

## Painting the Plays

Perry McPartland

For my talk at last year's BSDN, it was suggested that I discuss how a contemporary artist might go about painting the plays of Shakespeare. It was probably thought that as a practicing artist I might be able to approach this subject from a somewhat different angle to that more usually taken. I took this context as an invitation to frame my discussion according to something of a personal bias, deciding my first loyalty would be to the object rather than the subject. That is to say, how the object of the painting might sustain its aesthetic integrity and not be overwhelmed by or rendered simply accessory to the subject it references. I should say right away that no solution readily offered itself to the question. Perhaps, however, the following text might represent how the beginnings of a response might be sketched out- if only in words.

How to paint the plays is – I would say – a very difficult subject, and these difficulties in the main spring from three areas. First, it seems to me that a painting of the plays would have to find a visual equivalence to their greatness, their greatness meant in terms of both their achievement and their breadth, while avoiding the stereotypical “greatness” that our culture accords them. The next difficulty is probably even more complex, and lies in finding an equivalence that may at the same time be realized within art's contemporary paradigm. Current aesthetic practice evinces, what we might term, a torturous relationship to re-

presentation, and where representation extends into illustration this relationship grows more complex and may be considered problematic.

We are all by now familiar with exhibitions of contemporary art that promise to shock our sensibilities- probably even to the point where we are quite bored at having our sensibilities shocked. The shock of the new is after all rather a dated concept. Nonetheless, when looking at contemporary work we find it is a concept that persists. And I think this persistence is due to something other than the merely faddish. It seems to me that the critical position that the contemporary art work must take up is dependent on how it differentiates itself from the other objects of the world, and specifically, the objects of its reference – and shock, contrariety, perversity, the defining against a mythological status quo of “expectations” operate here as devices of differentiation. Moreover, this differentiation appears a necessary condition for the contemporary work's realization of an identity. Differentiation, I think, has always been an aspect of the artwork's identity – that the work does something which no other object in the world manages – but in the last half a century it seems to have become the definitive characteristic of the art work. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* examples this rather precisely.

**Figure 1** Andy Warhol *Brillo Boxes* 1964

<https://jessicafisherart85.files.wordpress.com/2009/11/warhol-brillo-boxes-multipl2.jpg>

In terms art historical and theoretical, as well as in terms of subsequent practice, a very strong case could be made for viewing *Brillo Boxes* as the seminal work of twentieth century production. And the only thing that separates *Brillo Boxes* from actual Brillo boxes is their re-contextualisation as art. Their whole existence and identification is dependent on, and only on, the differentiation that this re-contextualisation enacts. While the work clearly picks up on Duchamp's earlier ready-mades, it wilfully avoids their poetry and surrealism (*In Advance of a Broken Arm*), or ideals of form, implication, and art historical reference (*Bicycle Wheel*).

**Figure 2** Marcel Duchamp *In Advance of a Broken Arm* 1915

[http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/data/13030/88/ft9h4nb688/figures/ft9h4nb688\\_0041.jpg](http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/data/13030/88/ft9h4nb688/figures/ft9h4nb688_0041.jpg)

**Figure 3** Marcel Duchamp *Bicycle Wheel* 1913

<http://linedandunlined.com/wp-archival/uploads/rh/readymade.gif>

It de-connotes – or probably better to say, it de-arts – the ready-mades even further. In removing the final traces of the aesthetic, Warhol's ready-made realizes a chastity of banal facticity. In making an absolute fetish of the concept of art, the work annihilates its own visuality, its own aesthetic presence; no reader familiar with the work would need to click on the URL, and for

anybody new to the work, the image provides nothing after its initial confirmation. In keeping with such a perverse context it seems perhaps fitting to include one more image, Mike Bidlo's *Bidlo Not Warhol*, a replica of *Brillo Boxes*.

**Figure 4** Mike Bidlo *Bidlo Not Warhol* 1991

[http://greg.org/archive/bidlo\\_not\\_warhol\\_1991.jpg](http://greg.org/archive/bidlo_not_warhol_1991.jpg)

Through this pyrrhic re-iteration, the realisation of the artwork's object identity through strategies of contrariety to and differentiation from the representation it apparently asserts is given, if anything, even more emphatic marking. These are, of course, extreme examples, but they delineate the field on which the contemporary art object must, it seems, locate itself. The last difficulty, as I mentioned, follows on from this, and is the nature of illustration itself. The very process of illustration predicates something like a determining relationship between source and representation, wherein the latter is asked to play a supplementary role. And this would seem to contravene the contemporary artwork's need for a differentiated objecthood.

How then might a painting of the plays be realized when its various demands seem to pull in mutually exclusive directions? I would like to discuss one particular painting, which while not contemporary, appears nonetheless to surmount the problem. The solution that it offers- and while this may appear twee, it remains true- is simply aesthetic and intellectual brilliance.

**Figure 5** Henry Fuseli *Titania and Bottom*

C.1790

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0a/Henry\\_Fuseli\\_-\\_Titania\\_and\\_Bottom\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0a/Henry_Fuseli_-_Titania_and_Bottom_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

**Figure 6** John Fitzgerald *Titania and the**Changelling* Date unknown

[http://www.aradergalleries.com/paintings/images/148\\_America/Fitz\\_Titania.JPG](http://www.aradergalleries.com/paintings/images/148_America/Fitz_Titania.JPG)

This is Fuseli's *Titania and Bottom*, and I have paired it with a painting by Fitzgerald, more or less contemporary to it, so as to better distinguish its qualities. The contrasts are immediate. Merchant reminds us that "At the time [of Fuseli's painting] the Dream was conceived as little more than a basis for musical and choreographic elaboration,"<sup>1</sup> and Fitzgerald's painting might be said to exemplify such a dainty and stereotypical approach. Alongside the striking disparity in mood and conception that we remark in Fuseli's work, I think at the same time we notice how this work answers the problem of illustration. In contrast to the interpretations – for which I have somewhat unfairly located Fitzgerald as the model – we can see that instead of conforming to the readings the subject has theretofore accumulated, Fuseli's image bears a radical relationship to its source material. And this new and disruptive space allows it the room to realize an independent identity as a work in its own right. Importantly though, there is nothing gratuitous about the unconventional reading the painting makes; quite the opposite in fact – it indicates a fresh commitment to *the Dream*, evincing a pene-

trating address of the play text itself. Unquestionably, this is the Athens-upon-Avon<sup>2</sup> of the play, and the painting recalls, at the same time, the specific fairy mythology of contemporary rural culture. And compared to Fitzgerald, these are indeed "spirits of another sort". They are possessed of a spiky energy – we observe the mercurial mix of playfulness and insouciant coercion that characterizes, for example, Puck's epilogue, which flatters and threatens by turn. Similarly, the sinister sexual elements that permeate the play – references to bloody defloration, Helena's masochism, Demetrius's rape threats, potential bestiality – are here, a whole age before Kott and Brooks, given extensive and original treatment.

Stuart Sillars has written compellingly about this image and I think it is important to go over a few things he has remarked about the depiction of Titania. The whole expression and body language that configure her display amorous conquest, evidence a one-way traffic of desire that seems unlikely to admit any impediment. This is undoubtedly the fairy queen who commands:

Out of this wood do not desire to go:  
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou  
will or no. (3.1.126-7)<sup>3</sup>

Her pose, as Sillars points out,<sup>4</sup> works to highlight Fuseli's close reading of the lines:

Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my  
arms...  
So doth the woodbine the sweet  
honeysuckle

Gently entwist; the female ivy so  
 Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.  
 (4.1.37-8)

The sinuous arabesque of her body together with her proprietorial encircling of Bottom act as a visual metaphor for these lines, and further point up their subtext of parasitic possession.

The image makes Titania a supernatural sexual predator – yet her portrait extends beyond this. Fuseli is a master of representational ambiguity and sophisticated referential layering, and Sillars points out<sup>5</sup> that Fuseli has most probably taken this figure from Leonardo's painting of Leda – herself a victim of rape by a god turned animal – and that in this way, the sexualized figure of Titania is complicated so as to also encompass her vulnerability and victimhood. At the same time, with something like a Shakespearean breadth and multiplicity of mood, this sympathetic handling of dark subject material immediately rubs up against the comic. If Titania is Leda, then the translated Bottom becomes Zeus. A transformation absurd, yet when we remember Bottom's noumenal vision, not imprecise.

Another example of Fuseli's referencing can be seen in the miniaturised classical figures that populate the grove. Their tiny proportions further enhance the scene's sense of preposterous dislocation, while at the same time their actions (spearing insects, brazenly flashing a full-frontal) decontextualise their own provenance, relegating them from the classical world to one realized by anarchic and comic incongruity. In this way the image echoes the play's merry misuse of its classical sources; and

specifically, the figures effect an ironic effacement of identity similar to that realized by Theseus's proclaiming his disbelief in antique fables – even while he himself has quite clearly been plucked from one (5.1.2-3).

I think similar application and displacement of reference can be seen at work in the imaging of Titania. At once a classical figure, yet transposed into a scene and grouping which are far from classical. While this serves to distinguish her, her incongruous placement also decontextualizes the reference to the classical. The surrounding figures are less dramatic, more naturally posed, and set besides them – rather than evincing the values of classicism – Titania's gesture of naked abandon might instead be read as the flamboyant outlandishness of the drugged. The circle of fairies evince something like a jaded voyeurism, and its realisation strikes me as terribly contemporary. They appear half-interested, half-bored, perhaps even conniving at Titania's degradation, half in encouragement and half in scorn. The mood implied by this is a highly unpleasant one, but one which I think the painting pushes us towards. For Titania is certainly the scene's cynosure, but she might at the same time be said to provide its spectacle – with all the connotations of prurience and humiliation that the presence of an audience would implicate.

The play, of course, is concerned throughout with spectacle and the observation of that spectacle, and the strange doubling effect that this relationship creates. And the various mirrored figures that appear in Fuseli's scene undoubtedly highlight the play's multiple doublings. Yet there is one figure here, more

subtlety marked, that seems to combine these aspects of doubling and the ambiguities of observed spectacle. I refer to the female figure on the right of the canvas. For me, she is one of painting's most sensual figures. In terms of stature, presence, lighting, and even in terms of the resemblance of their features, the figure seems to double Titania. Except this figure occupies the peripheries of the spectacle, and so forms its audience. And where Titania is enveloped in her experience, subsumed (eyes-shut) within the ecstasy of a drugged vision, this figure is lucidly aware, indicating another level of vision which penetrates the fabric of the aesthetic construction. She gazes directly at us. We, the observers, suddenly become the observed; the exclusive position we enjoy is undone, and we are implicated within the scene. In fact, we are transformed into the figures who observe the scene in the play-world- Puck and Oberon. And we should expand on that, for not only do these Puck-and-Oberon-audience-doubles observe the scene, but it is these fairy figures that have engineered it – and who revel in it. This not only hints at the darkness we can find at the heart of the play, but the breaking of the wall repeats the play's meta-theatrical concern in its positioning of the audience as part of its illusion, and in doing so implicates us in its perversities. The exposed breast further relates the figure to Titania at the same time as it differentiates her. This figure displays only one breast, and unlike the fairy queen's naked delirium, her exposure appears knowingly performed. She appears conscious of her own sexual energies, and this makes her gesture a deliberate and self-aware provocation. Beyond

her recognition of the presence of the audience, it seems she is prepared to consciously entangle us in desire's ambiguities.

At the level of her breast, a second figure also projects herself into our space. She evinces a fierce enjoyment which enjoins us to bawdy derision, yet simultaneously provokes our guilt and embarrassment; she laughs both with and at us. The world of darkness and confusion in which the figures of the play are embroiled, becomes once more ours. Moreover, I feel this pairing elaborate the ambivalent emotions that would accompany a husband – if we might call Oberon that – setting up and observing his wife's sexual humiliation.

I think, in every respect, this work represents a painterly translation of profound penetration and extension. I must admit, however, it is the sole example of a painted interpretation of a Shakespeare play that this text considers. I have found it necessary to limit the remainder of the text to a discussion of certain visual forms and techniques that seem to show correspondence to the effects of the plays, and in this way point to possible strategies by which one might approach their contemporary illustration. And, once again, we will turn back to past practice, seeing it as suggesting methods of approach that the present would seem capable of making use of.

A common contemporary critical line taken towards the plays, developed from readings like Fuseli's, sees them (if I can be permitted to generalize for the sake of brevity) as presentational structures of artifice and dissonance; and I feel, not unimportantly, that it is an understanding which has some affinity with the plays' original intentions and reception. Were

we to look for a style of painting whose effects seem similarly derived, then the form of Mannerism would seem to suggest something like an aesthetic equivalence. To this end, I would like to discuss Pontormo's *The Deposition from the Cross*, but before I do so I would like to give some attention to a pair of rhetorical devices which I think are of great significance within Shakespeare's dramatic language, and consequently inform the presentational construction of the plays.

**Figure 7** Jacopo Pontormo *The Deposition from the Cross* 1528

<http://www.wga.hu/art/p/pontormo/4capponi/1deposi.jpg>

I introduce them here as I think their discussion can better configure our reading of Pontormo's masterpiece. These are the devices of ethopoeia and ekphrasis, the first being, in the time of Shakespeare at least, an imitation of manner, and the latter, a description of an artwork – usually a painting. And in Shakespeare's plays these rhetorical figures will often occur in moments of apparent heightened emotional intensity, where one might expect the revelation of character. Yet rather than the direct expression of embodied emotion, these devices serve instead to provide a presentation of that emotion, and, as such, place it at a remove. Further, in drawing attention to their own performative rhetoric, they emphasise their own artifice. The following passage from *Troilus and Cressida* illustrates this well:

CRESS            I'll go in and weep,--  
 PANDARUS     Do, do.  
 CRESS            Tear my bright hair  
 and scratch my praised cheeks,  
 Crack my clear voice with sobs and  
 break my heart  
 With sounding Troilus. (4.2.110-14)<sup>6</sup>

Rather than actual sorrow, we are presented with the rehearsal in advance of a performance of sorrow. Strikingly, Cressida's seemingly deliberated projection of herself – or, rather, a projection not of herself, but of her grief; or, were we to take it further we might even say, not her *personal* grief, but rather “the emotion of grief” – is presented in the form of tableau. Moreover, a tableau to which Pandarus becomes an audience, and not an audience that reacts with sentimental identification, but rather with an appreciation of this translation of emotion into its own portrait. The fact that these lines locate this performance off-stage adds a further layer to the presentational aspect. At the level of character we cannot know if Cressida fulfills this apparent intention; at the level of the play this presentation goes unrepresented; and at the abstract level of role, it never occurs. These devices have the effect of ironising the very aesthetics of the theatre. They question not only the idea of a stable and continuous identity for the figures – for which it seems to supplant a series of theatrical iterations – but also the reality and coherence of the play's fictional world.

I think we can recognize similar effects of presentation, inauthenticity, dissonance and artifice in Pontormo's work. The painting shows

a melee of superimposed forms crowding upon each other. The eyes of the figures make a crisscross of angles, meaning our gaze is not allowed to settle, and preventing our giving our focus to the Christ figure. Classicism's moulding shadows are absent; the figures are instead demarcated by colour and lit by something like a Polaroid's flash. The space given to the figures is tilted, foreshortened and unreal. The only aperture that might have suggested distance is filled by a single cloud, its depiction suggesting that it operates as something like a banal quotation. The sky itself is dull, rendered like a stage cloth, and is completely without atmosphere. The scene that the painting proposes is realized throughout in terms of a representational disparity: the support the figures provide to the Saviour is tortured and inadequate; the scene's gravity and light are given inconstant application- the latter most startlingly realized in the bubble-gum pink torso of the figure carrying Christ's legs; the expression given to the swoon of the outsized Virgin has about it a certain mundanity, and this represents a deliberate play with what was already then a controversial theme. The universe the painting represents is abstract and incongruous in terms perceptual, physical and psychological.

These effects would suggest that Mannerism provides a fitting aesthetic accompaniment to an age which is sceptical, tentative, and self-aware- and these descriptors could apply equally to both Shakespeare's time and ours. But when we look at the products of our age, the works that trail in the wake of Warhol and Duchamp (and I think we can term these works neo-mannerist),

we see that while the aforementioned qualities are in effect, these contemporary objects seem at the same time- and quite in contrast to Mannerism proper- to make a virtue of their own aesthetic enervation. They are characterized by a peculiar type of hygiene, one that remains aloof from any formal engagement. If we are to look for an aesthetic strategy by which the qualities of the plays might be matched, we seem impelled to ask what possibilities might be suggested by a contemporary mannerism that was less chaste, more involved, more compromised- dirtier, even?

The final artist I would like to discuss is Cy Twombly, and I will concentrate on his works' approaches to text, representation and reference. It is my feeling that their utilisation allows the paintings to realize an identity quite distinct from their representational source, and, more importantly for our present purposes, they seem to share a commonality with the plays' qualities of presentation and artifice. Especially, if, contrary to the common critical line which reads Twombly's work as romantic, we take it as a form of Mannerism. As such I would suggest that the aesthetic strategies we see here offer the beginnings of an approach by which contemporary painting might approach the plays.

**Figure 8** Cy Twombly *Leda and the Swan* 1962  
<https://thefuturelab.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/twomblyleda.jpg>

**Figure 9** Cy Twombly *Venus and Adonis* 1979

[http://img.over-blog-kiwi.com/0/49/61/01/201310/ob\\_415ddc\\_galerie-art-paris-karsten-greve-jpeg-dim-origine.jpg](http://img.over-blog-kiwi.com/0/49/61/01/201310/ob_415ddc_galerie-art-paris-karsten-greve-jpeg-dim-origine.jpg)

**Figure 10** Cy Twombly *Virgil* 1973

[http://www.balkon.hu/balkon\\_2002\\_03/images/c\\_twombly\\_4.jpg](http://www.balkon.hu/balkon_2002_03/images/c_twombly_4.jpg)

**Figure 11** Cy Twombly *Orpheus* 1979

[http://www.cytwombly.info/prince2\\_files/cy\\_twombly\\_orpheus\\_1979\\_a.jpg](http://www.cytwombly.info/prince2_files/cy_twombly_orpheus_1979_a.jpg)

Looking at the above images, we immediately remark the works' emphatically realised materiality. This serves to front the qualities of the medium, reminding us, as Pontormo did, that we are looking at an aesthetic construction. Also similar to Pontormo's painting is the restless and contradictory energies of the surface (best observed in *Leda and the Swan*), and these work to prevent the realising of any single determining perspective. Yet in Twombly's case, the work's positioning of itself within the painterly is not without adulteration. As the works I have selected demonstrate, Twombly will often use text, most often classical references and fragments of poetry. Further, the paintings have a momentum that invokes the textual; their first impetus is not to open a painterly window of space expanding beyond the picture surface, but instead to traverse that surface- and almost invariably from left to right. Such a definition of space, together with the words, the indications of graffiti, and other

marks that appear to signal, would seem to condition a response in the viewer in which the textual and visual convene.

In their desultory dispersal across this space, these graffitoesque signs are further decontextualized. The marks are possessed of an instability – we are unsure what we are looking at – sign or scribble? Where we can make the notation out, they seem to display something of the breadth and dissonance I mentioned previously: here too, the lyrical neighbours the comic, the absurd, the bawdy. And these marks seem to undergo successive transformation – Zeus's feathers become Cupid's hearts which in turn become tits, quims and cocks. Even at the level of the word – the seemingly direct level of lexical representation – we cannot quite separate the notational reference that the word, or sign, makes from the mark that establishes it. This is especially the case where words are scribbled over, struck through – as if bungled. But as was the case with Cressida's speech (and I think this is similarly complex), it is not bungling, but *the performance of the representation* of bungling. The scoring through of the word "Swan" in *Leda*, while apparently negating it, actually emphasizes it – highlights its reference. Yet at the same time as it highlights its reference, it stalls its representation, and moreover, asserts the artificiality of that representation. And the writing is overtly performance: the citations are presented as though for the first time – strange and original – in what offers itself as "an accelerated splutter of inspiration"<sup>7</sup>. It is a visual rhetoric that allows Twombly to have it all ways at once – lyrical, yet

at the same time, a dandified and a crude reiteration of that lyricism.

Yet while Twombly makes frequent use of artifice and presentation, compared to the plays' employment of these devices, their power and breadth are circumscribed quite radically. Barthes describes these works as evincing a "pictorial nominalism"<sup>8</sup>. This goes for all of Twombly's work, but is most readily apparent in the last two images, *Orpheus* and *Virgil*. Clearly, they do not attempt a close reading of the sources they appear to invoke, nor do they enact a mimesis of what they purport to represent. Rather, they simply enact the presentational. Despite being framed according to a romantic vision, the paintings' nomination of Virgil and Orpheus isn't specific or revelatory, instead it merely signals our common cultural storehouse, and the audience's partaking and connivance in this referencing. This device of lexical conjuring echoes, in much more simplistic and attenuated fashion, Quince's line in *the Dream*: "This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring house" (3.1.3-4), with Quince obviously indicating both the actual stage and actual tiring house. The line works to ironize both the facticity of the means of production, and the

audience's imaginative investment in them. Twombly's use of this device is very similar, only much more dandified – and, significantly, I think, much more dead-ended – insofar as it invokes Art and Culture as painting's visionary and romantic subjects, yet stops short of their representation. But even this has something like its counter in the *Dream*, where the consummating revelation of Bottom's vision, off-stage and therefore un-represented, is given only his bumbled commentary of mangled cultural quotation. In the case of both Twombly and Bottom, romantic and ridiculous visions are invoked, but only through the device of their referential presentation. And in Twombly's case at least, the vision empties itself of everything but the presentation of its own aesthetic construction. Yet for now, even as emptied as these work are, they might represent the best equivalence to the plays that contemporary painting can manage. And on such a moment of non-revelation, it seems apt to conclude.



### Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *The Responsibility of Forms: critical essays on Music, art, and Representation*. Trans.

Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.

Merchant, W. Moelwyn. "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: a Visual Re-creation." *Early Shakespeare. Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 3*, eds. Brown, Harris. New York: St Martin's P, 1961

Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ed. R.A. Foakes. Cambridge: CUP, 2013

---. *Troilus and Cressida*. Ed. Anthony B. Dawson, Cambridge: CUP 2003.

Sillars, Stuart. *Painting Shakespeare: The Artist as Critic, 1720-1820*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006.

---

<sup>1</sup> "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: a Visual Re-creation", *Early Shakespeare. Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 3*, eds. Brown, Harris. New York: St Martin's P, 1961, p.168

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "Athens-upon-Avon" was first used by Donaldsen: Donaldsen, E. Talbot. *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Cambridge: CUP, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Painting Shakespeare: The Artist as Critic, 1720-1820*. Cambridge: CUP, 2006, p 229.

<sup>5</sup> P 229.

<sup>6</sup> *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Dawson, Cambridge: CUP 2003.

<sup>7</sup> *The Responsibility of Forms: critical essays on Music, art, and Representation*, trans. Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985. P 180.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 184.