

## David Lehman on "Why I Am Not a Painter"

"Why I Am Not a Painter" made poetry seem as natural as breathing, as casual as the American idiom, and so imbued with metropolitan irony and bohemian glamour as to be irresistible. As a freshman in college I hadn't yet developed the critical vocabulary to describe the effects of O'Hara's line breaks, but it was impossible to miss the surprises enacted in the space between lines: "how terrible orange is / and life. "

Only after many rereadings did I understand that the poem proposes, in its off-the-cuff way, a serious parable about the relations between poetry and painting. "Why I Am Not a Painter" begins by communicating the painter-envy to which poets in New York were susceptible during the reign of Abstract Expressionism: "I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not." In a turnaround characteristic of O'Hara's poetry, however, wry resignation is transformed into nervy self-celebration. The seemingly inconsequential anecdote in the poem is actually a restatement of another, more celebrated anecdote illustrating that the medium is the difference between the painter and the poet. A century ago in Paris, the painter Degas had lamented that his poems weren't any good though his ideas were wonderful, and the poet Mallarmé responded, "But my dear Degas, poems are made of words, not ideas." The parable of Sardines and "Oranges" makes this point deftly but insistently. The rhetorical figure of the chiasmus—a crossing over, as in the shape of the X—is enacted in the inversions of the poet (who begins with a color and ends in "pages of words, not lines ") and the painter (who begins with a word and ends with an abstract painting in which random letters remain as a purely visual element without verbal signification). The original inspiration for the painting ultimately called Sardines is preserved only in the title of Mike Goldberg's work, because paintings are made of paint, not words, and the process of painting may erase any of the artist's preconceptions. And since poems are made of words, not ideas or colors, the orange that incited O'Hara exists only as the title of his work. The symmetry is complete. "It is even in prose, I am a real poet," O'Hara wrote in his patented tone of jubilant wonderment, and in the reader's mind the French tradition of the prose poem—from Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris* and Rimbaud's *Illuminations* to Max Jacob's *Le Cornet à des* and Henri Michaux's *Plume*—established itself as a form invested in modernity. For Barbara Guest, "Why I Am Not a Painter" was also an exact statement of an Abstract Expressionist principle. "'Why I Am Not a Painter' is about the importance of not having a subject. The subject doesn't matter. That's straight out of Abstract Expressionism."

With its use of the present tense and its offhanded delivery, "Why I Am Not a Painter" seems, at first glance, to tell a "true" story. One thinks, reading it, that O'Hara wrote a prose poem called "Oranges" at the same time that Goldberg painted Sardines, and that the conjunction is an accident. It turns out, however, that "Oranges" was written in 1949, when O'Hara was still a Harvard undergraduate, many years before he met Goldberg. And this is another lesson that "Why I Am Not a Painter" teaches: What looks spontaneous may really be the product of a calculation, a fabrication, in the same way that Franz Kline's calligraphic black-and-white compositions, which seem like homages to an improvisatory ideal, were preceded by careful studies and sketches. Like a crime, true innovation in art requires premeditation, means, motive, and opportunity.

"Why I Am Not a Painter," so full of reversals and sly surprises, was, I came to see, a characteristic example of the New York School's aesthetic of irony. Irony was either "the citadel of intelligence," as Ezra Pound called it, or "the test of a first-rate mind," as Scott Fitzgerald maintained: the mind's ability to hold contradictory ideas at the same time and continue to function. In any case, it was the supreme expression of modernity, the trope of ambivalence and hedged bets. It involved a reflexive uncertainty, as in the poignant conclusion of Ashbery's "Decoy":

There was never any excuse for this and perhaps there need be none, For  
kicking out into the morning, on the wide bed, Waking far apart on the bed, the  
two of them: Husband and wife Man and wife

Deadpan wit was required. Irony could take a self-lacerating form, as when O'Hara announces that he is "waiting for / the catastrophe of my personality / to seem beautiful again, / and interesting, and modern." Irony also meant arched eyebrows, an effect that the poets obtained by the strategic use of quotation marks. Thus Schuyler delights in "the tonic resonance of / pill when used as in / ?she is a pill?" and O'Hara confides that "sometimes I think I'm ?in love? with painting." The quotation marks allow the speaker to use the language without necessarily subscribing to it. It was one way of redeeming the idioms of the day and achieving what Ashbery in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" calls "pure / Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything."

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