

Grace: What is it? Where is it? How will it affect me?

Another possible title for this exhibition was “Depression Painting,” a more accurate title however would have been “The Calvinist Approach,” or “Calvinism in Painting.”¹ *Protestantism in Painting* seemed like a happy compromise— a bargain between depression and John Calvin; a covenant between melancholia and Martin Luther. For some time I have been thinking about a Protestant system of painting. Just as one can speak of religion and philosophy as systems of belief, one can speak of systems of painting. Here, Protestantism, Catholicism, and their pertaining doctrines relate specifically to trends in contemporary painting. It should go without saying that any theological concepts as they are considered here have little to do with religion. Still, any idea of Protestantism in painting must necessarily depart from a more “Catholic” approach. Decoupling theological concepts from the theologies they serve is not a wildly new idea, but neither is it a wildly old one. The most pertinent example for our purposes being Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic*, where he describes how Martin Luther’s fateful (mis)translation of the bible forever locked Protestant worship to labor and accumulation.

The Dandy

The Dandy is a quintessentially Catholic figure. In the Catholic world of the Dandy aesthetics, pageantry and the epicurean senses rule above all else. In the Catholic world of the Dandy there is redemption and salvation; mistakes are made, lessons are learned, grace is found. For our Dandy, faith exists first *in* institutions, and then secondly *through* those institutions. In the Catholic world of the Dandy, grace is justified through “good works”— “good” in this case being a qualification that can only be ratified externally— validation by institution; legitimation by sacrament.

When the Dandy is a painter we may think of a Catholic system of painting in their “good works.” This system is populated not so much by Painters, as by People-Who-Paint. The paintings made by People-Who-Paint are, in the first order, “good works,” as they serve as proof of effort— *justificatio sola fide*. In the second order, the paintings made by People-Who-Paint serve as repentance for their shortcomings, for their failures, for their inadequacy— at once the mistake and its apology.

This system of painting is Catholic as a matter of performativity. The Person-Who-Paints *performs* Painter. They soon find that they may not be up to the task, they find their efforts insufficient, their performance fails, *ostentatiously*. They then perform ambivalent embarrassment à la Painter Performance Anxiety (PPA). This regime preconditions the Painter with a sacred status, as if Painter is imbued with a Divine Saving Grace (DSG) that is lacking in the Person-Who-Paints. This “Catholic” system of painting is ultimately predicated on an idea which is medieval in structure. Not unlike the ecclesiastic First Estate of the Ancien Régime’s Three Estates, the “Catholic” system presumes a special caste for the Painter.

Fake it ‘til you make it

In the Catholic system, so long as one follows certain rules, does “good works,” and performs continued repentance, one can live a life largely uninfiltrated by theology— occasionally even with some vague idea that they will be showered with DSG and ultimately saved from eternal damnation. However, there is no such indulgent leniency in the Protestant system. In Protestant religious doctrine, after humans were cast out of the Garden of Eden, god wrote up two extremely long lists: on one, a list of The Elect— that is everybody in the history of the world that would ever

¹ Finally decided against for being excessively niche; too *inside baseball*.

go to heaven; and on the other, a list of The Reprobate— a list of all the sinners throughout all of history, everyone that there ever has been and ever will be predestined to eternal damnation in Hell.² Famously the lists are secret and there is no possibility of switching between the two in any Protestant denomination.

One can logically discern that the Elect will behave in life in a manner that their destiny calls for. In this way, the most that one can do to secure any sentiment of salvation is to act like one of the Elect— to *perform* like somebody who is going to heaven.

The difference is slight, but could perhaps be summarized as follows:

The Catholic Person-Who-Paints presents her performed shame.

Her's is a process of aestheticizing inadequacy, a theatricalization of anxiety. A contemporary painting of the Catholic system is not so much a PPainting as it is an index of performed guilt. Justification of worth is a clerical process determined not by the “good works” themselves, but rather by the mere fact of their existence.

The Protestant Painter presents the result of her shamelessness.

She too recognizes her inadequacy, but knows that sentiments of guilt and shame, whether real or performed, have no effect whatsoever on deliverance. In fact, the Protestant painter, deep inside her heart may very well feel that she is not among the Elect, the saved; she may have some inkling that she is not a Painter. Alas, there is no way of ever knowing which list she is on, the most a Protestant painter can do is act like a PPainter in as hardcore a manner as possible.

Work

In psychoanalytic parlance one might suggest that where the Catholic system is hysterical-neurotic in nature, Protestantism in painting is marked by an obsessive-neurotic structure. The Protestant system of painting is distinguished by a belligerent impulsion to do “good works” at any cost. Whether or not the “good works” produced are actually *good works* is arbitrary. But there is no redemption in this system. Repentance will get you nowhere. There is only labor, the results of which are secondary.

² More *inside baseball*: There is continued debate as to when god actually sat down and wrote these two lists, one school, the Supralapsarianists expound the belief that he did it right after the Big Bang. The other, the Infralapsarianists proclaim that the lists were written up right after he evicted Adam and Eve.