

SLOW TIME

by BRIAN O'DOHERTY

Is it possible to prepare your mood to rhyme with what you are about to see? If you have some pre-knowledge, perhaps. Mostly we do this involuntarily, on social occasions, or even at home when passing from one room to another, where expectation is set and is almost always confirmed. Rarely does the furniture rebel, no matter how it is surprised. Most very good art has a kind of discreet environmental exhalation, offering cues to the viewer's deportment. That is, if you can pick them up, since the etiquette (dare we say, ethics) of art watching is one of those subliminal matters that have a half-life in that penumbra where several quasi-educational issues lurk—among them, labels, audio aids and, very practically, time and attention. What quota of duration is to be invested here, how much to be limited there? In this the art has its say; and in this brokerage is another hidden trope—the artwork's criticism of the spectator, the residue of a presumably intimate encounter.

When I first saw Nathalie Provosty's work at Nathalie Karg Gallery in 2016, I knew I had to earn my way into her paintings—and that it would take time. Works can be slow or sudden. There was a perceptual climax in the 1960s that many of us from that legendary era remember: the "Wow" experience. The work was perceived in one rapid scan, a sudden arc of perception, the impact of which sent you back a foot or two. What happened after that instant assimilation varied. That response seemed vaguely related to color-field, Greenberg's last stand (be it said, the Greenbergian stamp, then losing its imprimatur, hampered the appreciation of acres of good painting).

Provosty's new paintings pick up where her last exhibition left off. But they have been "educated" in the previous exhibition and what cues it suggested. You might say much of the work is similar in size (around eight feet square), but different internally—performed with more confidence, more ambition, and more complexity. Before talking about them, they are distinguished by an unusual property: they can be experienced without comment since they hold steadily within them their own self-criticism; they are looking for a viewer, not a critic—thus avoiding the extended critical commentary many (including me) are eager to provide. But what are we looking at? We are looking at what we cannot see. Or rather, we are looking at our own sight manifesting itself. How come?

For Ms. Provosty presents a very considered darkness, a fine-weave surface stained, sanded and painted so that it speaks in two voices, the carefully nourished surface which invites close attention so you can then ignore it and vanish into the depth, the void that single planes of color (including black) invite. This is a preface to a deeper engagement, adjusting to the darkness within, as when the eyes slowly catch up after entering a room from sunlight outside. Now begins, at the eyes' bidding, the slow cycle of disclosure. The rate and speed of that disclosure is carefully regulated. After an interval, determined by the ever vigilant rods and cones of the retina, fugitive shapes grow and loom.

So deeply imbedded in one's psyche are basic shapes and sequences that what visits the mind are the obliging contours of the alphabet, as if the paintings were inventing their own manner of speaking. Did I see the grand arch of an "O," the reciprocal curves of an "S," lying on its side like an odalisque? Whatever these encrypted entities may be, they become, by virtue of their method of disclosure, meaningful. The vehicle of that meaning is the eye, and it is from a deep, empirical knowledge of that organ that these works generate their content.

Every sense (though some psychologists were slow to acknowledge this) is subject to hallucination, given the circumstances—the overheard (but absent) whisper; the evocative illusions of taste and smell; the skin responding literally to an imagined touch (all these aided by darkness). But the eye? The grandmaster

of all these sensory equivocations and illusions. For when one talks of these paintings, which so subtly play with the eye's anatomy and employ to their advantage its physiology, the nature of perception is demonstrated and, in the darkness thus offered, clarified.

Between them, the two main cellular activists in the retina are the cones, devoted to absolute precision, spatial discrimination and perception of color (by the combination of three types of cone cells—remember technicolor's combination of three color cameras—a distant analogy perhaps) and the rods, both of which have roles in dark adaptation. Provosty's dark paintings do more than suggest the processes of perception in darkened circumstances. They combine the viewer's voluntary and involuntary roles. They insist on close attention, as when one enters a darkened room and waits for dark adaptation to occur. In this process, the rods have a distinct role, efficiently following up the cones first, an imperfect attempt at adjustment. The rods are not good on color, but they work diligently to regenerate the chemical substance rhodopsin, which is bleached by light. When you leave the darkened room and go into the light, the cones adjust, recover their former precision (as you would expect, all this works better in youth and is slowed by age). Add in the eyes' other properties and you have an idea of how much these paintings are occurring within the eye, as they try to discriminate concealed edge from edge, invent volume, separate figure from ground, which at this low signal/noise ratio can even reverse this most basic of visual distinctions, leading to the paradoxes and contradictions of vision.

Such contradictions are never the sense organ's fault. The senses report with perfect accuracy the raw data with which they are presented; it is the interpretation of this data that perception is liable to error, thus the instinctive generation of several perceptual hypotheses in ambiguous situations, followed by one of perception's most mysterious phenomena: recognition.

Other properties of the eyes are put to work, not least peripheral vision, which determines the limits of the visual field, and which is mainly the work of the cones. This elusive faculty comes into play when a dark canvas begins to fill the

visual field. It is the cones that mostly provide this peripheral information, which can be mapped in zones of far, middle, and close. Probably few people study their peripheral vision, which is in the animal world an essential ally, particularly in the hunting habits of the large cat family. Once a flicker of movement is detected, the hunting animal will wait and wait until its repetition confirms life and potential prey. It is peripheral vision in the rural countryside that often confirms a sighting—a brief flash of red signifies “fox,” easily missed by city eyes. Indeed, the retina is always ready to do its best. If the eyes are rubbed and compressed a little they respond with those blooms of rich purples that school kids call “eye movies” (the cones mostly). And some benign migraine headaches so annoy the retina that they activate a zone in the visual field with fibrillating runs of repeated patterns which travel slowly out of sight.

Artworks are ruthless about one thing: they measure the degree of your attention, which also involves attention to yourself. How intensely do your eyes engage in that intentional wandering on and within their surfaces that serious artworks, including Provosty’s, demand? Her proffered twilight encourages noticing what is occurring at the edges of the visual field. What “hidden” forms do you patiently acquire within these new paintings? The dominant figure, as one negotiates edges and figure-ground are trunk-like, sometimes, branching shapes. Tracking the edges, they appear to be mildly organic. And once again, through slow disclosure, isolation, and concentration of attention, have meaning, which is always a construct of the observer.

But why, you may ask, all this emphasis on the eye’s physiology? Because Provosty has externalized so many of vision’s properties and processes in the perception of her work, she has given to her canvasses some of the responding properties of the retina, so that, with some legitimate exaggeration, they might be seen as huge retinas, constructs which, in their sensitivity to the viewer’s gaze, return to him or her the process of their own perception.