

Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures

Benjamin K. Rice

1. *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*, Juan Sánchez Cotán

Quince and cabbage hang from the ceiling by string in a storage niche. Underneath, a cantaloupe has one-third cut away from it, exposing a clotted core of slick seeds. A slice rests beside the melon, but it is not enough to account for the missing portion; the remainder, I assume, has been eaten. Closest to the niche wall on the left, a cucumber extends across the edge of the stone shelf and scuffs a cross-lit shadow at an angle down the wall. So composed, this is food elegized as form, plangent with light. The leading bow of the melon slice is so engulfed in sun it is transposed as sun itself, into pure absorptive surface. This painting, as well as others by the seventeenth-century Carthusian monk Juan Sánchez Cotán, gives me a sense of austere repose. Cotán offers me food—I hunger, and he feeds me—but food excised of its associations with satiety or with emptiness. He nourishes another hunger. The painting engages my senses, but abstracts them first from reflex, need, pain, pleasure. If I am hungry, to look at such a quince, at such a cantaloupe, is not to experience a moment of imaginative reprieve, but to eradicate the whole trail system of nerves and neurons that plunges a hollow in the belly or goads the glands beneath my tongue.

When I am still hungry, I love to look at these paintings. I love how the space of my hunger is not filled, but instead swallowed up in a greater emptiness. It is why cathedrals were built. Under the clerestory, in the void shaft of a rose window, the worshipper jumps a valence, climbs a rung. The arch of the niche in Cotán's cooling pantry is as high-vaulted as any at Cologne or Chartres, or at Saint Jean, in Lyon, beneath whose ribbing King Henry IV married Marie de Medici.

The cruelty of an image is that it excites us toward an anticipation that it can't fulfill. It gives by taking away. Though, when Cotán gives me an image of fruit, he does not take away from me any particular instance of pear or pomegranate—instead, he takes away the whole idea of fruit. It is as if I never as a child had an apple tree by the fence in my front yard whose apples were as dusty on the inside as the outside.

And yet, part of the cantaloupe is gone. Someone has cut it away. Someone who was here before me. And that ease they ate with now disenchant me of Cotán's sacred suspension of blighted rind and waxy cabbage ribs, and I remember that what I am looking at can be eaten, someone after all has done it, and I remember that it cannot be eaten, that after all it is oil on canvas and measures at 27 1/8 by 33 1/4 inches at the San Diego Museum of Art.

2. *A la memoire de J.M. Jacquard né a Lyon le 7 juillet 1752, mort le 7 aeout 1854, d'apres le tableau de C. Bonneford*, Didier Petit et Cie.

Using only a drawloom, the percolation of pattern in woven cloth is an exacting, labor-intensive process. A master and his apprentice work across the loom, raising by hand the heddle of each warp, choreographing the final stroke of each strained instant—what will

consist, once the weft is shuttled in at a right angle, in a just single thread of a final patterned image. It is as if the master weaver is the conductor of an orchestra paused in time: for every discrete note from each individual instrument, he has to run between the frozen players, raising a bow here, an elbow there, has to blow air into a lung, then massage it through the trachea to fill the embouchure of a rigid mouth against a horn.

The Jacquard loom automated this process. Seeing it as a threat to their trade, silk weavers destroyed prototypes of Jacquard's first loom in the streets of Lyon in 1801. The word "saboteur" comes to us from the wood sabot shoes that laborers like the Lyonnais weavers would either wear or throw into the delicate mechanism of a weaving machine.

Jacquard's invention was a synthesis of prior solutions by past inventors. Vaucanson's system of hooks and paper. Falcon's punchcards. By passing a continuous strand of punched paper or cardboard through a reading cylinder that controlled a system of drawstrings and hooks, a loom could be "programmed" to raise the desired warp threads and lower others, weaving tapestries and silks, brocades and damasks of exquisite detail and complexity. One such weaving is a portrait of Jean Marie Jacquard himself, executed by Michel-Marie Carquillat and the Lyon manufacturer Didier, Petit et Cie, who created a silk rendition of such extreme and close-set fineness that it became a favorite party trick of the English polymath Charles Babbage to convince his guests it was an engraving that they were looking at in his private gallery. When he revealed that this portrait of Jacquard, procured from the manufacturer in 1840, was, in fact, a tapestry, he would add that by using Jacquard's punchcard technique he could at last perfect his own invention, the Analytical Engine, a yet-realized computing machine. By the turn of the twentieth century, using developments by Babbage, Jacquard, and others, the International Business Machines Corporation had begun manufacturing the tabulating apparatuses that would evolve into the modern computer.

In tapestry, image is actual structure. In painting, the image is applied to the surface structure of a canvas. A silk tapestry showing a picture of an inventor in his workshop, a caliper in his hand, slippers on his feet, glass cracked in the windowpanes and chisels lined along the wall—none of which would exist without that picture. In this case, the method of manufacturing the structure and the image would not exist without what it images. If an image renders and frames a world inside the world, then, in this case, multiple worlds are supporting and co-constructing each other, transdimensional beams and rafters, in the portrait of Jean Marie Jacquard.

An image is real when it begins to realize. Then the image is no longer an image. It is a machine. It machines other machines. A way of looking or thinking can be a machine, a kind of technology. A portrait in silk taught Babbage to look at it not as if it were a portrait but, rather, a matrix of possibility.

The limits of what I can do exist at the limits of my tools, but the tool through history is not a changeless object; it but begets other, finer, more efficient tools that accomplish more or other ends. Without the Jacquard loom, there would be no punchcard system, and so no computer, and so no dwindling of the stevedore trade in our portlands where loading and offloading relies on increasing automation. Consider the mega-port at Busan. Look at the dockside gantries, the spreader, the twistlock, the daily sedimentation of the geologic unit that is the stackable intermodal container, shifting in rusting, multi-colored layers like

shale—workings that cannot be known by one mind are not known by a mind at all, but by an algorithm whose labor is distributed across a server, or across many servers, and where they exist cannot be fathomed either, much less the cables fathoms-deep that run along the ocean floor and flay data from seaboard to seaboard.

What I can do, what there is to be done, changes. I am differently limited. The shifting of my limits limit others.

But I am only the weaver's apprentice. I am following a thread with my hand. I lift it into position, shuttle in the weft, try to figure a pattern. The threads of the image comprise the structure that supports the image, emerging gradually, an expression of alternating linearities. Like Babbage, like Jacquard, my work is a working out of work that has come before. One work is the substructure for another, a palimpsest. And not just the work itself, but how it is made, the *technē*, taught me. In this manner I am tasked to a contraption of flounces, forces.

3. *Pie Fight Interior 11*, Adrian Ghenie

Francesca and Paolo's started as a sin of pornography. In looking at the throes of desire, my own capacity for desire grows. There is now a threshold there that was not before. A doorframe plus a door. I enter but realize the fact of my crossing only after, seeing only now behind me the lintels and posts, the fanlight, as Paolo and Francesca da Rimini must have traced the threshold of their first embrace, which was the threshold of their affair, back to that book, the Old French romance *Lancelot du Lac*—what suspends them still in the funneling whirlwind that their desire also was in life. And so this room, post-threshold, is a chaos. But the room is a *kunstkammer*, and on its drafts (indeed, a window overlooking a garden stands open in the bottom left-hand corner) are other blown souls witnessing of their desires, and there are others there to witness to those witnesses, as in the anonymous Flemish painting "Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures," a painting of a gallery of paintings and prints by Dürer and Lucas van Leyden, and the Antwerp artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including works in the style of Joachim Beuckelaer, Joos de Momper, Jan Brueghel the Elder, and Frans Francken.

A desire, like a machine, machines further desire. A desire is a desiring-machine. It learns or works by the punchcard of desire, voids and holes fed to it that guide where the needle goes and what pattern accumulates. What portrait.

Here is a portrait.

In the long days leading up to this morning, I have been following Carrie around Paris, taking snapshots of broken eggs in standing street water or of vacant storefronts with windows washed white on the inside. She wears Adidas, neon leggings, and a denim jacket, and stalks the side roads with a rapturous dog-leg bent. A conversation with Carrie crazes from gut-flora, to Deleuze and Guattari, to the industrial sublime. On first meeting, we bond over a shared love of the blue tarps bound with bungee cords to stacks of baled hay—a common sight in the southern Oregon countryside, which we both call home. Carrie loves bales for the same reason she loves pallets, forklifts. Logistics, she insists. The geodesic

vectors of the global supply chain. Stacks. Shipping containers. Warehouses. Robert Moses. Hard water. Soft money. Usage of this word “logistics” can be traced back to the Napoleonic complex of factors involved in large-scale troop movement. It comes from the French *loger*, for “quartering” or “lodging.” A “loge” is a spectator’s box in a theater. A “corps de logis” is a section of a palace, as in that wing designed as gallery space to house Peter Paul Reubens’ Marie de Medici cycle—the apologia-apotheosis of the widow of Henry IV, the Protestant-now-Catholic king who declared “*Paris veut bien une messe.*” A kingdom for just a taste.

Here is a portrait.

Carrie uses her index finger to lick spilled sugar off an outdoor table at a cafe on the Rue des Archives. I am thinking back to the Adrien Ghenie I saw at the Pompidou: *Pie Fight Interior 11*, a figure in a house dress stooping at a dark bureau table, her face half-sunk in crème fraîche dabs of pastel paint. Her gluttony is focused and abject. Or perhaps she is trying to wipe her face clean. Ghenie’s other pie fight interiors reiterate this gesture: figures with smeared faces lift their hands to wipe off the spattered excess, the meringue of whipped buildup, and—caught in that action—are shown with their palms to their cheeks, as if in mid-scream.

Ghenie’s work has been described as baroque, opaque, marked by a condition of immanence. While his paintings may make reference to personal memories—textures, debris, postures inflected by the shadows of specific spaces—or to historical sources, these allusions are assimilated and transubstantiated by the re-worldings that his work performs. Surfaces accrete. Succulence compounds, fractures, dehiscent. Like Leibniz’s monad, which supports no direct point of access—all room, all cellule, all vessel—the interior becomes autonomous, an inside without an outside. Ghenie’s interiors are digestive chambers. The gut with its world, its colonies of microbial flora.

This is the problem of the interior. It keeps interiorizing. Much as in the baroque painting “Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures,” completed in Flanders in the 1620s, the image exists as a framework for other images; its world, for other worlds. It is a work that reflects widespread attitudes toward art in the Dutch and Flemish contexts. Art was a means to index, to record, to botanize, to arraign nature in all its many forms, even as it also was intended to beautify, adorn, and be possessed as icons of knowledge and human grace by private collectors and gallerists.

A work, then, of the hyper-baroque, in “Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures,” the gallery is festooned with points of access, each painting a window, a window fractalizing into further windows.

The desire to contain gets out of hand.

After breakfast, in our rented flat on Rue Oberkampf, I am naked in Carrie’s hand. By noon, I have lost my virginity and am drifting through the Pompidou, looking for a framework. I, like the cognoscenti, use frames as tools to try to understand.

Why do I keep going in and in and in.

4. *Parthenon, East Frieze*

Desire gets out of hand. It is out of my hands.

Headquartered in Indianapolis, Celadon Trucking has one of its satellite terminals in Henderson, Colorado. The company has signaled it intends report a ten million dollar operating loss this year. The new COO, heir ascendant to the family dynasty following the death of his father, says he plans to fix the problem by going back to the “basics of trucking.” Less leasing and outsourcing. Shorter dwell times. Smaller, better distributed terminal towns. Higher pay in areas of high freight density. Christopher and I walk single-file up the road shoulder beside the loading bay at the Coors factory in Golden, thirty miles southwest of the Henderson outfit. My aim is to make a circuit around the perimeter, feel close to industry, set my cheek against its haunch, the small of it, where it tapers toward the ribcage. I point out to him the Celadon logo in the lot and tell Christopher about the glaze-type developed on the Korean peninsula during the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties. When Steve Russell and Lee Bennett named their company, they had this same pottery glaze in mind. They hoped their business would grow to become just as “distinctive.”

The commerce trail between the U.S. and Mexico starts on a New York toll bridge in the 80s, where Russell comes up short fifty cents; he certainly has the money, just not the coin. While he pulls over, Bennett, an old employee, happens to see his ex-boss there on the roadside. He also sees an opportunity, and pitches his idea for a logistics company on the spot. He even has a client already in hand, a job that would mean hauling car parts down to the Chrysler factory in Mexico.

In his inaugural address, Donald Trump paints a panorama of multiple worlds, insisting that, in America, “...a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.”

Trump sums up this different reality as a world of “American carnage.” Manichean wars seethe in the substratum.

Eight hundred years ago, a scholar in China’s southern Song Dynasty called celadon glaze “the best under heaven.” Outside the Coors factory, Christopher tells me that celadon is the same brand-type of American Spirit that his wife Hester smokes, half a cigarette at a time. Christopher, on the other hand, takes a full ten minutes with a single menthol, sitting when it rains on a plastic grocery bag out on the porch bench.

I have lived with Hester and Christopher as their roommate for two and a half years. I have chosen to wade out into the dissolution of their marriage, let it tug at my ankle, and in that riptide think what it might be like to give myself over to it. These days, Hester has James, a stage magician, down in Denver, and Christopher has fallen in love with Meredith, a lanky cosplayer and autodidact in quantum mechanics and the philosophy of science. They met in a graduate seminar on formal tools at Colorado State. Epistemic modal logic. Decision

Theory. Virtual quanta. There is a stylized phoenix printed on the paper of every American Spirit cigarette. Every object is a totem of desire.

After smoking her half cigarette, Hester comes back inside from the stoop, brushes her teeth, sprays Febreeze in the stairwell and in what she calls our “foyer.” In fact, it is little more than an access space between bedrooms where we store our bicycles. I try to imagine what Hester (whose heart’s hornbook is *A Lover’s Discourse*) thinks of when she says or hears this word “foyer”—the intimacy of thresholds? seduction in a doorframe? the tedium of voices barely audible through a buffer of sheetrock and fiberglass?

Desire is a domestic architecture. Shadows dwell. Eaves, brackets, fanlights, and terraces are expressions of the constraints and airy sunrooms of love, of shifts in attention, diurnal rotations, that transpire over the course of an affair. Spandrels of consequence and distraction form where walls and ceilings meet. Bas-reliefs in rosewood. The bathtub develops claw-feet.

Meredith leaves town to visit Greece for three weeks, and, since he is always tracing his position in the world relative to hers, a new fold rips across the surface of Christopher’s geodesy. Meredith texts Christopher videos showing fragments of the Parthenon, which he in turn shows me in my bedroom on his phone. In June, I go to London and, in the British Museum, same as John Keats did, I see the Elgin marbles, among them the other half of the Parthenon frieze, which I record and send via text to Christopher. When Keats looked at the torso of Iris, and shards of the shoulders of the sun god as he breaks the surface of the ocean of dawn, he was looking at “A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.” I am forced to turn my eyes from the source of my world’s light. I know my sources only through their shadows, the shadows of their magnitude.

In simple terms, a magnitude is the extent to which a cause effects a system. Timothy Morton, the Romanticist scholar turned prophet of the eco-apocalypse, writes about the advent of objects of unimaginable magnitude whose effects distribute massively across time. To describe this phenomenon, he has coined the word “hyperobject.” Spacetime and styrofoam are both hyperobjects. They exist at timescales and in futures and in pasts that contain or frame and swallow up more human temporal frameworks.

Morton shows how this is an Einsteinian model of objecthood. Einstein theorized that a mass will warp and marble spacetime, withdrawing or burrowing into it, creating limpet-like “world tubes:” dimples of time and space that attract other objects of lesser magnitudes to dwell toward them as toward the variable depths of an eddy. Like a black hole, though to an infinitesimal extent, an American Spirit cigarette distributes itself and its gravity well through spacetime. An object is an object relative to its sphere of influence. A cigarette is a world tube. It has a light-cone and a timeframe I cannot conceive.

A cigarette is a pretext. For Hester, it is a symbol of discreet surrender to impulse. In the midwestern spirit of casseroles, darning, and moderation, when Hester craves she attends to, nurtures, that craving. Sprays deodorizer behind her, domesticates the desire. Dwells with it. It is incorporated into a genealogy of small sins, a family tree of them. For Christopher, the cigarette started as a pretext to be on the porch. At first with Hester, then later with Meredith. Smoking a cigarette, which he once described to me as wings opening up inside

the chest—a butterfly stroke into the intertide of time—became a ritual of love, then still later a way of holding out, of persisting inside an unrealized unreality. Meredith doesn't realize that I am what she wants, he says to me, again.

One of the cognoscenti, dressed in brocaded yellow silk, standing at the table by the window burdened with globes and comprehensive intricate tools for geo-positioning, shows so I can see it a small-scale picture with its cover slid to reveal a study of snails and insects. "Reference-mollusk" is another term that Einstein used to describe the world tube that an object is in spacetime, the mollusk's time-flesh the slippery Gaussian distribution of its attractive influence. Called *naturalia*, small paintings like this one of snails occupied an important place in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century collection: renditions of the world, they were interchangeable with natural objects themselves. It's less an object's presence that makes it real as much as it is my desire for it. It is my desire for it. My dwelling-toward, falling-for.

A vector is a magnitude plus a velocity. The speed light goes here. The shadows of time cast by the marble fragment of a surfacing sun god. I could go so far as to claim that desire is reality. But nothing is ever real or true on the basis of knowing it or claiming it. Instead, it is real as much as it is in the periphery. In terms of "Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures," it is the monkey at the open casement window. Just below, there is an elder seated with a compass drafting tool trying to measure distance on a map. For a time, the Dutch were the masters of the world. Able to economize and judge time and distances with accuracy, they could orchestrate a vast logistics of international trade. Their shipping ports bristled with mastheads and tangled with rigging.

In a niche of shadows, a Dutch still life of a painted bouquet is interlacing spacetimes by depicting blossoms in the same vase that normally exist at opposite quadrants of the globe and during different seasons of the year. The world of the painting collapses the world.

Some of these still-life masterpieces hang in the room with the cognoscenti, in a painting that is not about accuracy but the desire for accuracy, for acquisition. The desire to have the best under heaven all in one room. The mechanism of the world is that it teaches us to desire it. It is through the world that we are programmed to want it. The more world there is, the more it is missing, a slice of cantaloupe.

In a tiny rented studio on Rue Oberkampf, my shoulder bangs some of the frames off the wall. They fall across my back. It is almost painful to submit to the pleasure.

