



Eyes Wide Shut: Artist, Bradley Wood's Phantasmagoric Fictions

By Meraj Dhir

“What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.”

– Henri Matisse, *Notes of a Painter* (1908)



Artist, Bradley Wood

Henri Matisse, guardian of the great French tradition, painted nudes and domestic interiors. In 1908 he called for an art of calm and serenity, one that could effect tranquility through formal balance. Is it not ironic his appeal came just eight years into the new century? Matisse's remarks go against the grain of Modernity theorists Georg Simmel and Walter

Benjamin, especially their analyses of how art functions for the hyperstimulated, urbanized subject of the modern metropolis.

For Simmel, Benjamin, and the contemporary explicators of their ideas (such as Tom Gunning and Jonathan Crary), the cinema is the apparatus that meets the requisite needs of the urban dweller. It's a medium that at turns shocks and jolts through new technologies of transport and vision. Cinema uses montage, juxtaposition and the visceral impact of spectacular imagery. Gunning famously characterizes the appeals of early cinema as a "cinema of attractions". Think of the Lumière Brothers' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895), where an onrushing train visually overwhelms the screen. Or even Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), with its direct address and assault of the viewer by gunshot. Films like this served to acclimatize the modern spectator to the heightened sensations experienced in the city. But Matisse uses painting to offer a model of art and spectatorship at odds with the supposed frenzy of early cinema. And while he upholds the notion of the "mental worker" and "businessman" as a subject who is perceptually and perpetually exhausted, art for Matisse functions as a palliative balm for weary and unsettled eyes and minds.

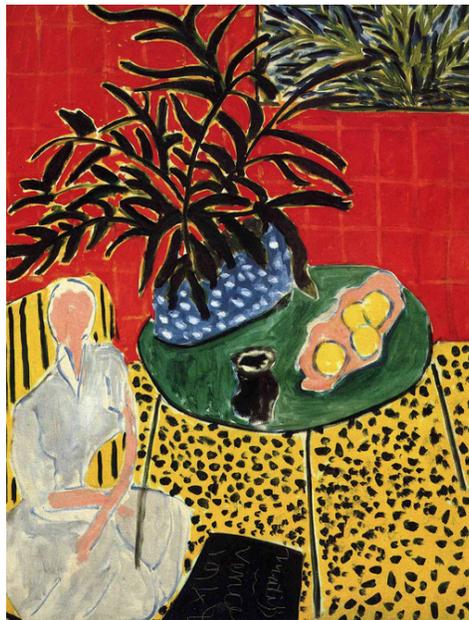
Why am I invoking Matisse, Benjamin and Simmel in this consideration of the paintings of Bradley Wood? The landmark show at Angell Gallery entitled "*Armchair Tableaux*", puts Wood's works into sharp perspective. First there is the issue of style and the history of forms. Over a hundred years separates Wood from Matisse's *Notes of a Painter*. A similarity between Wood's obsessions and the works of the Fauves and so-called Intimists – such as Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard – has been pointed out by others. Wood himself acknowledges a certain affinity, if not any direct influence. Moreover, Wood shares certain themes of domesticity, of the interior as a space of leisure, reflection and appetitive desires. Formally, Wood's paintings display a strong interest in "the decorative" and visual ornamentation as compositional and organizing principles. But what does it mean to say Wood's work is "like" these other painters? What historical dislocations do we affirm by drawing a point of influence from this or that painter and Wood? After all, his work is created and received in a very different historical and art-world milieu?

The arts, Michael Baxandall famously observes are "positional games". In a striking analogy to the game of billiards, Baxandall suggests that the notion of "influence," is misleading. In his book *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (1985) Baxandall urges that thinking that X artwork influenced Y is impoverishing. Instead he argues that the causal direction is in fact reversed, and that Y acts on X in particularly active ways by "drawing on" "differentiating oneself from" "assimilating" "appropriating" "remodeling" "recasting" "travestying" "parodying" or any number of more diversified and richly descriptive

ways than the passive “X” influenced “Y” formulation suggests. But also, by thinking of Y as a billiard ball, an agent with a particular motility, acting on X, another billiard ball, the entire relation and angulation of the balls to one another on the field of play is changed.



Edouard Vuillard, The End of Breakfast at Madame Vuillard, 1895, oil on board, 49.5 x 68.9 cm



Henri Matisse, The Black Fern, 1948, oil on canvas, 117 x 89.9 cm

Instead of citing influences on Wood, let's see what the artist draws from and absorbs, how he recasts and revivifies techniques or tropes found in Matisse and the work of the Intimist painters (and I will argue many other sources). How is the theme of the domestic interior, both homosocial and feminine, different today than it was a hundred years ago? And more importantly, to what new forms of stress, stimulation and mental derangement are these works addressed? I'm not arguing for an easy-to-follow chain of causality to explain Wood's

works, nor any sort of post-modern break. But like the thick viscosity of Wood's oil paintings, the situation is much stickier and opaque.

Take the aptly titled canvas, *Flowers for Soutine* (2013), which cites the name of the expressionist painter Chaim Soutine, whose canvases equated the splaying of animal flesh with a thick, grotesquely applied paint. But if the painting pays homage to the Russian master, this influence is relegated to the furthestmost plane, displaced to the left where crimson and carmine paint describe a dark and mysterious antechamber. What strikes me as more salient than the issue of influence is the construction of space. Here we find a common spatial motif in Wood's art: the use of the half-ellipsis or oval to create a room that, along with the ambitious size of his canvases, engulfs the viewer. Note also the exaggeration of space, the warping of horizontal lines and the looming foreground bust of the woman at right. There is something cinematic about this arrangement akin to the tight depth compositions found in the films of Hitchcock and William Wyler, replete with wide-angle lens distortion. Yet Wood's style is far from photorealistic.

Wood's mise-en-scène appropriates a particular compositional trope and assimilates it to the exigencies of genre painting. In addition to the broad application of paint, and the Cézannesque simplification of forms – gaze at any part for too long and it begins to wobble and disaggregate – note the foreground hands merging with the angular base of the flowerpot. This fusion and merging of tensile flesh and obdurate matter is a semantically rich structuring device in Wood's work. Moreover, the aggressive foreground becomes one of the means through which the work activates the space on our side of the picture plane.



Bradley Wood, *Flowers for Soutine* (2013), oil on canvas, 106.7 x 76.2 cm



Alfred Hitchcock, *The Paradine Case*, 1947

Let's turn to an even earlier work to further plumb Wood's obsessions and themes. *Waiting* (2012) is one my favorite of Wood's paintings. The apparent simplicity of a woman sitting on the corner of a couch in some ill-defined domestic or office space (at a doctor's?) seems banal, if not boring. But gaze longer and note the subtle inflections of her pose, her askance gaze, her rigid posture, her arms folded tensely in her lap (a detail mirroring precisely the folded hands in Matisse's *The Black Fern* above). Why is this figure displaced to the absolute edge of the sofa? Note the subtly abbreviated mouth: plum red and pursed. All of these are social cues of anxiety or even distress. I know of few painters who activate the off-screen space of the frame, to borrow a term from cinema, as well as Wood. The not-so-subtly cropped nude above her is less interesting than the image to its right — is that a Franz Kline on the wall or a reflection of the fictional space towards which she gazes? What are the threatening geometries impinging on her? Wood changes tones, using daubs of darker paint to ambiguate the space of her lap and the seat of the sofa as if this area were under shade. The fleshy pallor of the nude and the sitter's skin is harmonized into the wall at left, as if it too was partly composed of flesh and breathed. The three vertical daubs of green at the upper left register seem amorously facelike. There is a dual narrativization in Wood's work, one of subject matter and figures, and the other is a narrativization of paint and brushwork itself.



Bradley Wood, *Waiting*, 2012, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 88.9 cm

The exhibition at the Jamie Angell gallery bears the suggestive title *Armchair Tableaux*. I don't know whether or not Wood was aware of Matisse's quote when he named the show, or if he was simply underlining one of his favorite motifs. Either way, the congruence is salutary. The term "tableau" has multiple resonances, each significant for Wood's work. First, it names the highest aspirations of the French Academic tradition. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries genres of paintings were formalized along a progressive hierarchy. The highest rank was accorded to history and mythological paintings, followed by landscape, portraiture, still life and everyday genre scenes. The word tableau was used only for the most edifying of these and signified also the largest format and size. So the title of the exhibition signifies something of Wood's ambition as well as the importance of still life tableau in theatre. The literal tables that populate his domestic interiors and the flat, frontal staging he gives to many of his subjects reveals a truly rich constellation of meanings.

I want to discuss a painting I believe achieves the level of masterpiece in Wood's oeuvre. *Hat and Book*(2015) presents a figure seen from behind, the back of her hat a visual bridge to the viewer. It seems the figure is absorbed in some sort of illustrated book. Notice the dynamic play with symmetry and subtle asymmetries; how pattern cancels out depth. The foreground of the image is fringed with ornament. It's fascinating how Wood employs the pattern of textiles to motivate the pattern of his brushwork. The connection between the decorative and the all-over is clearly influenced by Matisse who wrote: "Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive; the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share." And so too our gaze in Wood's paintings is never allowed to rest on the face, or gesture, but circulates and radiates throughout. Our eyes are caressed by the picture's subtle visual harmonies. The lime green carpet enforces a sense of depth, its orthogonal lines oblique to the picture plane. The contrast between the far turquoise wall (a color that gains prominence in Wood's most recent work) and the dark inky black of the floor creates a subtle coloristic tension. The licked surface of the floor absorbs the viewer's gaze, its opacity providing respite from the rich visual splendor that dominates throughout.

The carpet leads to a simple fireplace above which lies a large tableau recalling nineteenth century English riding paintings (Bradley Wood's version of such a scene, at least). Follow the vertically stacked and taxidermied pheasants, each coupled with smaller portraits to the right; repetition of forms here suggests the simplicity of Donald Judd's wall pieces. These devices act as a rhythmic patterning across the surface of the canvas. And what is the figure to the right? Is this a doorway through which a woman's form is compressed or a full-length portrait? If the former, who is this woman standing there eerily? Such a hesitation occurs

again when assessing the image to the left of the picture. Is this a window, framed by Tyrian blue drapes or in fact another painting?



Bradley Wood, Hat and Book, 2015, oil on canvas, 28" x 22"

Such a categorical instability between the pictorial and the real, exterior and interior space, haunts Wood's paintings and produces a visual phantasmagoria. In fact, it is precisely this categorical instability that produces the effect of the uncanny in Wood's canvases. It is important to underline that Wood's paintings are above all spaces of imagination. Here is Wood in an interview with Lisa Takahashi:

"The people I paint tend to be fairly eccentric in some way. We moved from an artist community in Brooklyn to a town 25 miles north of NYC. It was a huge change that actually inspired me to create narratives about the neighbors I didn't even know – the wealthy widow, the peculiar old couple at the grocery store. Of course, these characters probably exist more in my mind than in real life."

What resonates especially in Wood's telling response is his avowal of voyeurism and his attraction to the eccentric. Isn't the artist describing something here that's akin to the situation of L. B. Jeffries, the fictional hero of Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Rear Window* (1954)? After breaking his leg, Jeff, a professional photographer is confined to a wheelchair. He occupies his days by looking out at the tenants of the apartments across his window. He gives them nicknames and conjures up elaborate fantasies about their lives and relationships. Part of the genius of Hitchcock's film is precisely how the physical and spatial situation of the protagonist mirrors that of the audience. The cinema viewer is also confined

to a chair. S/he looks out voyeuristically at the cinema screen, a space of pure imagination. Invoking *Rear Window* and the figure of Hitchcock points to how Wood's work is informed by the cinematic, perhaps not in any explicit sense, but more subtly and conceptually, as a generative idea. But like Hitchcock's films, Wood's canvases are also spaces of a certain aspirational desire. Sometimes, as in the work *Diablo* (2013), the artist will appropriate a more horizontally stretched lateral canvas (here linen) reminiscent of the Cinemascope format to great pictorial affect.



Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window*, 1954



Bradley Wood, *Diablo* (2013), linen, 24" x 43"

Two large paintings in the exhibition at the Angell Gallery signify important technical and conceptual breakthroughs for the artist. Note the bold, bilateral symmetry that structures *Still Water Perch* (2015), one of the signature pieces in Wood's *oeuvre*. Again we have the half ellipse of the ceiling and the seductive curve of the sidewalls with their graphic herringbone patterns. The two women, their postures at once alluring and blasé, gaze out frontally at the viewer. They aren't posed as simple objects of delectation and desire for the male gaze, but boldly *face and confront the viewer*, not unlike the nude in *Manet's Olympia* (1863). These are more than pretty pictures of pretty women poised for the viewer's delight.

The evocation of an idyllic surfer's respite is reinforced by the undulating brushwork of the sky and water. Wood contemporizes the trope of the Albertian painting-as-window looking out onto the world. The broad pattern of the floor, referred to by one onlooker as the pattern found on men's board shorts (!), suggest the influence of California pop. The surfboards themselves, while flat, are truly sculptural in form, bringing to mind John McCracken's similarly monolithic fiberglass wall sculptures. Here they are branded and instrumentalized, but nevertheless objects of formal and visual beauty. Formally, McCracken and Wood share an interest in intruding through to the viewer's space. The slightly off-kilter perspective, the push/pull of assertive flatness and simultaneous invocation of depth are attributes that playfully seduce the beholder of this work.



Bradley Wood, *Still Water Perch*, 2015, oil and acrylic, 80" x 100"



John McCracken, Red Plank, 1969, wood, fiberglass and lacquer, 96 1/8" x 22 1/4 x 3 1/8"

The title *Dad's House* (2015) alludes to the sexual politics at play in this bold, hyperbolically structured picture. The model ship, the expensive paintings, the *objets d'art* strewn throughout – including the attractive, scantily dressed women, teasing us with hints of their louche availability. These are all *dad's property*, and are guarded as such through an anthropomorphic displacement: the threatening polar bear whose sheer scale, and hostile *en face* pose, stands in for *le nom du père*. The trope of *facing* the beholder, so important in the work of Manet, is again here recast into a domestic interior. This *workpositions* and *situates* us in space with its bold, outward address and internal formal dynamics. The zebra-stripe motif, another favorite of Wood's, creates a decorative pulsation of visual energy that circulates throughout the tableau. Our gaze is dispersed throughout the picture, resting only momentarily here and there at points of pictorial interest. But there is a double displacement of the father in the sculptural bust, seemingly carved in bronze, and poised precariously at the uppermost left part of the canvas. Father gazes down like a surveillance camera at everything he possesses and protects. The peach flowers in a spiral-patterned vase at right are both charming and deranged. The long phallic necks of the taxidermied birds rhyme with the curved candelabra of the chandelier. Don't look too close at the sensuously painted thighs of the woman with the captain's hat: your gaze will be punctured by the sharp, shard-like shaft of her dress that guards its hidden apex.



Bradley Wood, Dad's house, 2015, oil on canvas, 80" x 100"

Wood has been interested in critiquing the psychosexual dynamics of male desire for some time. The congruence between the consumption of food and sexual pleasure is thematized in the phantasmagoric structure of *Wallpaper* (2011). Here the summarily painted forms of nude women hover over a bookish man at his dinner table. There is something lewd, even obscene in the way he hides his mouth with his napkin. And here we find one of Wood's more successful modest format works where he surrenders rigid patterns for a more loose and painterly brushwork that *resists synthesis* into any formal *gestalt*. In this sense *VIP Lounge* (2012) is a minor masterpiece of perceptual dispersal. The figure's crossed legs about the viewer's gaze. A "VIP" lounge is, above all, a space of *exclusion*.



Bradley Wood, Wallpaper, 2011, oil on canvas, 39" x 33"



Bradley Wood, VIP Lounge, 2012

I want to look closely at one last painting from the exhibition *Armchair Tableaux*. While less spectacular than *Still Water Perch* or *Dad's House*, this modestly sized painting contains much of what fascinates in Wood's artistry. The decorative turquoise and white carpet, the light yellow flakes on the exquisitely painted, diaphanous curtain that frames the left edge of the window are all virtuosically rendered by Wood's nimble brush. The violent scything of the portrait at left draws our attention to a space that exists beyond the frame. And what is this picture that seems both flat and three-dimensional? It looks like a grotesque portrait of Oscar Wilde's fictional Dorian Gray. These portraits are an example of what art historian Victor Stoichita calls the "self-aware image." In a book on this theme Stoichita argues that all pictures containing paintings necessarily say something about the meta-pictorial aspirations and intentions of the artist. Such "meta-pictures" abound in Wood's paintings. They often include just enough ambiguity to unsettle our preconceived notions about how the subject of the painting should make us feel.

In *Cherry Lawn*, Wood uses broadly painted green leaves at the centre of the image to visually thwart any recession at the very place one would expect the vanishing point. This flat patterning is found in Vuillard, and yet here Wood recasts the device within a higher chromatic key so to speak. The deep opacity of the black floor is aggressively thrust into the foreground of the picture, a space or void into which the viewer might well fall and disappear.



Bradley Wood, *Cherry Lawn*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48" x 59" inches

I must confess I looked at *Cherry Lawn* for some time before noticing the woman, dressed in a sheer adult onesie and matching hat. Her form is contracted and hinged into the composition. The yellow of her hat is carried over into the more muted yellow angle of the portrait frame on the far wall, completing a sort of rectilinear circuit. Look at how limbs act as structural devices – crossed knees are never just casual ways for figures to rest in Wood's pictures, but rather compositionally sophisticated devices to link space and merge elements. Look at the legs of the nude at the far back of *Cherry Lawn*; who is this pictorially marginalized woman splayed in the corner? This seems a one-upmanship on Manet's *Olympia* in terms of the figure's vulgar debasement. But observe how she is coloristically and technically linked to that space, as if her environment is in the process of absorbing and consuming her. And the theme that domestic interiors of consumption are consuming their owners, that Dad is a prisoner in his house, and that we are somehow also complicit in this act of consumption that leads ultimately to death, informs a dark undercurrent in Wood's painting. After all, isn't the human body absorbed and flattened to the same commodity form as any other inanimate object in Wood's canvases? Aren't we all finally someone else's tool, instrument or possession?

In Wood's paintings there are always multiple pictorial devices channeling and containing, but also contaminating their human subjects, mitigating the space within which they live or that the space itself embodies. These are complicated, painterly, alchemical forces. That we

sometimes fail to notice people or things in Wood's pictures is a result of how he is able to encourage a stretched duration and expanded temporality in the act of gazing. These are paintings that reward us anew each time we visit them. But unlike Matisse's avowed goal, the decorative and ornamental in Wood's work functions as much to intrigue and unsettle, as it does to delight. This is what we might call, after Hitchcock, the suspense of looking at the tableaux of Bradley Wood.