Galassi, S. G., Lubar, R., Utley, G.R. (2008). *Olvidando a Velázquez. Las Meninas* (Institut de Cultura, Ed.). Barcelona: Museu Picasso de Barcelona.

Charles, M. R. (2002). Interviewed in C. Maybach & P. Gardner (Producers), C. Maybach (Director). (vol. 2). *Art city: A ruling passion* [DVD]. United States. Los Angeles: Twelve Films.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Robinson, R. E. (1990). *The art of seeing: An interpretation of the aesthetic encounter*. California: J. P. Getty Museum.

de Diego, E. (2003). Representing representation: Reading *Las Meninas*, again. In S. L. Stratton-Pruitt (Ed.), *Velázquez's 'Las Meninas'* (pp. 150-169). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences* (1st American ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Hall, O. (1989). *The art and craft of novel writing.* Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.

Irwin, R., & Sameshima, P. (2006, April). Rendering dimensions of a liminal currere. In C. Snowber (Discussant), *Interweaving boundaries: Art, education, and spirituality.* Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Lachapelle, R., Murray, D., & Neim, S. (2003). Aesthetic understanding as informed experience: The role of knowledge in our art viewing experiences. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, *37*(3), 78-97.

Lyas, C. (1997). *Aesthetics.* Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Muniz, V. (2005). *Reflex: a Vik Muniz primer* (L.A. Martin, Ed.). New York: Aperture.

Murray, D. (1968). *A writer teaches writing: A practical method of teaching composition.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Murray, D. (1995). *The craft of revision* (2nd ed.). Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.

Pinar, B. (December, 2003). A lingering note: Comments on the collected works of Ted T. Aoki. *Educational Insight, 8*(2). Retrieved January 03, 2007, from http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v08n02/celebrate/pinar.html.

Sibley, F. (1965) Aesthetic and nonaesthetic. *The Philosophical Review*, *74*(2), 135-159.

Strunk, W. & White, E. B. (2000). *The elements of style,* (4th ed.). Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon.

Utley, G. R. (2003). *Las Meninas* in twentieth-century art. In S. L. Stratton-Pruitt (Ed.), *Velázquez's 'Las Meninas'* (pp. 170-202). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wolcott, A. G. (1994). Whose shoes are they anyway? A contemporary approach to interpretation. *Art Education*, *47*(5), 14-20.