

*When I look carefully
I see the Nazumas blooming
By the hedge!*

Basho 18th C

Words as colour not language

Essay written by Joe Harney

Our evolutionary ancestors could hear long before they could speak. Sound and images were present in the preconscious mind, long before extended consciousness mushroomed. The neocortex is built upon that same ancient brain, resides upon it.

Conceptual semantics is a theory from cognitive psychologist Ray Jackendoff that proposes there to be fundamentals, 'semantic primes' of language. These are the atoms, beyond which a chunk of language can no longer break down to a further elemental meaning. You end up in loops of endless feedback. Words refer to each other, perpetually volleying back and forth between pages of the dictionary. The search for greater depths, by diving through the cracks of language, can only reach so far. Another plane exists, accessed by shifting from the idea of the word itself, past the patterns it fits into and on to the sound. Listen to a word on repeat long enough and its conceptual referent dissolves, drains from the mind. It becomes a sensory experience, one of elemental human timbres. Resonant exhaled air passing through the conscious modulation of a throat and mouth. The lexicon loses its edge, vocal tones become hues. In this mode, we switch from listening to hearing. The abstract parallel dimension of semantic primes drifts away, down the river, returned to nature. In this mode, the sound of those human utterances exists on a continuum from incidental to intentional.

D.T. Suzuki compared differences in western and eastern attitudes to nature (and as psychotherapist Irvin Yalom points out, to life itself) through works by Tennyson and Basho. His analysis found both poets in the throes of encounters with flowers. Tennyson's western hand rips his bloom from the very wall it grows in, "root and all", to inspect it up close. Destruction, in order to understand it, epitomizes for Suzuki the logic of 'knowing', of striving, doing, questing. In contrast, the haiku poet Basho is content to resonate with the simple purity of his flowers' mere existence in nature. These Nazumas (which Yalom notes to be an "inconspicuous, unpretentious" plant) bring him to a state of exclamatory joy. It is enough to "look carefully", in order to truly see them. He stops there. They are strikingly beautiful, just as they are, in the space they have found for themselves in the world. With Basho, it feels like beauty itself has something of the untouchable about it. To grasp at it with words would be to expand and elaborate... but then, the moment is already in the past. it's more meaningful to just be with it.

It's easy to say there's beauty in everything, it's the kind of mawkish meaninglessness that pollutes our daily timeline. The sentiment however, of there being beauty in everything, refers to a state of mind. It's easy to describe, harder to access.

These rich, sensuous works by Hallahan exist somewhere between process and gesture, between rhythmic incident and expressive intention. Consideration and refinement abound, there is no cynicism here. Each work has been gifted its own sense of life and presence through a palpable deep focus. Some canvases are a multitude of moods, layers of intersecting emotional tones that compete with each other. "Lotus," anchoring the exhibition at its centre, is a shimmering cacophony of opposing forces. Calmer moments feel primordial, as though they reach us from that place prior to extended consciousness, somewhere behind or beneath language. There is a fitting musicality to titles like "Mushroom blue" and "Determined flash." Few discernible cultural referents emerge. The one clearly figurative work is of a solitary flower, 'Trying to occupy space" in amongst the murk. It's the only thing Hallahan seems to have carefully seen in the wider world, the one thing chosen to be reflected back to us. He seems to be sensing everything else. These powerful paintings reward by just being with them, finding a softness of focus that lets them breathe unto themselves.