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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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What It Is

Jean-Siméon Chardin

Around the middle of the 18th century, the observation of shadows became something of an obsession among a group of Parisian writers, scientists, and artists. 'Shadow-watchers' (who never, it seems fair to assume, would have considered their enquiry simply one concerning a lack of light) frequently offered guidance to painters about the best way to represent these dim, loaded areas. Experiments, lectures, and articles dealt with such pressing shadow issues as their varying degrees of intensity, the phenomena of their light and colour, and their relationship to distance. None, however, seemed to address a fundamental, if obvious, component of the shadow - that its often banal gloom can somehow assist in distilling the sublime from the commonplace.

We don't know if Jean-Siméon Chardin was interested in the more scientific explanations of shadows, but it is obvious from his paintings that they preoccupied him. He certainly had good reason for sympathising with their more melancholy symbolism - his first wife died young, his two daughters died in infancy, and his son, a failed painter, committed suicide in a Venetian canal.

The subject matter of Chardin's paintings - food; women involved in their domestic duties or absorbed in letter-writing; children; dead birds and fish; live cats; games; bubbles; music; and shadows - can be understood immediately, but to assume their meaning to be equally straightforward is futile. If you look long enough, it will dawn on you that these images offer ambiguous solace in an abrasive world, not explanation. Although they allude to essentially untroubled, middle-class environments, something mysterious seems to inform them - wild strawberries, for example, are invested with an almost holy significance, while a shuttlecock is rendered with the reverence of a silver goblet.

Chardin's paintings might appear to be exceptions to the supposedly frivolous Rococo ideal, but in many ways they embody it. Despite their hushed and self-absorbed atmosphere, his pictures share the puzzling sense of celebration (what are they really celebrating?) and ambivalent air you find in those of his contemporary, Antoine Watteau; a painter who he admired (a small Watteau sketch hung in his home). Chardin's work may exude the humility you associate with humble domestic and still-life scenes, but in their own subtle way, his subjects are as theatrical and elusive as cryptic Rococo representations of masked parties in inscrutable, flower-strewn forests.

Chardin positioned his still-lives in the middle of the picture plane, pushed up close to the edge of the table, a device which separates them from the viewer as surely as a stage separates an audience from the players. Employing the genre's convention of hinting at the disarray which lurks at the heart of order, usually one or two elements - a knife, a bunch of grapes, a stick of bread - are so precariously positioned they look as if they might be about to tumble into the unassailable void that lurks before them. He did with painting what theatre does so well: describing reality using the tools of unreality. Chardin drenched the focus of the picture - which he stripped of extraneous details - with soft, artificial light so that, however nondescript the subject, the audience must know immediately it is meant to be the focus of their attention.

The simplest of things can be inexplicable. Once, when I was camping, a friend, who was a little drunk, stared into the campfire and muttered (as you do in the wilderness when you think no-one is listening). 'I know everything about fire except what it is'. When I visited the touring Chardin retrospective, which marks the tricentenary of the artist's birth, I remembered my friend's words - they seem particularly apt when applied to the artist's enigmatic representations of fruit. Particularly in his late paintings, Chardin imbued every monumental cherry, fleshy peach, and lazy grape with a degree of character that borders on the anthropomorphic - fruit which looks familiar but, nonetheless, is not fruit you could ever really know, let alone eat. That these summery feasts are usually surrounded by tender, sepulchral shadows, and lit by an invisible light-source, adds to their other-worldliness. But, perhaps, what most acutely emphasises their almost metaphysical qualities, is, conversely, their utter ordinariness. Fruit, however beautifully represented, is ultimately just fruit. Although Matisse observed that Chardin understood perfectly how to paint the emotion of objects, he wasn't very accurate - objects don't have feelings, only the people looking at them do. What Chardin accomplished was to render, in a delicate, layered impasto and with the utmost naturalism, an object or objects which look from a distance as if they were dissolving into air, but which, close up, reveal signs of a very physical struggle - the struggle to make the act of looking and feeling tangible.



Despite the fact that that Chardin's pictures are full of dead things (plucked fruit, dead animals, long-deceased people moving through long-demolished rooms) and precarious states (card games, spinning tops, growing up, thinking), they are strangely reassuring. Perhaps it's because the death he describes is more of a benign carnage, or at least a deep sleep, than annihilation. His ghostly disembowelled stingray (which Proust described as a 'strange monster' transformed into the 'nave of a polychrome cathedral'), languid, murdered hares, and birds plucked so cruelly from the sky for someone's pot, appear to have stumbled into death in the middle of a dream. In some of the paintings, dead animals are curled together on the kitchen table, and they look comfortable. If the shadows behind them recede into infinity, at least infinity is somewhere cool, dark, and quiet.

An object in a still-life is always more than a constituent part of the painting's sum. Many of Chardin's pictures suggest that behind each image is someone waiting to bring these inanimate, patient objects to life. Jugs can be found in at least 30 of his pictures, and you can't look at them without thinking about the people who are eventually meant to pick them up. This ever-present domestic suspense creates an atmosphere of permanent, thwarted anticipation. A chain of association is set up - who placed this fruit here? What disturbance broke the grapes from this bunch? Who's going to cook the hare? Often something or someone is isolated from the focus of activity - a grape has rolled away from the bunch; an empty cup has tumbled away from the detritus of an abandoned meal; a flower has fallen from its vase; a child wandered away from its mother - but it's an isolation which seems to be more of a restful, self-imposed exile than a banishment. Being alone isn't so bad, they seem to say. And for some reason, you believe them.

Chardin was the son and brother of billiard-table makers. Perhaps this instilled in him an understanding of how serious games can be, that the repetition and self-absorption they demand inevitably lead to an understanding of how reality can be made more bearable if we allow ourselves greater time for reflection and play. He only began painting figures in his mid-30s, and the subjects he chose echo the contemplative quality of his still-lives: a young man gravely blows bubbles; a girl pauses in the middle of a game of badminton; a child builds a house of cards or observes a spinning top; a day-dreaming mother feeds her infant. Repetition, which appears as a kind of renewal, recurs in his pictures, not only as a continuation of traditional genres, but as a reflection of imitative and repetitive practices within society.

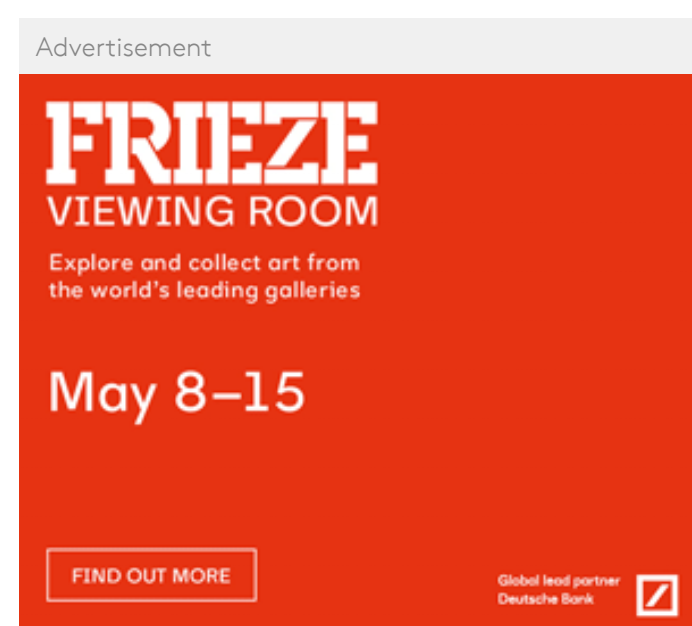
Our attention span is now assumed to be a restless, almost unmanageable thing. That the seemingly simple act of looking is at once complex and precarious was fully understood in 18th-century society. Chardin's paintings stress, without the least hint of didacticism, that perception isn't something you can hurry along. Although the world might appear to be in a constant state of flux, they make it clear that it is sometimes necessary to pause. It's hard to believe that Chardin's world stops at the edge of the painting. I like to think that somehow, it keeps going.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

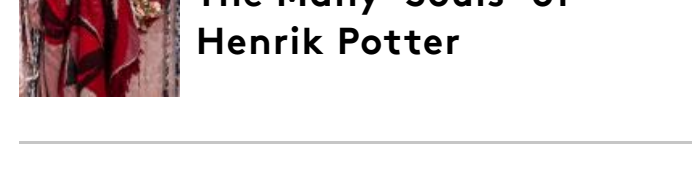
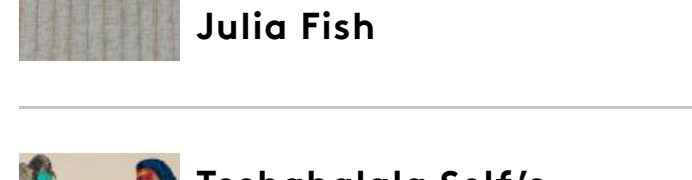
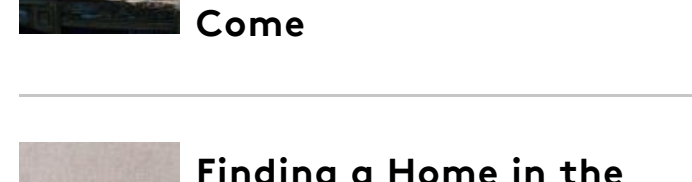
Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze's* first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

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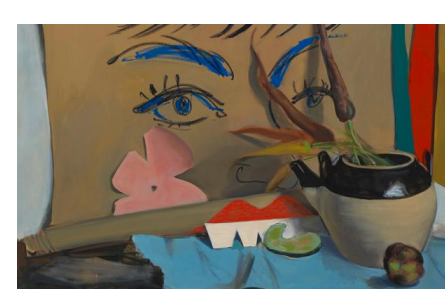
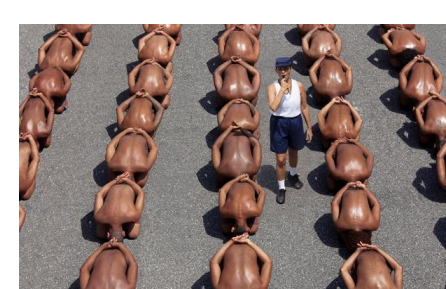


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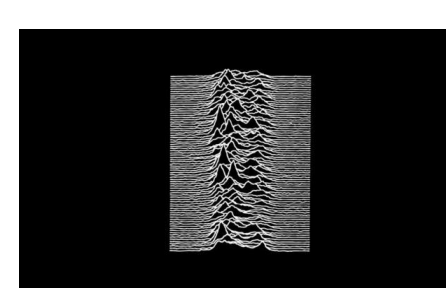
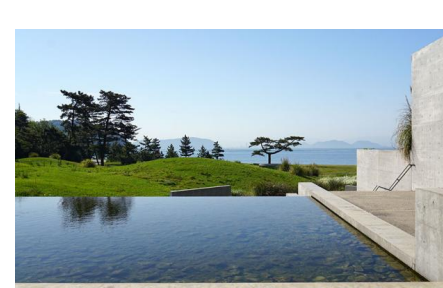
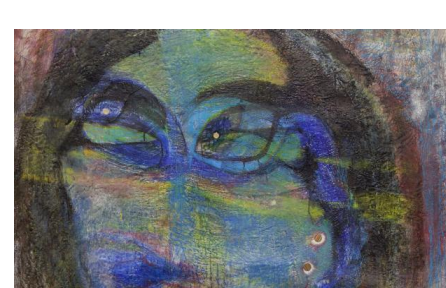
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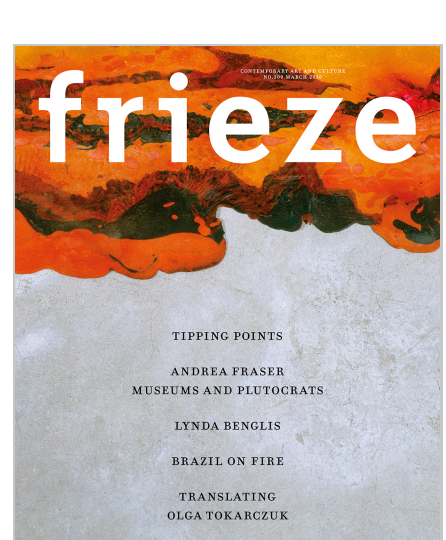


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