

Placed Into Abyss

When two mirrors face each other the limited physical space between them is extended to an infinity of optical space. Any image containing a smaller copy of itself gives way to an endless vortex of recursive self-reflection, since each copy must incorporate its subsequent copy, in perpetuity. This phenomenon is sometimes called *mise en abyme*, which translates from the French as 'placed into abyss'. A term used to refer to a film-within-a-film or play-within-a-play, *mise en abyme* can also suggest a narrative framing device in literature, and, in visual art, the formal technique of a self-similar image inside an image.

In Anna Kristensen's subtly disorienting paintings of Australian ikebana arrangements there is a dynamic network of re-presentations, self-replications and pictures-within-pictures. Taking images from a forgotten 1967 book called *The Beauty of Australia's Wildflowers: Creative Ideas for Japanese Flower Arrangements*, Kristensen has reproduced their content in acrylic and oil, with remarkable precision. Following predetermined imagery so as to remove aspects of decision and intention from the creative process, she then added prominent margins – adaptations from imagery found in various paintings, postcards and Persian rugs. Each image thus mirrors several preceding ones, while with their repeated formulaic compositions the paintings also reflect each other. And as we know, a reflection reflecting a reflection reflecting back, amounts to an abyss (literally 'without bottom').

Any text as widely read as Clement Greenberg's *Modernist Painting* (1960), is bound to have been widely misread. What is often overlooked is Greenberg's acknowledgement that the flatness towards which Modernist painting is said to orient itself is never an absolute flatness: while the heightened sensitivity of the picture plane since the mid 19th century may no longer permit sculptural illusion (*trompe l'oeil*), the first mark a painter makes on a canvas always destroys its utter and literal two dimensionality and begins the process of carving a kind of optical depth (this is no less true for abstract painting).

Greenberg's argument was simply that after Modernism we are made aware of a painting's flatness before we are made aware of what the flatness contains; that in contrast to paintings by Old Masters, we now look *at* rather than *into* the picture. But Kristensen's paintings make clear that no such clear-cut distinction can exist. Seeing a picture has always entailed simultaneously looking *at* and *into*, and we've never seen the painting's content without seeing the painting. Even the most sophisticated surface-eradicating ('sculptural') painting before Modernism was appreciated by that (pseudo) eradication. *Trompe l'oeil* was never a total deceit of the eye; the most important moment in experiencing those illusory images was the revelation of the artifice, the uncovering of the trick, wherein lay the indication of the artist's skill.

Knowledge of the surface has thus always been part of the act of looking at and into the picture, and good painting, both before and after Modernism, has always been – optically speaking – at once superficial and deep. Painting may no longer strive to be a window onto more three-dimensional space, but it can't be characterised as a simple flattening and pushing forward of the plane either. The works in Kristensen's *Mise en abyme* exhibition are testament to the fact that the painted image doesn't exist on flat ground. Rather than giving the illusion of an absolute space that externally precedes them, these paintings autonomously construct multiple spatialities

that are layered up and woven through each other. The use of seamless studio backdrops in the original 1960s photographs had already stripped the images of spatial coordinates, and the objects in the painted reproductions appear suspended and dislocated against the saturated backgrounds of improbably luscious hues – until we see the subtle shadows cast around them, which simultaneously indicate some sense of specified position in physical space.

A similar movement between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality is involved in making, and seeing, ikebana. A Zen art of ‘flower arrangement’, it is equally about the arrangement of the negative space around and between the flowers. Herein lies the Japanese aesthetic ideal of *ma* (間), suggesting a gap, opening, delay or silence that is framed by some supporting structure. It can be understood as a demarcated in-betweenness in space or time. A room, being the space formed inside walls, is *ma*; a pause in music, as the absence delineated between audible notes, is also *ma*. The ideogram for *ma* 𠄎 has the character for ‘gate’ (門) framing the character for ‘sun’ (日) – in this sense it refers to an aperture through which light can appear. Whether the enveloping gate is formed by tangible objects, sounds or actions, its opening is the interval that allows the experience of *ma*, whereby the intangibility of light reveals itself from the framed abyss.

The ikebana is traditionally displayed in the *tokonoma* (from *toko* for ‘floor’ or ‘bed’, and the aforementioned *ma* 𠄎), a built-in recessed space in a Japanese room, in which items for artistic appreciation are displayed. Since stepping into the *tokonoma* is strictly forbidden, it possesses, like a painting, depth that cannot be penetrated. This amounts to a flattening of the image – seen from a single vantage point, the third dimension is removed and the form of the ikebana is rendered two-dimensional. Like a reflection in a mirror, it’s an image that can be grasped with the eyes but not the hands.

Superimposed onto (into) the same pictorial plane, the frames on (in) Kristensen’s pictures are co-dependant with what they enclose. The word *frame* comes from the Old Norse *frá* for ‘going forward’, ‘promoting’ or ‘advancing’. Paradoxically, this is the same etymological root for the archaic *fro* for ‘away’, ‘back’ or ‘backward’, which survives in the phrase ‘to and fro’. And the spaces in these pictures suggest a tension between pushing forward and pulling back. No longer externally supporting the image, the frame is incorporated into the field with a sort of *to and fro* movement between the overt flatness of the borders and backgrounds, and the ambiguous depth of the incongruous spaces within (behind/in front of) them. The images come out of the same distance into which they withdraw, as the abyss of the recursive picture draws us in while blocking us from getting beyond it.

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(Essay for *Mise en Abyme*, Kalimanrawlins 18 November – 17 December 2011)