

Shattered Perspective: The Give and Take of Ideas

by Emily O'Connor

What does it mean to “give more than you take” when you view art? Can seeing be more than merely consuming with your eyes? How can art challenge you to give even as you take in its color, shape, form, and ideas? These are some of the questions that are raised as I reflect on my experience at the Institute of Contemporary Art. In his work “Ways of Seeing”, John Berger argues for a way of seeing that comes before words. However, having read his piece before going to the ICA, his words acted as a kind of unavoidable filter in viewing the exhibitions. My overall experience at the ICA was one of questioning what I was seeing. The provocative art pieces in the various exhibitions combined with the backdrop of Berger’s work on the nature of seeing resulted in an evening of taking in images as well as processing and reflecting out ideas.

Upon entering the first gallery at the Institute of Contemporary Art, which is titled “Expanding the Field of Painting”, I was overwhelmed with a sense of feeling disoriented. With plain white walls and a bare concrete floor, the space itself was minimalist and not overly stimulating. However, the combination of the stark white walls and the bright and dynamic art pieces initially created an intimidating atmosphere. It was hard to know where to look and where to physically start seeing the art as well as where to internally start seeing the art. As I moved around the room, I gained more comfort as a viewer and was able to start taking in the pieces.

The curation of the ICA is simple but intentional. Unlike other styles of art museums, the ICA focuses the room’s attention on the individual art pieces rather than on the room as a whole or on the exhibit as a whole. The rooms remain undecorated besides the art on display. This type of curation challenges you to see each piece individually but also to explore how it relates in its individuality with the surrounding art and the context of the themes of the other pieces in the exhibit. Modern and contemporary art can often be more challenging to experience than traditional styles of art because it is often more dynamic and unorthodox in its style of communication. It can be a difficult balance to strike in being provocative but still remaining accessible. For me, the ICA and its current exhibits walked the tension of this balance quite well. The collections were subversive enough to be challenging but natural enough to be thought-provoking.

Jim Hodges’ collection entitled “Give More Than You Take” was an especially stirring exhibit. His pieces ranged from drawings to paintings, from glass work to sewing work and addressed an array of different topics and themes. Although both are common everyday items, the soft flowing scarves and the jagged broken mirrors both seemed to reach for something more than merely everyday existence. Many of the materials and images that Hodges used were natural and familiar. Plastic flowers, common fabrics, mirrors, shopping bags, and tape were used and seen throughout the exhibit. These ordinary materials made up many of the familiar images of the sky, flowers, spider webs, the human skull, and trees that composed the pieces. It was Hodges’ creative skill and insight that allowed him to take common images and familiar materials and combine, arrange, and manipulate them in such a way as to provide the viewer with an entirely new and different perception of these sights.

The use of mirrors especially engaged this idea of perspective and perception. Throughout the exhibit there were various broken and colored mirrors of varying sizes. Upon looking at a mirror which is divided into smaller pieces, there is an association occurs with the ideas of being broken and damaged. However, as Hodges reorients an everyday item with a natural association, he challenges your perception because each mirror is not a self-contained piece of art. Each mirror interacts with the surrounding art by reflecting its own separate image back in a fragmented reproduction. It provides the viewers a platform to engage a new perspective of the art. In this way Hodges' pieces intersect with Berger's ideas in that the viewer is given a new way of seeing; a way of seeing that challenges original perspectives and instinctual word associations.

Furthermore, the broken mirrors in "Give More Than You Take" act as a lens for seeing as well as questioning. Mirrors literally give perspective as it itself is an object of light and reflection. Broken mirrors provide an opportunity to re-see a physical thing in a new construction. However, it also goes beyond the physical intake of a sight. The broken mirrors act as a catalyst to see and perceive ideas in a new way. When looking at the mirrors, I was provoked to ask, "Is it shattered or is it organized? It is chaotic or put together? Is it cracked or whole? Divided or unified?"

We, as Berger discusses, are taught to associate certain ideas and words with certain images, such is the nature of processing and seeing. However, what happens when the imagery challenges your natural association such as in the case of Hodges' shattered mirrors? Perhaps these questions and these reevaluations of associations and perceptions are a way of giving that Hodges references in the title of the gallery. As you take in the sight of his works, you are challenged to engage new way of seeing and in turn give or release your new perspective, questions, and ideas.