

Natalka Husar (Canadian/Canadienne, b. USA/née aux États-Unis en 1951)

Deviled Eggs/Les œufs à la diable, 2006

Oil on rag board/Huile sur carton pur chiffon
81 x 102 cm
Purchased with funds from the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program/Achat grâce au Programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des arts du Canada, 2011
© Natalka Husar

Commissar's Daughter/La fille du commissaire, 2007

Oil on rag board/Huile sur carton pur chiffon
81 x 102 cm
Gift of the artist/Don de l'artiste, 2011
© Natalka Husar

Looking at Art/Regarder l'art, 2009

Oil on rag board/Huile sur carton pur chiffon
81 x 102 cm
Purchase/Achat Donald Murray Shepherd Trust, 2011
© Natalka Husar

Looking at *Looking at Art*

Sally McKay

In Natalka Husar's painting *Looking at Art*, people sit at a table set for a feast. A nurse and a flight attendant serve from empty trays. Glassware glitters in a harsh, bright light. The effect is sharp and pointed, eerie, anxious, and intimate.

Husar grew up in New Jersey, the child of Ukrainian immigrants. Her work is often about identities shifting in time and place. *Looking at Art* is the rightmost panel of a triptych. All three images depict people engaged in social interaction. These characters belong to a semi-fictional universe, many of them reappearing throughout Husar's oeuvre. But for all their narrative qualities, the paintings can't be parsed like picture books; there is no fixed order of events, no promise of resolution.

Looking at Art communicates powerfully, but it is more destabilizing than affirming. Its expressive qualities are multifaceted. What perceptual dynamics facilitate emotion when artworks and audiences converge in non-linguistic conversation?

The concept of mimesis as a copy goes back as far as Plato, but cognitive scientist Merlin Donald has a different take. For Donald, mimesis is the physiological capacity for self-expression. He explains, "A mimetic act is basically a motor performance that reflects the perceived event structure of the world, and its motoric aspect makes its content a public, that is, a potentially cultural, expression." In recognizing and repeating body language, humans form understandings without words. While imitation facilitates recognition, mimetic acts are not duplications of pre-existing realities, but unique, temporal utterances. People are social animals, and culture is not a layer smeared on top of physiology, like icing on a cake, but an integral dimension of human evolution.

Mimetic performance emerges in the body language Husar gives her characters and through her own gestures in the application of paint. The colour scheme of the triptych is consistent: acidic blues and whites contrasting against large areas of flat black. If Caravaggio's light is warm and luminous, Husar's light is brittle and stark. The surfaces are thick and gritty. If Manet's paint goes on like butter, Husar's paint goes on like broken

glass, sand, and glue. Even the paint itself—old tubes of lead-based oils scrounged by the artist—is physically dangerous and historically loaded.

The triptych begins and ends with cutlery. On the left, an orderly row of dinner knives welcomes viewers to a buffet. Shiny forks and spoons angle off the picture plane to the right. These tools are designed to facilitate nourishment, but only two people are eating, and both are using their hands.

Deviled Eggs

A young woman may have crashed this party. Her look is very punk. She pilfers the buffet, eating breaded shrimp. A middle-aged woman dances with abandon while others clap and shimmy around her. A demure flight attendant observes while a nervous nurse clutches at the dancing woman's arm. The nurse, the woman dancing, and the stewardess are all self-portraits. Husar slides into the story. The mood is one of slightly desperate celebration.

Commissar's Daughter

This young woman is stolid, hefty hands folded in her lap. She plays other roles in other paintings. Here she slumps a little, dressed in taffeta and shiny blue silk. Her gaze is direct and bemused, like someone who can handle herself in most situations.

Looking at Art

The artist/nurse and artist/flight attendant return as waiters, serving people at a table full of gorgeous painter-bling. Speaking of mimesis, nothing bedazzles the eye-brain like renderings of transparent, shiny objects. The first impression is one of sumptuous bounty, like a Dutch still life. And yet, like a Dutch still life, this sense of plenty is undermined from within: the glassware glimmers, but the serving trays are empty.

Husar knits her narratives tightly into the fraught physicality of the paint. From a distance the image depicts smooth, reflective objects, but up close one can see thicknesses, bumps, and ridges denoting false starts, erasures, provisional marks, happy accidents, reworkings, and difficult decisions. The painting's surface looks like a battlefield and its seductive illusions are hard won.



TOP TO BOTTOM/DE HAUT EN BAS

Natalka Husar

Deviled Eggs/Les œufs à la diable, 2006

Commissar's Daughter/La fille du commissaire, 2007

Looking at Art/Regarder l'art, 2009



Looking at Art (detail/
Regarder l'art (detail), 2009

It's not a tidy narrative. The fluid identity of the artist slides between various subjective stand-points, and the title, *Looking at Art*, requests a self-reflexive interaction. Much Western art has been about embodied acts of looking, but surprisingly few artists have explicitly addressed it in their subject matter. Two examples spring to mind. Thomas Struth's series, *Museum Photographs* (late 1980s and early 1990s), depicts people in art museums, making an institutional critique. Mark Tansey's *The Innocent Eye Test* (1981) is a humorous painting of a bull, ironically conveying a postmodern deprecation for representational art. While Struth and Tansey take the institutional art world as given, there are no artworks illustrated in *Looking at Art*. There is no arch detachment either, but a murkier commitment; the artist is implicated and her serving trays are empty. And yet, both the nurse and stewardess are behaving as if they do have something to offer. The thug seems curious, but the blond woman reels back in repulsion. Maybe there is something gruesome on the plate that only she can see, or maybe she is offended by the artist's/nurse's empty offer. Whether the nurse thinks she is serving art, food, or medicine, this woman doesn't find it palatable.

The flight attendant's serving tray reads differently. It is empty, yes, but its bowl is very deep. From a distance it looks like a smooth, slightly tarnished surface; up close it looks like a tiny, mystic cosmos, a Turner-esque swirling, misty, endless depth of space. A rabbit-hole escape or a spiritual promise? This character also moves her head. The effect is uncanny, a temporal shift in an otherwise

frozen moment. I turn my head to scan the painting, she turns her head to scan within the painting.

It's a flight attendant's gesture; glancing to check that seatbelts are safely fastened, caring for people with professional aplomb. Maybe the artist's offerings aren't so impoverished after all.

One character makes eye contact with the viewer. She is middle-aged and bedecked with trashy jewellery. Like the woman in *Commissar's Daughter*, she looks lumpy, lovely in her own way, and self-contained. Like the woman in *Deviled Eggs*, she is eating, not waiting to be served. Cutlery is nice, but not required. I'm seeing something of the hard-won resilience of people familiar with hardship.

Mysterious yellow dots effervesce above the nurse's head. Has something ineffable been released? Are we witnessing a sublimation? Or are these purely formal entities, placed to entice and please the eye?

Perhaps an embodied engagement with mimesis facilitates changes of state that can't be fixed or measured. In *Looking at Art* there is no way to disentangle imagery from paint, nor culture from experience. The definition of *expression* in the Collins English Dictionary includes the following entries: "a manifestation of an emotion, feeling, etc., without words" and "the act or process of forcing or squeezing out a liquid."² Husar is a master of both.

¹ Merlin Donald, "Imitation and Mimesis," *Perspectives on Imitation, From Neuroscience to Social Science*, vol. 2, ed. Susan Hurley and Nick Chater (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 28.

² *Collins English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "expression."