

Watercolour has a reputation as a medium both too easy and very difficult. Just to put coloured stains on paper is pretty straightforward, and requires no special preparation or training, but I think it's widely understood that to make a really *good* watercolour is surpassing hard. In contemporary art quality is never determined by technique, but only by concept or expression, and so watercolour has naturally lent itself to illustration, where the difficulty is manageable; in fact for conceptual artists today it has exactly the value it has for amateur and commercial artists, namely as a supplement to drawing. It can be light, easy and charming, and still depend on a modicum of technique without getting into the deep aesthetic problems. It works just fine when it stays inside the lines.

I have lately become a fanatic watercolourist, but in my work there are no concepts. Like any modern artist I want to make the difficult look easy, but since an abstract watercolour might be shaken out of one's sleeve with out much trouble, the problem is to find out how to make it last for the viewer, how to give it staying power. Of course I have some ideas about that, but for help and encouragement I had to turn to the modern watercolourist with the heaviest aura, Cézanne. Luckily for me, for all of us, in the last couple of years there have been two beautifully illustrated in-depth studies of his watercolours. Both of these books contain many close ups that reveal how the paint went on, and more importantly, the pencil underdrawings. More on this crucial topic later.

But the importance of Cézanne goes far beyond his highly original use of a minor medium, and I couldn't help but be intrigued by the fact that the Philadelphia art museum has recently mounted a show about Cézanne's contemporary relevance, called *Cézanne and Beyond*. The show included modern and contemporary artists who have been inspired by or made departures from the cantankerous old master, a veritable celebration of "the anxiety of influence." Very fortunately, the editor of this magazine shares my devotion to the medium, as well as to Cézanne, and he was open to my ruminations on the father of modern art, my own earliest source, but he also asked me to look at the watercolours of David Milne, as presented in a recent show at Mira Godard in Toronto.

Milne, as it happens, is also an artist whose work lies within the problematic dialectics of ease and difficulty.

I used to think of Cézanne's watercolours as the ultimate of refinement, highly intellectual and technically transcendent. The main technical problem of the medium is the "reserve," the use of the white paper as an element in the design, and of course Cézanne is famous for his "unfinished" works. His watercolours often have a lot of unpainted space, and this connoted to me, in line with the attitudes of many generations of modernists, the ultra serious and intense. He didn't need to finish because his mind was so strong that it filled the empty areas. But I guess I hadn't really looked; they are nothing like that at all—in fact very simple, and simply unfinished. That doesn't mean that the canonical view is wrong, just that the works are far more human and accessible than I at least had thought. His method is directness itself, and always in search of feeling.

The second revelation for me was the extreme usefulness of penciled contours, and to explain this I find David Milne very helpful. The Mira Godard show spanned almost his entire career, from 1910 to the later forties. The earliest piece in the show is Impressionist, but by 1912 he had become a skilled Post-Impressionist, clearly learning from Gauguin, Matisse and perhaps the Fauves. Whether Post-Impressionism was up to date or over and done with in 1912 is a difficult question to answer, depending as it does on context. What is clear is that Milne, at that time, was the cleverest and most forward looking painter in Canada. His only peer was Emily Carr, and he outclassed her both in painterly skill and in wit. In the first half of the last century genuine modernism was hard to find in Canada. The dominant tendency in English Canada was the antimodernism of the Group. French Canada, with its natural ties to Paris, had Morrice, and then later, in the thirties, important figures such as Lyman, Pellan and Lemieux, but for all kinds of reasons this was a very belated development. Outside of Quebec modernism never really took hold in this country, and until very recently Milne was likewise a peripheral figure, however distinctive. That has all changed with the new hanging of the AGO collection in the renovated building. Dennis

Reid has effected a major historical re-evaluation of the artist, with three rooms of works hung shoulder to shoulder. Milne is now central to the history of Canadian art, and although the research that would fully support Reid's revisionism has yet to be done, the AGO has gone a long way toward making that possible and even inevitable. The Mira Godard show took place against the background of the AGO rehang—in which watercolours do not play a prominent role—and it gave an opportunity to look closely at Milne's methods.

In works such as *Pink Hills*, of the Post-Impressionist phase, all the objects are made up of flat coloured planes. One can clearly see the penciled contours that fix the composition and act as guides for the placement of colour areas. Then from the twenties onward Milne reverts to a more traditional method, drawing the objects directly with thin dry brush lines of black paint, adding colour as a secondary element, and the pencil lines disappear. His pictures become coloured drawings rather than compositions in coloured planes, and that more radical modernist project is only recalled through the occasional use of coloured rather than black contours.

Of course it is quite difficult to render both objects and space in an attractive arrangement with areas of colour alone, and a preliminary pencil outline helps a lot. But Cézanne's use of the same technique gives very different results; he doesn't use the pencil outline as a crutch, but as a way to make a better picture. He uses a quick, scribbly sketch to help him visualize the volumes of the objects, and the brushstrokes are then all modeling strokes; he need merely place the strokes like a kind of skin on volumes that already exist as vivid illusions in his own mind. The work is done in his head before he makes the stroke, and so the blank areas paint themselves. Intensity, in Cézanne, is basically just the power to visualize. This is true of the landscapes but it is especially clear in the still lifes, as can be seen in Carol Armstrong's wonderful exhibition catalogue *In the Studio: Still Life in Watercolors*, published by the Getty Center in 2004. This book has close ups that set a new standard for usefulness in art books, revealing every layer of transparent paint and every wandering pencil line.

One might object that since Milne did not paint volumes during his Post-Impressionist phase this is not a legitimate comparison, but I would disagree. It has to do with the question of difficulty in watercolour painting, and the artist's task to find that difficulty, master it and then make it look easy. For the workaday illustrator the problem with watercolour is precisely the reverse—since the lights cannot be painted, as they can be with oils, the artist must think backwards, and paint by not painting, ensuring that the blank paper remaining at the finish of the work is fully functional. Of course without a preliminary contour drawing, the chance that the end product will be a mess is pretty high. The modern artist must scorn this elaborate method on principle, and Cézanne did precisely that by starting with a ludicrously imprecise sketch, but in the process he solved the technical problem by making it more a matter of conception than execution. In other words, he modernized it. But then a further consequence of his method is that modeling becomes bolder, stronger, independent in a new way, produced directly by the colour and less an aspect of a pre-determined form, hence *less* conceptual. It's really a paradox. His work innovates by being less reliant on technical method—hence more modern because more a matter of conception—but also less conceptual—hence more modern because less beholden to pre-existing abstract models. Ease and difficulty are here found in a new combination. The rejection of technique makes the execution of the work much harder, but the strong grasp of form makes the work seem clear, obvious, in fact much simpler than any other watercolour. From this point of view, Milne's flat post-Impressionism is too easy to begin with, but then he makes it even easier with an illustrator's technique. The pictures would be better attempted *without* guidelines.

The comparison of Cézanne and Milne is just even if their goals are different, because what is at stake is what painting techniques are to be used for. In Cézanne's case the best guide is Richard Shiff, who has been thinking about Cézanne for over twenty years. In his contribution to the Philadelphia catalogue, he returns to the testimony of nineteenth century critics, and to Cézanne himself, to establish the centrality of *feeling* in the artist's work. Feeling in art is a difficult thing to

discuss, probably because it is hard to verify. Since both sensations and emotions—different and equal aspects of feeling—are subjective and transitory, they resist being held and objectified for study. Yet artworks themselves are objective and permanent. Perhaps there is an intrinsic difficulty—how can we attribute feelings to such things as artworks, which are not sensate, nor retain any connection to the artist who made them a hundred years after the fact? This last observation stands against the common view that artworks are conduits back to the emotions, ideas and intentions of the artist. In this normative and unreflective view, held by most viewers without question, the work is merely a medium of communication from artist to art lover. Without going into the question in depth, I think it is clear that this is absolutely not the case. Great art has its own reason to exist, apart from the needs and intentions of the artist. Shiff has shown how Cézanne developed a *technique of originality*, drawing on existing conventions that signified the authentic, the individual, and the sincere. The goal was in fact feeling, understood to be the shorthand for all those attributes. Cézanne’s achievement was to push those conventions so far that he made things that no one had ever seen. In modern art, feeling is completely bound up with novelty, which then provides the objective measure we need to explain how and why we are moved—originality can always be assessed because it is a relationship between works. To put it simply, there are no feelings in modern art except new ones. Actually, this insight may help us to appreciate feeling better. Feelings only exist between people, or in relation to specific contexts, they can not be detached from their moment and then sent in a parcel to another time and place. Feelings in art exist between the viewer and work, and so they can never be the same as whatever transpired between the work and its maker. And what happens between viewer and work always happens within the context of many other works available at that moment.

A discussion of Cézanne’s originality is always a discussion about his many supposed technical failings. The myth of Cézanne, invented by himself, and then repeated very effectively by his many nineteenth century admirers, is that he couldn’t help himself, that his feelings were so

strong that drawing, composition and spatial coherence had to give way. Like everyone else, I have always believed that Cézanne could not make an academically correct drawing, and that his achievement was to transform his personal incapacity into a whole new set of standards by sheer force of will, application and genius. I wonder now what advantage such a belief has, and what it says about the self understanding of modern artists, but it is clear at least that till now no evidence to the contrary has been available. So I can't understate the shock I felt when I opened Matthew Simms gloriously illustrated *Cézanne's Watercolours: Between Drawing and Painting* (Yale University Press, 2008), again with copious details and close ups, to find a very competent academic drawing from Cézanne's youth. This one reproduction is worth the price of the book. The shock was doubled by the presence on the preceding page of a sketch of a diver drawn in a broken manner that recalls no one other than early Baselitz. But that kind of shock is a familiar one today; every artist is ahead of their time at some point. The shock of Cézanne's academic drawing is the realization that he made a choice—that there was nothing to stop him from following the path of a Degas or a Fantin, he had the skill. He also had the wit to see that there was no point to go that way, and so he took a different path, one that cut across the very different routes surveyed by Courbet and Manet to arrive at the same place—to make a virtue of weakness and turn pictorial solecisms into modern style. This could also be characterized as a conscious transformation of bad taste into modern beauty. He had a choice, and he took a risk. The risk was maybe greater than most of his contemporaries were willing to take, but it paid off commensurately because he changed history, thereby ensuring his place within it. What Shiff has shown is that the same risk was available to anyone, that it was within the range of recognized possibilities at that time. By the time both Picasso and Matisse played a bigger stake, the game was already old.

For Cézanne, the “mistakes” and incongruities in his works had to stay because they were signs of his honesty and the work's truth. This is apparently what he believed, so he was in the peculiar but typically modern position of knowingly allowing his work to fail. But what seems odd

to us is that in this case “truth” and “honesty” are conventions deployed as conscious strategy, but no less true and honest. Our inability to square this circle is our ever growing misunderstanding of modernism. We are losing touch with our own culture because we moralize every decision, pass judgement on every gesture and submit the great fiction called art to the small fiction called truth.

But it is precisely the question of a conscious deployment of skill that raises the largest shadow over Milne’s work. Milne is deft; Milne is facile; he has an agile mind and a dry, reserved Protestant wit; but though his work is full of elegantly deliberate missteps—slipped boundaries, wobbly edges, too summary descriptions, reversals of light and shade, accidental compositions—they don’t register the presence of a great artist. This might be because by 1912 they are also not very original.

Milne’s qualities come into clearer focus if we compare his watercolours to those of a self identified follower of Cézanne included in the Philadelphia show, Charles Demuth. His progress has some parallels with that of Milne. In the late teens he made some very attractive cubist type watercolours, with fragmented forms and very free compositions. One can see the improvisation, and that gives them very much the spirit of Cézanne. But in the twenties, like Milne, and like many artists, he became less modernist, in fact his work became very graphic, controlled, technically accomplished and illustrative. Though his apples and pears are modeled with colour, they are so tight and so clean that the colour is diminished; the preliminary pencil lines are all too precise, and the colour stays tamely within them. Both Milne and Demuth had the skill to control the tricky medium of watercolour, the skill of the graphic artist and illustrator, but Milne used it in the service of modern style—of the two he is clearly the superior artist.

Milne couldn’t hide his illustrator’s skill, and probably didn’t want to, but as Cézanne shows, it is this dissimulation, which means the creation of a new identity, which is the real task of modern art. The insouciance of modernism is not supposed to be a mannerism. But then Milne’s

interest, for us today, lies in the fact that the devices of modernism now *are* mannerisms. He was ahead of his time, and to paraphrase Baudelaire on Manet, advanced in the decline of his art.

I have to say that I appreciate as never before that Milne was a true sophisticate, and evidently far too sophisticated for Canada. Like any artist of superior intellect, he could act the clown. In the Mira Godard show a piece of 1942, called *The Encounter*, includes two stuffed animals. It's hilarious, but with a hilarity that perhaps can only be appreciated today, and the more deserving of respect for that. Actually, Milne's downfall might be that he didn't fool around enough, but the reason is probably that landscape doesn't give much scope for humour. Milne's real originality, intimately interwoven with his wit, is found in certain mangled forms that appear in the foregrounds of his paintings. An example from the Mira Godard show would be *Young Maples in Spring*, of 1938, in which the orange blob in the foreground could be many things but hardly a maple. But however surprisingly distorted some of Milne's objects may be, they don't even come close to the still unassimilable horrors of Cézanne's late bathers. In these works we might distinguish a threefold character of formal originality, grotesque humour, and conscious ugliness, which in his case might be three descriptions of the same thing. Milne has dashes of the first, but sadly lacks the other two.

Milne always seems to be just too good, and the watercolour medium is treacherous with those who master it too well; the deft are rewarded with easy victories followed by historical oblivion. But Milne survives and now has his moment precisely because of his unfortunate professionalism. Today we are even willing to appreciate the commercial illustration precisely for its skill, which doesn't seem as empty as it used, and I think that Milne's clean and never failing virtuosity has a new glamour.

Maybe he never did make a bad picture, but then neither did he make one that stood out from the rest; to us, Milne's consistency seems like a guarantee of quality, but in comparison to Cézanne he is too consistent. There may be change, but there is little development in his work. Here

I want to veer away from the standard image of Cézanne as doubt ridden, never satisfied and remorselessly self critical. He may well have had those traits, but to see the work afresh we need to get some distance on the clichés of modernist journalism. Shiff gives us the answer; he shows that the development of Cézanne's work, *as he worked*, was not the result of agonizing self examination, but of surrender to both the changing appearances of nature and to the work as an emerging organism. The effect is of an ever moving wholeness, of serenity constantly found. The “unfinished” areas are not signs of tortured indecision, but of a willingness to let things go when the rhythm of the work calls a pause. From this perspective, consistency is the enemy of art, and it seems that Cézanne knew how to incorporate that insight as one aspect of his technique of originality. In this sense the unpainted areas of the watercolours are far more productive than if they were just suggested spaces or un-delineated planes. In a piece by Milne such as *Camp at Hungry Bay*, the large expanse of unpainted sky is very beautiful, but it is only sky. In Cézanne's watercolours the reserve contains all the possibilities of tomorrow.

Most of the essays in the Philadelphia catalogue that treat Cézanne's successors stick to a pretty conventional modernist line—that Cézanne's work points the way to a self-referential art of painted surfaces. More complex views emerge in John Elderfield's piece on Picasso, Jennie Hirsh's piece on Morandi and Shiff's comprehensive text, which touches lightly on most of the artists included. But while such a mainstream position might do justice to Brice Marden, Ellsworth Kelley and Jasper Johns, it doesn't apply well to four of the most recent artists included, Luc Tuymans, Francis Alÿs, Jeff Wall and Sherrie Levine, all of whom are definitely post-modernist. Since the theme of the show is Cézanne's continuing relevance this component should be the most important, and yet of two reviews that I've seen, one in the New York Review of Books the other in Artforum, only the latter had anything to say about the four, and in both cases Jeff Wall was pointedly dismissed. Apparently because Wall's work does nothing more than reference Cézanne's imagery its

engagement with the master is superficial. I think that a more nuanced reading is called for, one which in fact does illuminate the older artist.

Wall's piece *Card Players* is an obvious and direct citation of Cézanne's late series on the same theme, but his treatment of it is completely different. It's a commonplace, particularly in the art and literature of the nineteenth century, that provincial life is narrow, dull, stifling and oppressive, and I think that Cézanne, an artist who deliberately chose to stay in the provinces, who made a virtue out of provinciality, really did capture the suffocating dead air of provincial society. His card players are not "society," meaning the snobbish middle class of the small town, the bankers and notaries from whose ranks Cézanne came, nor the wives and daughters of those bankers, who jealously scrutinized the metropolitan fashion plates from which Cézanne drew some of his earliest works. The provincial with enough education to raise their expectations of life, the type of Mme. Bovary, was in his day already canonical either as a figure of satire or sympathy, or more commonly both, but Cézanne took up the inarticulate peasant. The card players are the most inert people, engaged in the most boring pastime, at least the most boring pastime to watch, one might say equivalent to watching paint dry. I've never been convinced by the claim that uninteresting subjects are redeemed by brilliant paint handling, but in any case, in my view the card player series, the late portraits of peasants and the portraits of the gardener Vallier are not his best paintings. This is not a case of an artist falling off in old age; the late views of St. Victoire are astonishing, the later portraits of his wife and son equally so, and the bathers are beyond qualification. Nor am I disposed to believe that these people are the salt of the earth, or representative Provençal types. There may be indications that Cézanne saw them this way, but his actual accomplishment is to show people who are nothing much more than blocks of wood. And in view of the fact that the paintings are similarly empty of incident, the surprising conclusion is that in Cézanne's work the style matches the subject. Subject matter has always been of interest to his critics, from Meyer Shapiro to T.J.Clark, but the conventional modernist view, reinforced by most

of the essays in the Philadelphia catalogue, is that the momentum of painting itself always prevails over the motif. It seems that the arch modernist is literary in a surprisingly un-modernist way. The result is an irony that I suggest is Cézanne's most profound response to the work of his older contemporary, Edouard Manet. The irony of Manet's great works of the 1860's, such as *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, is the incongruity of historical art and contemporary life. Cézanne has transposed and transformed this into another irony, one as prophetic of Warholian blankness as of the furthest reductions of twentieth century abstraction, namely the utter incompatibility between the people depicted in the work and the people who will be its viewers, and the flat, banal quality of his painting leaves those sophisticated viewers no place to retreat to in search of aesthetic satisfactions.

Wall belongs to a different realist tradition, in which all the most banal details of everyday life are understood to be profoundly interesting. In fact there is no such thing as an uninteresting detail, and no mask is only a mask, there is always a story behind it. There is no difference that doesn't have a common ground in social experience, and all experience can be written and then read through the details, the particulars that constitute a work of art. Wall is in the company of those great realists who have rescued the banal for aesthetic contemplation, and in the process expanded the scope of art. But since the universe so presented is a continuum from the grain of dust swept out the door to the mountain peak in the distance, there can be no irony in its presentation.

I think that the singling out of Wall by the reviewers is symptomatic of a blindness in the general understanding of painting, one which poses a real risk to the future productivity of this art, namely a fixed idea that painting has to involve paint. Wall was the only non-painter in the show. Actually, Levine also showed a photograph, but a photo of a work by Cézanne, so that's another, more familiar problem. Yet Wall's works *are* paintings, in the tradition of Flaubert, Degas, Ibsen, Munch and Hopper, not to mention the numerous cinematic equivalents. Literature, cinema, photography and drama become vehicles for painting to expand its expressive range, but only because there are literary, cinematic, photographic and dramatic possibilities already within the

medium. The narrow focus on paint, brushes and the hands that wield them, and canvas or other surfaces, amounts to a kind of lobotomy of painting's memory and self knowledge. The medium is reduced at the very moment when two thousand years of practice has piled up the richest store of possibilities imaginable. They may not be the paintings everyone wants to see, but Wall's pictures are valid extrapolations of the history of painting nevertheless; his work and Cézanne's are comparable, and the comparison can teach us something about both.

This brings us to the reason why Cézanne is still alive for us today, and back to watercolours. See a loose arrangement of coloured stains, scattered asymmetrically across a sheet of paper. Some of them come together to indicate trunks and branches—strong lines that give structure to composition without setting limits—others collect in flickering masses to signify foliage—fields of coloured light—others speak to each other across empty areas to model rocks—the folding in and out of space. You could call it an abstraction. But all is surrounded and penetrated by blank paper, by the reserve. The reserve in Cézanne's work is all the possibilities of painting, but not any particular familiar one. In the continuous universe, completely filled with facts from beginning to end, he finds the blank, the open space, where an unknown future emerges even now. Such is the fantasy we call art.