



Pat Steir, *September Evening Waterfall*, 1991, oil on canvas, 114x102³/₄ in. Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Pictures of Light

The sun has set. I'm in Greece on a mountain and it's dusk. Nearby a dog barks, a donkey brays, a woman's voice is loud, and far away, on a radio, someone is playing the most beautiful music. I hear wisps of it all blowing by me, between the hills.

I'm watching the sea, and the sounds and perfume of the evening become part of the light and color of the sea. I have watched light all day. Thin veils of light, on water, on islands and in the air. Light describing and disguising form. Washes of light over light, glistening and bright. Light over dark, translucent and transparent, soft, and at once, hard and descriptive, even harsh. I see more colors than one can name, always changing and hard to remember.

Changing light has a profound existential impact. Primal. Words for it deceive. How to describe, light, sound, longing, specifically, eloquently, simply and exactly. I love words, but.... The only way I can GIVE the experience, the mix, to you, of the light, and its impact upon me, is to show you.

TO MAKE A PAINTING. Would this picture of light be what you call an ABSTRACT PAINTING? Or would it be a picture of reality? Do you believe in a reality that is solely visual? Do you still believe that a picture is worth a thousand words? Do you know at what point an image is not an image? These questions are my subject.

PAT STEIR

When a Painting is Not a Horse

"A painting, before being a horse, a nude woman, or anything else, is essentially a flat surface painted with colors arranged in a certain order." With these words Maurice Denis, about a century ago, observing a painting turned upside down on his studio easel, unknowingly began the dispute.

Not long afterward, Wassily Kandinsky deliberately composed his "first abstract watercolor"; whereas Magritte, meticulously painting a pipe, took care to warn his viewer that "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." More recently, Baselitz came to the decision to overturn, and hence to negate, the figurative traces of his paintings.

These different approaches to the search for truth beyond the confines of the true, all followed the discovery of Nicéphore Niépce — the possibility, that is, of capturing reality just as it is on a flat surface, through photography.

Even earlier, Ingres, by rescuing the body of the *Odalisque* from the truth of anatomy to consign it to the rules of drawing, committed the "error" of emptying the gaze of the obligations of verisimilitude.

But it is Duchamp who unknowingly ended the dispute: is the "ready-made" not perhaps the representation of the abstraction of the representation of reality?

It is representation, in short, that opens and closes the eyes on the visible, that illuminates, obscuring the very reason that motivates it, the space that goes beyond our gaze, real or abstract as it may be.

GIULIO PAOLINI

Translated by John Stezka

