

Brain Work: A Meditation on the Painting of Katherine Sherwood
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A psychiatrist friend of mine looking at a painting by Katherine Sherwood hanging near my front door, instantly saw it as an image of the brain, and began naming its parts. This was no accident; Sherwood's work frequently employs images of brains, in particular photo lithographs of angiograms of her own brain. But many viewers would be more likely to see this canvas as a thickly-painted abstraction in shades of orange, brown, yellow and gray-violet. For my friend however, the recognition was involuntary, even though it was not a part of his practice to study angiograms. As he described it, he recognized the forms from images in textbooks he studied in medical school years ago. To him the forms were barely stylized or abstracted.

Pattern recognition of this kind is a part of human nature, human cognition. Our brains are wired to observe similarities, register echoes, and construct analogies. We see things in things. We find faces in rock outcroppings, in clouds. We look at the stars, connect the dots and see creatures from our surroundings and characters from our mythology. What one culture sees as a centaur another sees as a llama—but the impulse is the same. Sophisticated viewers know not to do this when looking at a work of abstract art; it is not, after all, an ink blot test designed to gauge the viewer's mental state. Still, it is hard to avoid.

For me, the brains in Sherwood's paintings are not always so readily apparent. And even when someone points them out to me, they sometimes look like something else—an ear, maybe a lung, a...what is that, a kidney? Forms recur. Patterns repeat. There are echoes of other organs and vessels here, blood vessels, intestines, fallopian tubes, branching nerve fibers, which also resemble the roots of plants, some sort of seaweed. Corals, brain corals, cauliflowers.

For some there is a shock when what seems pure abstraction turns out to represent or recreate these bodily forms. In this way, Sherwood's work draws our attention to the seeming opposition between representation and abstraction. Is there really such a thing as pure abstraction, or does the abstract painter draw from natural forms and forces? Is the viewer meant to read these images, recognizing and drawing parallels between similar patterns, or simply to revel sensuously in color and form? Sherwood paints the inside of bodies, not the outside. She lures us in to find the connections between the inside and outside world. She reminds us that painting has always been about bodies, and not just the exterior surfaces of nudes, displaying themselves in all manner of attitude and activity. Consider Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), where the anatomist displays the tendon of the corpse's dissected arm, simultaneously holding up his own arm to show the action that particular tendon controls.

Sherwood uses angiograms of her own brain and engravings of brains and other parts of the nervous system from early anatomy and medical texts such as Andreas Vesalius's *On the Structure of the Human Body* (1543). Juxtaposed with these different types of medical imaging are patterns drawn from Solomon's Seals, a system of calligraphic symbols from the Middle Ages, associated with magic and healing. The seals typically involve a pattern of branching lines capped by triangles contained within a circular border. They look like aerial views of mazes, or perhaps stylized renderings of brains. The seals were part of rituals conjuring spirits of all sorts—some good, some evil, some both at once. The spirits appeared in different forms, as birds and animals, as fantastic creatures with multiple heads, carrying serpents or swords, riding on horses, on lions, on camels, on bears. If the conjurer knew the right words, they would then appear in human form. They had the power to grant health, wealth, and knowledge of philosophy, astronomy, astrology, rhetoric, geometry, geology, botany, alchemy and all the other arts. The conjurer was supposed to make the pattern associated with a particular spirit and wear it as an amulet on his breast. The seals were to be made of the metal appropriate to the particular spirit and used at the correct hour of the day, the correct day of the week, in the correct phase of the moon. The spirits were meant to read these symbols and know they were being summoned.

The seals are a form of secret writing, legible only to those with the special knowledge. Does this mean that a scholar, familiar with the seals, would be able to pick them out of one of Sherwood's paintings and name the relevant spirit? Would the spirit itself see the seal and know it was being summoned? Probably not; these spirits were fickle and fussy. The conjuring ritual was very precise. Fail in one of the details and the spirits would not come.

Sherwood's process also follows a precise sequence. She layers the blank canvases with coat after coat of acrylic gesso, to erase the texture of the cloth itself and create a monochrome creamy ground on which to pile up the image. She affixes photo lithographs of her angiograms and etchings of brains and other parts of the nervous system from Vesalius's text. Sherwood layers these patterns with patterns from the seals. The patterns overlap and occlude each other. To make the rectilinear forms—the branches and triangles of the seals, for instance—she marks the line with tape and strokes on the pigment with a brush. For the curves, she pours the paints from plastic containers. The poured paint begins with a thick line and then ends with a thin trickle. The paint is so thick that it often cracks as it dries. Sometimes sections of paint even peel off. Sherwood lifts the peeling forms—like peeling skin, like peeling a scab?—and reattaches them, sometimes turning them upside down. The peeling paint leaves its trace behind, like a scar. The painted surfaces have a living, fleshly quality. For the final step, she mixes an olive green oil paint with wax and turpentine and brushes it all over the canvases, then wipes it off. Traces of the pigment remain behind, highlighting the cracks and crevices, and even discovering divots and dimples in the ground. The cracks, though formed at random, seem symmetrically spaced—yet another network of branching lines.

Once, Sherwood worked to avoid this sort of craquelage and other flaws in the painted surface. Now she works to encourage it. She cannot know in advance how it will turn out, but she invites these alterations, these accidents. She does not work from a plan or sketch, but allows the painting's composition to emerge of its own volition. All this takes patience; each new layer of paint needs to dry before new paint can be applied. Sherwood's process might seem to have something in common with the action painting techniques of such artists as Jackson Pollock. But her actions are slower, gentler, more deliberate, more reverent. And there is an element of faith, of mystery, of magic. All these practices are not governed by the so-called logical left brain. They embrace the idea of the happy accident, the fortuitous mishap.

At what point do I talk about Katherine Sherwood's disability? She had a stroke ten years ago, affecting the left side of her brain, leaving her paralyzed on her right side. After the stroke she had to learn to walk, talk and paint all over again. She now lays her canvases flat on a work table and paints with her left hand. She circles the canvases seated on an old, wheeled office chair. In press accounts of her work, Sherwood's stroke is often represented as a fortuitous mishap. With the censoring functions of her left-brain switched off, her painting became more fluid, her process more purely intuitive. In this interpretation of Sherwood's stroke there seems to be a longing for some sort of divine intervention granting compensatory powers for lost mobility. But Sherwood insists that her work has really not changed that much. She points to earlier work that deals with the same forms and ideas. For her, adapting to her disability, learning to paint with her new impairments, was less a matter of heroics than one of practical problem-solving. She acknowledges that necessary changes in her process have altered the way she thinks about the work. She is now a one-handed painter, working on an horizontal rather than vertical surface. But she seems more inclined to think that after years of dealing with the same ideas and images, she finally came into her own and created the painting that had somehow been in her mind all along.

The desire to understand Sherwood's stroke as benefiting her work reflects the culture's master narrative about disability. In this narrative, the stricken individual overcomes her disability through heroic perseverance. The story is supposed to inspire first pity then awe, and to offer reassurance that when disability strikes, we can all triumph in the same way. Sherwood's story seems to offer an extra spin on this formula in that her overcoming involved changes in her brain function over which she had no control, allowing her not merely to regain but to surpass her previous powers. In other words, it is as if she overcame without even trying. Sherwood's story also seems to confirm cultural notions about how artists function. Artistic activity is supposed to be governed by the putative creative right brain. The artist is supposed to be emotional, intuitive, noncerebral, perhaps even a little crazy.

It can be said that all painting has an element of the self portrait. Even when the painting does not depict the artist at her easel, brush poised, eyes alert, the painter shows us what she sees and how she sees it. We glimpse the world through another pair of eyes. Katherine Sherwood shows us the inside of her skull, since we

understand that art takes place first in the artist's brain. But to what extent do we even need to know Sherwood's life story to appreciate her work? Does it help to appreciate the work of Vincent Van Gogh to learn that he may have had temporal lobe epilepsy, bipolar disorder and an ophthalmologic condition caused by drinking absinthe or using lead-based paints?

And yet, Sherwood's stroke is there on the canvas, apparent in the angiogram, the visible record of that cerebral event. Katherine Sherwood's work however, is not about overcoming that event; it does not seek to inspire pity or awe. Rather it makes use of that biographical fact, incorporating it into her work, making it a part of the system of symbols and visual elements that she deploys.

There is also an act of reclamation here. Sherwood reclaims her angiogram as an image of her brain, made by her brain rather than her hand. To her doctors, it is a tool to gauge her recovery. To her it is a pattern of marks as uniquely her own as any she might make with a paintbrush. In the same way she elevates the etchings she borrows from Vesalius's text to the status of works of art. Originally commissioned to illustrate the anatomist's words, she bestows on the unknown artist posthumous recognition for his work. And on top and around these images, the Solomon seals summon spirits who can grant different kinds of knowledge, different facets of brain function. Katherine Sherwood draws our attention to the seeming oppositions between medicine and magic, science and art, intellect and intuition, the literal and the figurative, left brain right brain. She reminds us that these distinctions are never as clear-cut as they seem, and that what now seems cutting-edge science may one day be dismissed as so much superstition.

In her studio, Katherine Sherwood invites me to touch her paintings. The surfaces are so thickly painted that they are almost sculptural, almost bas reliefs, almost as if forms have been pressed into wet paint to leave these traces behind. They invite the touch, but it feels a bit transgressive. Art viewers are not supposed to touch paintings, but I must confess that it's something I've done all my life. Both my parents were visual artists. I spent a lot of my childhood in artists' studios, and yes, I touched the paintings. In fact, my fingerprints are all over paintings that now hang in museums around the world. But touching Sherwood's painting also feels transgressive, because we do not usually get to touch these parts of the body, except in the dissection lab or operating room. I feel myself transported back in time, doing dissections in high school biology class—the wonder holding back the disgust, as we folded back the layers, feeling the strange and yet familiar textures—the astonishing uncoiling length of intestine, the strength of arteries, the spongy lightness of brains. The remembered stench of formaldehyde is replaced by the, to me, more pleasing scent of oil paint and turpentine. I am brought back to the present with the realization that I am, in fact, touching paint and not what it represents. I feel compelled to wonder: which part of my brain should I use to understand this work—the logical, symbol-deciphering left brain, the free-associative sensuous right brain, my memory, my imagination, my vision or my touch?

Part of the affinity I feel for Sherwood's work is that I can draw a parallel between her practice as a painter and my own practice as a writer. To write this essay I assemble words, form phrases, compose sentences. I free-associate, allowing a word or phrase to summon memory, to lead me astray. I follow strands of thought until they peter out, trail off in a trickle. When I reach the end of a strand, I move on. Tomorrow I will come back and add or delete. What I delete will leave a trace behind. The trace will govern what new words I add. I will observe patterns that I was not conscious of while writing yesterday. I will move and rearrange, juxtapose and overlap patterns, draw connections, connect the dots. This layering and rearranging is not governed by the logical left brain. Often I do what I do simply because it feels right. Over time, after days and perhaps weeks of working in this way, the seams between the additions are smoothed out; the illusion of a logical train of thought begins to emerge.

This is not the only way I know how to write, but it somehow seems appropriate to Sherwood's work. I am not an art historian or critic. It's hard to know where to start. Should I try to create an image of the painting in the reader's mind's eye, or to enhance the experience of viewers who have already seen it for themselves? Should I narrate Sherwood's painting process or her thought process with the clusters of interlocking ideas that make up her imagery? In what ways does her biography figure in all this and in what ways is it irrelevant? I pose these questions. I circle back to new starting points. My process is slow, accretive, drawing attention to its false leads and fortuitous mishaps.

At what point do I talk about my own disability? I am legally blind. I have a significant vision impairment which compromises my ability to perceive Sherwood's work visually. I know the work through touch and, drawing on my friendship with the artist, through what Katherine has said about it. I can talk about Katherine's process, how the work was made. I can talk about the ideas that went into its making. I can talk about the feel of the paint, or I should say, the different feels of the paint, since the smooth texture of the creamy ground is radically different from the thick sections of poured paint with its ridges and cracks. I can talk about the colors, because I still perceive color accurately. But can I really claim to know these paintings? This raises a complex philosophical debate about the role of vision in epistemology. Can I claim to have first-hand knowledge of this work, or is what I know merely hearsay—what I have heard Katherine and others say about it? I could ask the same question about any viewer—to what extent is understanding of this or any work dependent on knowing the different ideas and elements behind it? Why else do art museums publish catalogues and post biographical and critical wall texts?

I could leave the biographical fact of my disability out of this meditation and remain the disembodied consciousness of this essay. But Katherine inspires me to incorporate my visual impairment into the body of my text, to draw attention to it, to make use of it as an element in the work. My tactual explorations of Sherwood's paintings give me, if not special knowledge, then at least a particular perspective. I do not subscribe to a belief in compensatory powers—the notion that blind people

enjoy enhanced hearing and touch. And touching Sherwood's painting is not like reading a Braille text. It creates no image in my mind's eye—if my mind even has an eye. But it allows me to report that the paint is not just what it depicts; it is a textural, even sculptural element. It is also a tactile record of the process of its application, tangible marks left by the hand and the brain that made it.

Katherine Sherwood's work invites us to think about thinking, to meditate on the brain, its form, its contents and the many ways artists, scientists and magicians have sought to map and harness its powers. It is intensely cerebral work, on both the figurative and literal levels. It makes us mindful of the brain as the site of ideas, imagination, memory and dreams. But it is also a fleshly thing, made of tissue, fueled by blood, heir to mishap, and yet capable of renewal and change.