

Perceiving, Representing, and Picturing

The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify — as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight.

John Ruskin, 1856

The French philosopher Rene Descartes famously held that we can be mistaken about what we see, but we cannot be mistaken about the way things **appear** to us — the way they **seem** to be. It may look to me as if Ana is sitting at the small table in the back of the coffee shop, but if I look more closely I realize it's not her at all. This is a very common experience and hardly worth commenting on. But Descartes does have an important philosophical point. Knowledge about the objective world, “outside the mind”, as he would say, nearly always involves a measure of uncertainty. But there is no uncertainty about what I **think** is true, because what I think is true is found “inside the **mind**”, the contents of which are directly accessible. The task of knowledge, according to Descartes, is to get a reliable correlation between the way things seem to be subjectively, and the way they **really are**.

Now reasonable people can, and often will, disagree about the way things are “out there”. That's a fact that's neither interesting nor informative. What **is** interesting is whether Descartes is right or not about the claim that, when it comes to the matter of how things seem to us, we cannot possibly be mistaken.

Let's try an experiment. Find an object of some sort that's at least 10-20 feet away from you right now and focus on it without moving your head. If you need glasses to see clearly, be sure you have them on. How would you describe your visual experience?

Now suppose you have a good deal of artistic skill and I ask you to paint a very accurate and descriptive picture of what you see. How do you imagine it looking?

Let's say I ask the artist William Bailey do the same exercise. He's looking at a collection of ceramic objects on a ledge in the corner of a room in a hotel. And here's his painting capturing, to the best of his ability, the way it looks to him.



William Bailey, Still Life Hotel Raphael, 1985

Chances are this will pass as a realistic depiction of what he saw and what you would see if you were standing in his place.

Is Bailey's painting a true image of the way things appear to us? Alva Noë would claim it's not. Why? Because if you pay very close attention to any instance of seeing, you'll notice that the area just outside your central focus very quickly gets less and less clear and distinct. If, standing where Bailey was in the hotel, you focus on the large grey bowl with the blue horizontal stripe in the center of the shelf, the objects around it would be much **less** distinct. In fact, I doubt you would be able to make out the change in color where the two walls on the left meet. And the higher up the wall, the less distinct the contrast would be.

But that's not what we're given in the picture. What we have there is a sharp focus, high resolution image from left to right and top to bottom. That may be what we think we would see, or how we remember or imagine seeing to be. But it's not even close to the actual phenomenon of seeing. And you can test this for yourself, simply by looking around and paying close attention to your own acts of seeing.

Seeing, as we learn from Oliver Sacks, is an active process and a skill. We have to learn to see, even though there's a lot already built in to our eyes and brains. Our perceptual systems need to be exercised and calibrated to function properly. Noë builds on the neurologist's understanding of human perception by making a case for how it is that seeing occurs in humans through **active bodily engagement in the world**.

But it seems to me there is something important left out of this account. When I was a young art student, I spent several semesters and many hours in life drawing classes. And I was continually struck by how hard it was to get a reasonable likeness of the model. My figures always seemed to me somewhere between awkwardly rendered and horribly grotesque! Of course, I wasn't the only one having trouble. Plenty of other students were having the same issues. But the instructor and some of the more experienced students seemed to get on quite well, dashing off the most extraordinarily convincing drawings with seemingly very little effort.

It took me a long time to recognize what was going on. They weren't drawing what they saw, they were drawing **on** some combination of what they **saw** and what they **knew**. Or, better yet, they were **translating** what they saw into drawings using techniques acquired studying other highly esteemed and accomplished artists such as Raphael, Rembrandt, Brueghel, Goya, Manet, Cassatt, etc. They were using a visual grammar and style borrowed and adapted from the tradition of western art. With it they could take the actual appearance and form of an object and translate it into a convincing picture.

The upshot of my story is that there are three aspects or phenomena to consider when reflecting on perception and image-making:

- the **seeing** of the object,
- the object **seen**, and
- the **representation** of the object.

Seeing is not the same as photographing and it's not the same as drawing or painting. Each entails its own set of capacities and skills. And each produces something of a different order. If we lose sight of these simple distinctions, we're likely to confuse them and assume, for example, that our visual perception is a passive process very much like taking a snapshot with an analog camera, with the eye and the brain taking the place of the lens and the light sensitive photographic film. Or we're just as likely to assume that a photograph is "drawing with light", as its name suggests. I'm not so sure that's the case and suggest we think about it.

Timothy Quigley, 27 Jan 12



Rembrandt van Rijn, Seated nude woman by a stove, ca. 1661-1662 (Rijksmuseum)

