

# Love at First Sight

By Timothy Buckwalter | Feb 14, 2008 | KQED Arts

*Seeing a specific painting or work of art in person, at a certain moment, can change your life. Something in the painting and in you just click. Maybe it's a color. Maybe it's the subject matter.*

*Ask an artist and they can probably tell you the first time it happened to them. Some emotion flew off the canvas and lodged in their heart. A sense of wonder was born. A conversation began. Time goes on and other influences flow into that artist's life. His work changes, but that first emotional experience is still there.*

*Below Bay Area artists talk about that first love -- the initial painting that moved them to paint.*

**GALE ANTOKAL:** When I was an art student in New York, I was assigned to see the show New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970, curated by Henry Geldzahler at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was the first contemporary survey the Met had ever exhibited. The large galleries of 18th and 19th century paintings were emptied to be filled with the most sensational and the most important work in a particular moment of each artist's career. There were over 400 paintings, sculptures and drawings of the New York school, which included Abstract Expressionism, Color-Field Painting, Pop Art and Minimal Art. David Smith's burnished aluminum sculpture exploded on me upon entry. I was overwhelmed by this visual pageant and grateful for a moment to recover from the impact. Then, I walked into a room where there were small works on paper by Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly, a pencil rendition of Device Circle, 0 through 9 in charcoal and pastel, and a study for Painting with a Ball in conte crayon.

But it was Johns' grid series Gray Alphabets that riveted me. The hand-drawn graphite and graphite washes stunned me. The edge of each letter patch appeared as if it was peeling, and the leaden, little licks therein were all contained within a precise and delicate outline. They were like the grit and soot of the city -- like a newspaper page to a young child, before they are able to read. Incomprehensibly tabloid. In the same room were a row of Ellsworth Kelly's delicate, slightly ungainly botanic line drawings -- a tulip, a stalk of grass, a magnolia blossom, an avocado plant. A chrysanthemum with the same vertical iconic grace of Mondrian's earlier renderings... and also in reverence to Matisse.

I was stunned by the contrast of material substance in Johns's and Kelly's drawings. I think I must have sensed that graphite, charcoal, pastel, and conte crayon could be subject matter in themselves. That was the moment that I wanted to devote my life to making drawings.

*Gale Antokal is from New York and received her MFA from the California College of the Arts in 1984. She is an Associate Professor in the School of Art & Design at San Jose State University. In May 2008, she has a show of drawings at Patricia Sweetow Gallery. She is also represented by Couturier Gallery in Los Angeles.*

**LISA SOLOMON:** As an educator I hope that something I do, say, or show will make a mark on a student. I often think back to my undergraduate Figure Drawing class with John Zurier and the day he showed me David Park as a shining example of an "ah-ha" moment. A moment where my heart beat faster and all I wanted to do was pick up a brush and paint.

We were always working from a live model -- I was shy and afraid of taking risks. John had been slowly encouraging me to just try things. Play. Experiment. I started using oil sticks to make messier and bigger gestures. I started removing parts of faces and trying to use color as an emotional quotient rather than as a descriptive one.

John walked by me and said "Oh, I want to show you someone."

He went to his office and brought back a book on David Park. I was floored. The immediate sense of gesture butted up against a built up surface. The paintings were both fast and slow, representational and abstract. The colors were pure and mixed to perfection. The shapes simple. The brushstrokes divine. I could almost taste the paint. Dots became eyes, swoops became ears, stripes melted into one another on shirts.

That weekend I went out and found an out of print book of Park's work. It was the first art book I bought for myself. I still own it. I sought his work out in museums. The first time I saw a Park piece in person I was awed by the depth of paint, the relationship between figure and ground, the subtle mastery of composition and scale. His figures always fit, just so, into their spaces. The colors were more vibrant, and the brushstrokes more pronounced in person. I felt as though Park was in each of his works. That he meant them, felt them, ate and slept them.

I tried to paint like David Park all semester. Of course I failed miserably. But I learned a lot. I learned how to push and pull the paint around. How to mean my brushstrokes. How to manipulate and mix paint on the canvas during the act of painting. My work looks nothing like Park's now; I can't imagine even using the figure as imagery in my work. But I still admire the work greatly. And I always smile when I have the occasion to show a student the work of David Park.

*Lisa Solomon recently exhibited at SqFt Gallery in Nashville.*

**JOHN ZURIER:** My parents were collectors and I grew up with art in our house. So I was exposed to paintings at an early age and lived with them daily. Most of the paintings were modern and contemporary -- really marvelous things -- and I knew right away that abstract art was intimately connected to the real world.

As a small child I was in love with a painting of a dancing girl by the German Expressionist Ludwig Kirchner. But the one I loved most was a large watercolor of a standing woman holding something in her hands by Oskar Kokoschka. It was a perfect balance of a sudden watery color with a moment of fragility.

What made me want to paint were sensations I had no words for: the silence of houses, the colors of things, light from an open window, the scent of the ocean mingled with Eucalyptus and dry Sycamore leaves. I had already decided to be a painter when I saw the painting that would change my life.

In 1979, during my last semester as an undergraduate, the art department at Berkeley screened Emile de Antonio's film *Painter's Painting*. I remember watching it in the middle of the afternoon with the 16mm reels purring away and seeing Barnett Newman sitting and talking in his studio in front of his paintings. I can recall my excitement thinking, "Now this is it! This is the real deal!" As soon as it was over I went to a bookstore and bought the Newman catalog by Thomas Hess.

Soon after I graduated and took off for Europe to see paintings in the great picture galleries and museums. Barnett Newman was the farthest thing from my mind when I rode the escalator up to the galleries at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. My head was filled with the old masters and I was seeking Matisse. When I walked into a small room that was filled floor to ceiling with Newman's *Shining Forth (to George)*, the experience was shattering.

*Shining Forth (to George)* is 9 1/2 feet high and 14 1/2 feet long. It has 3 vertical stripes of black oil paint running top to bottom on unprimed raw cotton canvas. He painted it in one afternoon in 1961 for his brother George, who had died earlier that year.

Nothing could have prepared me for the intense light coming off of it. With its utter simplicity, expanse and scale I had no coordinates for it. Every landmark was gone. It couldn't have taken him more than an hour to do. And although I could see exactly what he had done, that didn't explain anything. Here he was leaving open and uncovered everything I had been taught to cover up. I felt as if the ground was giving way beneath my feet and I had to leave the museum and sit down outside.

I was 22. It was the most radical painting I had ever seen. And it would take years to accept the implications of this experience, where for a moment I felt so exposed, so happy and so free.

*John Zurier is represented by Gallery Paule Anglim, Larry Becker Contemporary Art, and Peter Blum.*

**DEAN SMITH:** The year was 1978. I was 17, a nerdy, awkward kid from the 'burbs with little exposure to fine art. Okay, I did have this glossy table book of the history of art that my parents, in some unarticulated desire of exposing me to "culture," had given as a Christmas present many years before. But really no exposure whatsoever; certainly not live and not in person. And so I found myself one Sunday afternoon with my dad and my friend David at the Oakland Museum of California. What initially had brought us there has now faded from memory.

We entered the museum's Great Hall -- back then you reached the cavernous gallery from the elevated anteroom above, descending a staircase to the space below taking in the whole of the room as you did so (now they have sealed off that splendid, dramatic entry with offices -- what a shame!) -- and facing the staircase was this enormous canvas suffused entirely in orange. The glorious tonality of orange juice, so tangy yet sweet you could taste it, except for one corner of the painting (the bottom right, I believe) was raw fabric, defined with paint drips and ragged brush stroked edges.

I wanted to jump into the painting. Be in that space. Feel the color flood into my pores. In its unapologetic monochrome-ness the light it radiated gave me the profound impression of a happiness so utterly childlike that it could forever banish all the world's dour gray-mindedness.

Dad and David just laughed and snorted. You know, the usual comments: "That's not painting! I could do that!" that sort of thing. Not having the self-esteem let alone knowledge to defend such a work, I kept my mouth shut. But I thrilled to that painting -- Yes!! Orange! How perfect in its simplicity, that a single color could so move me. Dad and David moved off into the other parts of the gallery dismissing all before them. I walked up to the label and read it: Sam Tchakalian, Orange Juice.

*Dean Smith is represented by Gallery Paule Anglim.*

**TIMOTHY BUCKWALTER:** Marcel Duchamp knocked me out.

I was 17-years-old and visiting a show of painted Dutch tiles at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I wandered out of the exhibition, eventually making my way back to the Modern and Contemporary section. I stumbled into Gallery 182 and looked up to see Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*. I never looked back.

Earlier that year, 1983, I had seen a reproduction of Franz Marc's *The Large Blue Horses*. It blew me away. Though it was painted more than 72 years before, to my untrained eye it was like an amazing combination of tattoo art and new wave music. It wore the butch confidence and primitiveness of flash. And the colors seemed so alive I instantly related it to the vibrancy of the music with which I was obsessed. I kept trying to find more.

Marc and the Blue Rider group -- a loosely knit collective of artists that held the then-radical notion of integrating art across media boundaries, so they actively recruited not only painters and sculptors but also musicians, composers, writers, architects, and designers to their ranks - - made me realize that art could be as big as life.

But the Duchamp offered something else, a beauty and grace mixed with motion and messiness. There was nowhere on the canvas that wasn't moving, wasn't alive. Action and motion lines were exploding everywhere. The figure had a giddiness to it. It was kinda funny and made me think of sex. I couldn't stop staring.

And I wanted a part of it. I wanted to spend my life trying to paint like that.

*Timothy Buckwalter's paintings and drawings are currently the subject of an exhibition at Pharmaka Art. He is represented by Rebecca Ibel Gallery and Braunstein/Quay Gallery. Online his work is represented by The Beholder.*

**BILL DUNLAP:** I grew up in a tiny town in Western Maryland, on the edge of the Potomac River, near West Virginia. For some unknown reason, having in the family no artists, art lovers, or even book lovers, I had a great need as a kid to get to the public library often, so that I could sit on the floor and look at the library's small collection of art books.

Some of the things I remember really loving were: the way JMW Turner painted skies, the way van Gogh drew people and animals, the way George Grosz drew people as animals, the way Frida Kahlo brought so many seemingly unrelated objects to play in one canvas, and Picasso, of course, the way he did everything. I was hooked first by modernism, then moved backward through art history. My favorites there at times have been Brueghel, Giotto, Piero della

Francesca, Goya, and so many anonymous ancient Egyptian, ancient Greek, and medieval European artists.

I've always had what I felt was some kind of intuitive understanding of the visual arts. There is certainly much I don't know about visual art, but I never needed to have it taught to me, or to be sold on it. I just eagerly ate it up.

All of that was fine, but I wasn't making my own art in any steady, determined way. That happened later, when I was living in San Francisco. The trigger for that, I think, was Paul Klee. I've studied so many of his pieces over time, but if I had to pick just one that really got me started on obsessively making my own work, it might be his 1923 watercolor titled Battle Scene from the Comic Opera 'The Seafarer'. That one seems to me to have a lifetime of starting points for art-making. There seem to be so many ideas here about color, line, composition, patterning, geometric shape, archetypal symbols (crosses, blood, the number three), wit, charm, horror, violence, and the great fun to be had in titling a piece. And it's all executed in a sort of brilliant technique of anti-technique.

Klee has had a lasting impact on me, and many of my art-wandering paths have started from something I saw in his work. This has led me into "primitive" art, art done by children, the mentally ill, folk art, and art by self-taught visionaries and outsiders of many different stripes. I think much of what I do now to be a kind of anti-technique anti-art. I'm not exactly sure how I ended up here, but I know Paul Klee had a lot to do with it.

*In recent years, Bill Dunlap has been seen in numerous shows in the Bay Area.*

**CAITLIN MITCHELL-DAYTON:** I always knew I was going to be "an artist"; not that I had a particularly well defined idea of what that might actually mean; making pictures, I guess. If there were any real paintings in the Southern California town where I grew up, I didn't see them. And even when I moved to the Bay Area, the artists that meant the most to me weren't represented here by real paintings; in other words I knew their work only through reproduction.

When I was halfway through graduate school and able to visit the Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan, I came upon Diego Velasquez's Juan de Pareja, -- which is a weird format, a half-portrait (the standard is either full-length or head shot). I'm short and the heads of Velasquez' full length portraits tower so far above me that I can't get the close view of them that I'd like. Juan de Pareja hangs more or less at my eye level. You can stare right into his face. The sensation of looking at a real person is hypnotic, peculiar, creepy and intoxicating. Juan de Pareja was Velasquez' assistant -- a regular guy. He looks wary, serious, vulnerable and dignified. He is a particular, specific person. And he is entirely aware of being painted.

Juan de Pareja didn't help me to decide to paint, but it did show me the kind of painting I wanted to make. Without exactly formulating it to myself at the time, I tried to grasp those qualities, which were to some extent and in an unfocused way present or at least being attempted in the work I was making then. Since then, I have used them as benchmarks for every painting I make.

*Caitlin Mitchell-Dayton received her MFA from the University of California at Berkeley. She has had solo shows at the John Berggruen Gallery and Gallery Paule Anglim, and her work has been exhibited in the Bay Area at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the De Young Museum and SFMOMA, in Los Angeles at the Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery, and in New York at the*

*Drawing Center and in Pierogi 2000's traveling files. She has been a Visiting Lecturer at the San Francisco Art Institute since 1999.*

**KERRI JOHNSON:** When I was a kid my dad and I would watch public television together, WGBH in Boston. The night would always start with some kind of nature program, followed by Dr. Who -- those were the Tom Baker years, my favorite -- and after that I would stay up to watch the intro for a show called Mystery!.

The animated intro completely blew me away and I remember thinking the same thing every time I watched it, "why isn't the entire show done like this?" I was always disappointed when the beautiful, black and white hatch marks would give way to real, stodgy, middle aged British actors.

I believe it was the rough elegance of the animation and the "gothic" blackness of the imagery and backgrounds that drew me in, not to mention the underlying dark sense of humor. It was not until I grew a little older and started paying attention to credits that I found out it was the handiwork of Edward Gorey.

As a youngster I would imitate his angular style with a standard black pen in my sketchpad, creating my own foreboding characters as if they were surrogate offspring. I would draw for hours trying to extract the same feeling from my drawings that I would get from seeing Gorey.

While my color pallet and drawing style have evolved since those early days, the sinister yet playful sensibility Gorey so beautifully conveyed was an important early influence and it continues to inform my work.

I still love to watch the introduction to Mystery! and I continue to feel that the program would have been far more popular if they had let Edward Gorey write and animate the entire series. I know I would have stayed to watch instead of picking up my sketchpad and going off to bed after the intro ended.

*Kerri Johnson recently had a solo show at 21 Grand. She is director of Blankspace Gallery.*

**NARANGKAR GLOVER:** Paul Cezanne's *La Femme à la cafetière*, the 1890 portrait of a heavysset café owner wearing a simple dress painted in cobalt and ceruleans, hung unassumingly in a corner at the Musée d'Orsay when I visited in 2002.

What kept me circling the gallery to pass over it several times was the portrait's complexity within the understated yet ubiquitous subject matter. What I saw in her was a reflection of Cezanne's disillusionment and disdain for pretty much everything. Her expression echoed him barking orders toward his obliging, yet pedestrian subjects. The heaviness in her face, and the gravity of her form read that she was not in the least bit amused. The frustration is that visceral.

Yet the skewed perspectives, loose brushwork, and strategic placing of the coffee pot and mug to the side are a one hundred percent thing of beauty... forever. That's when I realized it was what I always wanted. I wanted to paint people for real -- with all their baggage, frustrations, impatience, and loneliness.

It was a swift turning point for me in my approach to painting, a shift away from graffiti and Pop Art. I was confronted with the master works of Paul Cezanne in person, and I was no longer afraid to make each and every piece a tug-of-war from start to finish.

*Narangkar Glover is co-director of Rowan Morrison Gallery. She most recently exhibited at Tinlark Gallery in Los Angeles.*

**MARY SNOWDEN:** My influences are almost too many to mention, and they change and evolve constantly. Nevertheless, I'll take a stab at it.

When I was a child, I painted paintings that were embarrassingly like Grandma Moses. I can still remember the excitement I felt looking at her farm scenes and imagining myself in them.

In my late teens I loved Willem de Kooning. But somewhere around 1960, I went to a show in New York and saw this amazing painting with a large bird protruding out of it with a pillow dangling beneath it on a rope. It was Canyon, a Robert Rauschenberg combine. I was blown away and my ideas about painting were forever altered.

I appreciate all forms of art, especially writing and film, but paintings are what always steal my heart.

*Mary Snowden is represented by Braunstein/Quay Gallery. Her work is currently featured in Artists of Invention: A Century of CCA at the Oakland Museum of California.*

**ALEXIS MACKENZIE:** Because I was a classic case of I'm-going-to-be-an-artist-when-I-grow-up, the difficult thing was choosing how, exactly, I was going to express myself. I drew, I wrote; it wasn't so much that I was ever thunderstruck by inspiration, or carried an ideal close to my heart -- it was more that I spent a long time searching for the thing to hold dear, which felt most right as a means of expression.

There is one concrete moment with a collage that I recall, however, which almost certainly is what set me down the eventually obsessive path I've taken with the medium.

In high school, I kept a visual journal for a class, which was mainly comprised of collages; while I loved making them and they were well received, I think the moment I began to feel that they could be more than simply a journal to me was one afternoon at my friend Meredith's house.

She had made a collage incorporating various elements from magazines -- signage, a ballerina, a large rounded mirror, an urban environment -- I can't recall everything about it, sadly. I lost my tattered color copy of it long ago. But what was so captivating about it was how precisely she had cut out all the tiny details, and placed things so that they almost seemed to belong. They fit, they balanced, there were no rough edges. We were admiring it together and she said to me, "There's just something so nice about cutting something out perfectly..." and somehow it resonated; something inside me clicked into place with that statement.

From there it simply became a journey of exploring the imagery available in the world, how it fits together, and how well I can teach myself to manipulate it. I still think of that moment, and how the consideration of it has led me deep into this practice which I love so much -- in a way,

the thing that is so nice about cutting something out perfectly, is how the discipline of focusing so tightly on a single task actually allows the mind to roam most freely.

*Alexis Mackenzie's work was recently seen in All Star Hustlaz III at White Walls.*

**CHRIS ASHLEY:** Initially, I was certain that de Kooning's *Woman I*, 1950-52, most influenced me. He is an enormously important artist for me, and this unusual and controversial painting is a unique milestone in American art.

But I had to think about this. Many early encounters with paintings were important, and I needed to wade through memories and sort out my story to identify that single moment. So I put de Kooning on hold.

One Saturday afternoon in 1969, my grandmother took me to the new Oakland Museum, and while she tried to interest me in landscape painters (Albert Bierstadt and Hill, who I do like) I was drawn to abstract painters (Clyfford Still, Edward Corbett, or Lobdell). I think I remember seeing Nathan Oliveira's large pink and orange *Spring Nude*, but maybe I've just seen it too many times over the years. I very clearly remember Mel Ramos's *Browned Bare*, which showed me what kind of artist I did not want to be. On the way home that day my grandmother bought me a set of oils, and as I sat before the still life she set up on the kitchen table I tried to make a Lobdell.

Other important memories: Joan Brown's large yet intimate narrative travel paintings at Hansen Fuller Gallery, San Francisco, 1976; the huge Fauves show at SFMoMA that same year, and my first encounter with Clyfford Still soon after; Hassel Smith at Paule Anglim on Montgomery in 1977; and first seeing Agnes Martin's *Falling Blue*, around 1978, and literally feeling my life change as I stood there.

But I keep going back to de Kooning. I remember finding Harold Rosenberg's big 1974 book on de Kooning in the public library not far from where I grew up around 1976, my surprise when looking through it, and how I repeatedly checked it out. *Woman I* grabbed me because of the edge it walked between representation and abstraction, because of de Kooning's assertive drawing with the brush and control of space, and because of that wonderful bar of aluminum paint holding down the right side, later confirmed in person at MoMA. It all made me want to paint, which I began and continue, and I think of de Kooning, and my grandmother, quite often.

*I Made This For You, Chris Ashley's online exhibition of drawings is on view at Marjorie Wood Gallery.*