

## DOMOBAAL

### An Agent of the Letter

Dear Roxy,

I have been thinking about your new work since we last met. I am writing, and thinking about writing, and in starting to write - always an uncertain beginning - it seems that a title is a useful thing. I have been thinking about titles, yours - that is, those of your paintings - and mine, that is, what I might call what I am writing. A title, then, is what is given to a composition - essay or work of art. I have been imagining what I would write for several weeks now, and I am surprised to find that what I am writing has turned into a letter. As I thought about your work, and what I might write about it, I thought each word carefully, imagining it as coming out perfectly formed, complete and precise and lovely - each a mot juste, correct and fair. I imagined each word as followed by another, equally exact, then another, joining together into a sentence, a paragraph, a page. I would be happy at the end of it, and so would you, for there would be a careful writing that tells another reader something about your work, which he or she may be encountering for the first time. And then there would be more happiness at the comfort of these elucidating words. However, comfort - and the adequate provision of comforting strangers - does not seem possible in my thoughtful encounter - a re-encounter through thought - with your work.

I have the eight jpgs you so kindly sent me in a folder on my desktop; the folder is called 'Roxy'. While they are neatly tucked in there, I cannot see them as they are in QuickTime. I know what they are called, and as I have seen them in your studio - and these are the images I requested - I should be able to imagine them, to re-construct from memory. The words, their titles, should allow me to form an image. If I were to open the jpg, I would see how close my recollection has brought me through a word to the image. I suppose that I have some knowledge already, and that I am merely testing that knowledge, my memory of a recent perception, in seeing the work and listening to what you had to say about it. It should be a simple matter, a click on a document, not cause for hesitation, or for an exaggerated speculation. If I were to open 'Two Heads', for example, what would I see?

Until I do so, I think I might see two heads. The work's title leads me to believe something about it; it establishes a reading before seeing the painting. It is reassuring, for as I look at the painting, it is far from comforting. I am discomforted, in fact, uneasy and unsettled. In 'Two Heads' there is a certain formlessness, a refusal to hold shape, and clicking down the documents, I find that also in 'Angelismus', 'Bluebird', 'Puck', 'Puppy', 'Tongue' - in works whose titles indicate that there is a subject, a form in which I might precisely locate meaning, interpretation, and a point of view. In short, Roxy, these are elusive, slippery, floating paintings that pretend to lend themselves to language, to an accurate framing in words, as words, but evade and resist a coherent capture. I am not excusing myself, seeking to find a justification for my failure. Rather, this leads me to think something else about them: that in thinking or writing about them, the words I might use come from another place, other than a conscious location, and that place is at work, in the work, and also in the work as their viewer (receiver?) I may have to do with them.

In writing, I am supposed to be articulate about your paintings (that

## DOMOBAAL

is why you invited me to write about them, of course). While I want to do my work, there is something in the work - I know a lack of distinction in whose work, what work, is creeping in - that refuses a nice exegesis, and rather, remains inaccessible, while interrupting nonetheless in expressions that seem more readily assimilated. This painting (click) shows a thing like a puppy, for instance, while this one is a bit like a tongue, and yet clearly neither is puppy or tongue - or two heads, better than one. I suppose one might say this of any painting - representation/mimesis - but these are particularly like foreign bodies, internalised yet estranged, as tropes of speech that elaborate the laws of language while playing with words, diverting them from normal or literal use. A trope comes from tropos: turning away from what is known of a word and how to use it, turning it - like a painting - into something else. It is a rhetorical figure, enfolding metonymy, metaphor, and synecdoche: association, comparison, parts substituted for a whole...

Forgive me if I am departing from clarity, like a figure of speech, like a painting ('Cross my heart': three fingers, a rabbit's ears, a ring, finger nails, eyes, and none of the listed and something like all of them). It is an elocution that turns away from the literal, the straightforward, the interpretable. Roman Jakobson defines metaphor and metonymy as the two axes of language: paradigm and syntagma, substitution and linkage. One element may take the place of another, and one element may join with another, and Sigmund Freud calls these the processes of condensation and displacement in his theory of dreams. The theory of dreams and the theory of linguistics transform through each other into a theory of the unconscious. We can read this in the work of Jacques Lacan, hearing it in his famous dictum that the unconscious is structured like a language; indeed, that to be structured and to be like a language is the same thing. In language, in structure, there is always a missing element, and meaning will always flow. There is always something that cannot be named in the system, a formulation of the impossible in the unconscious structured like a language. Meaning is suspended in the face of two heads, or two black eyes (or dots), some flower petals (or petal-like forms), a blue wash, a green stain, and a heavy black mask ('Io Solo'). In thinking - and in writing - about your work, I am alone, io solo, in the limits of representation, and I remember that the paradigmatic relation holds in absentia, as the syntagmatic holds in praesentia. I wonder if this letter is metonymic, denoting your work to which it rarely literally refers, but with which it is joined, so closely that without your work, this letter could not exist. In that case, your works might be said to provoke unconscious formations, operating out of my control, my choice of words, choosing, in fact, my words for me.

I am still thinking of titles. My letter is to be an essay in a catalogue about your work, and if it must have a title, then I will call it this: 'An Agent of the Letter'.

Cordially, as ever,

Sharon

Sharon Kivland, June 2006