

# *The Art of Seeing: Something Missing?*

by *Christos Tolera*

**With any image at our fingertips these days by tapping on a keyboard, it's easy to get complacent. Christos Tolera urges us not to with a personal account on how the physicality of art, and that space between artwork and viewer, is crucial to the experience. - .Cent**

*"Don't ask what the work is, rather see what the work does."*

- *Eva Hesse.*

I had always viewed art through a veil of intellect. I sought, with tenacity and sincerity, to understand what I was looking at. The distance I required to retain my cool persona came with the objectivity I employed to see. Then, one day, I had an experience, which finally released me from what had become the bondage of this calculated cool.

It is the summer of 1993. I am standing in the Duveen galleries of what was then simply known as The Tate Gallery. I am with an ex-girlfriend struggling to make a case against abstract expressionism and a case for getting the hell out of there. I needed a cigarette.

My arguments were not based on anything other than ignorance but I thought they were strong. I had, after all, previously 'seen' the 'Rothko Room' paintings and had been nonplussed. However, the persuasive powers of an ammunition-laden ex-girlfriend cannot be underestimated and my newly born desire to at least appear open-minded won out over my well-worn armour of false pride.

As we entered the room I stopped, tried my hardest to look, saw what I could see and tried to leave. In the space of a minute or two, the huge canvases containing patchily painted rectangular shapes of maroon or grey,

on black or maroon, could no longer hold my attention. "I just don't see it. There is something missing", I said.

"Just stop and stay still for ten minutes." I reluctantly agreed, albeit to prove a point. I think it was at this moment that I surrendered to the experience that was to follow. With disinterest and dismay I stopped thinking and entered into a state that, in retrospect, I can only call a thoughtless awareness, a meditative state.

As I began to stare into the centre of a painting, in my feigned interest, I slowly began to see beyond the surface brushwork and somehow, against my will, the rectangles started to throb. The pulsating reds, blacks and greys seemed to breathe with me, occasionally flickering to a different beat. The edge of the rectangle I was looking at started to disappear and I found myself entering into something that was not a space. It was as though I was literally marooned. I then settled my eyes on to the next canvas and I felt surprisingly exhilarated, as though I'd been parched and the next painting was deliciously wet. When I started to move amongst the paintings, I noticed for the first time, the deliberate change of direction in the brushstrokes, which caused colours to appear and disappear in the reflections of the light. The series of paintings seemed perfectly balanced as I feasted from one to another, each one providing the perfect accompaniment to the last. It was as though I was being taken on a journey to which I was integral and for an unquantifiable time I felt as though I was the only person in that room.

The ten minutes turned to twenty, to thirty, and so we left the fabled 'Rothko Room'. Confused, trying to understand what had just happened, I did not answer my companion's questions. As we left the gallery and stood on the front steps facing the river, I was overcome

by a wave of emotion that, to this day, I have not been able to identify. I am not metaphysically minded by nature but it is as close to a religious experience as I have had or been witness to and it had all happened against my will or what I considered to be my better judgement. The feeling stayed with me for the rest of that afternoon and a vivid memory abides.

'The Seagram Murals', as the paintings are known, were to become like an addiction for me and I regularly revisited, enticed by an overwhelming desire to recreate that initial experience. Today I realise a paradox, that I cannot recreate it. I cannot make it happen by effort of will, I allow it to happen within the context of a relationship and within the framework of a dialogue as opposed to a monologue. I am not there just to observe but to engage with the work.

I have come to believe in the overriding necessity of a direct physical interaction with art. I was once told that art existed in the space between the object and the spectator and that it cannot exist without someone there to look at it.

Most importantly, on that day in 1993, I learned that seeing art is not an act of mere documentation but as with all relationships, whether with an object or a person, seeing is an experience that requires an unreserved presence. To this day, when I experience the possibility of something missing in a relationship, I firstly check to see if that 'something missing' is not me.

*"A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer."* - *Mark Rothko.*

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