

## Still Life with Provisions

Danny Licht

Danny Licht is  
a fourth-year  
in the College  
majoring in  
Philosophy.

I once had a teacher who said many things that moved me. His name was Abraham Bennahum, but we only ever called him professor. In the beginning it surprised me that I was so taken by his words, because he was, as he put it, a teacher of paintings, and I was not someone interested in art.

When he lectured, his eyes enlarged and squinted, and his hands drew arcs in the air. To him, the painting was not just another thing like a table or a raspberry. It wasn't just one more thing found hanging on the wall. The painting for him was an invitation into the world, an exciting connection between other people and their ideas about what is what.

It was January when the term began, and on our first day of class there was a blizzard that covered the campus in quiet. That morning we made our way to the top floor of a small campus building, and we warmed ourselves inside the classroom on the top floor that bore no number. When we walked in he was positioned already at the lectern and reading a long dark book whose title I could not make out. He was always there before the rest of us, unmoved by the weather, sitting with a blue and white porcelain tea set, paying us no mind until the clock hit nine.

"Good," he said, and he took off his glasses. Without introduction he began to lecture on a painting that he said was exemplary. *Exemplary* excited me.

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When he spoke, I listened, and in that room in the blizzard, he went on to speak for an hour and a half about this exemplary painting. Bennahum's gray beard was full and grown, and his long voice maintained the sculpted intonations of his childhood in Germany. What exactly he said on this first day remains to me a mystery, but it felt so right to me that I left that lecture feeling moved; I felt I had discovered something, but I did not know what. I started writing down long passages from his lectures.

Walking across campus later that day, it occurred to me that if only I knew what was exemplary, then I'd know what I should do that summer and then I'd know what to do for lunch. Over winter break, I had started to really understand the University as this place of total opportunity, of infinite choices, and this I found paralyzing. It pushed me into anxiety, and I thought of almost nothing else. I did almost nothing because of it. It was the exemplary that I wanted to know and understand, and it shook me to realize that Bennahum seemed to know this about me, that he began his course in this particular way, that he seemed to be looking at me more than anyone else as he spoke.

The subject of the next lecture was a still life with bread, wine, figs, and a pomegranate, but Bennahum rejected this designation.

"Still life," he told us,  
"is an excuse. The



It looked better in the postcard.

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invocation of the term is an abrogation of our duty as humanists. It is a renunciation of our responsibilities as writers of painting.” As I write this, it reminds me of something he told us some time later when, at the end of a lecture, he was asked a question about the role of painting in modernist art, to which raised his voice with a fist. “Guard yourselves from isms, my dears!” he said, speaking with a type of seriousness that I had never before encountered. This led to a silence in the room that even in memory makes me nervous. But after a minute, he let out the beginnings of a grin. I suppose the two caveats were similar in purpose.

In the lecture on this still life, he spoke almost entirely about the colors of the painting, the interactions of blues with grays, of reds with blues, of traces of other colors and of colors that did not seem to belong. “And yet,” he said, “they belong absolutely.”

He used words like value, contour, and chroma to describe the colors, and he used them with such authority and pleasure that I imagined I knew what each of them meant. “Each separate color,” he told us, “suggests an emotional, physical, experiential communication that is distinct unto itself as a color in the painting, and the force of each color in the painting comes always and only as



I don't think Mother'll appreciate the grass stains.

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precisely specific to the painting that is at hand. That is to say, the power of the colors that we describe here is a power and a look that is always provisional.

“Indeed,” he continued, “everything I tell you in this lecture hall shall be altogether and always provisional, and the provision shall be the painting itself, and the provision shall be the moment in time we share together, and the provision shall be I, your teacher, Abraham Bennahum.” I had never met anyone who spoke like this before.

The winter moved on, and his lectures became increasingly involved. The concepts he described related to earlier concepts he had defined. His language became more arcane, sometimes incantatory, and yet more and more familiar. It felt as though he spoke a different language from the rest of the world, which is not to say that it didn’t engage us. We spoke it with him. Each of us was left rapt by his speeches. We hung on his every word. What would come next? To what conclusion could his horticultural metaphors and zoological allusions ultimately arrive?

We could speak to each other using his vocabulary, reciting his phrases. Someone started calling the course “Introduction to Bennahum” and others took to this too. They weren’t wrong to call it this, but I always found it too derisive. It became hard to distinguish between what we actually understood and what we were just saying for the sound of it. The spirit of his language invaded us, goaded us onward, but the acuteness of his insights remained always one step beyond us.

Midway through the course, he told us there would be a paper. “There will be a paper,” he said, just like that, and he put on his glasses and opened to a page in an old book called *The Painting*.

“Professor,” someone in the front row said, in a high pitch and stuttering. “What’s the paper supposed to, um, do?”

“Of course!” he said slowly, his eyes closed. “That is the right question. Let us consider it together.” He took off his glasses and closed the book. “In the first place, a painting! We must choose a



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painting that we will consider, and the painting we choose should be a good painting. So long as it is good, none is ill suited to this undertaking.

“Once the choice is made, we should find *what* exactly is good in the painting and we should name that thing, the thing that is right, and the thing should be so right that it takes us in and it takes us away. It should be a spirited moment within the painting that wakes us up, perks the mind, says, *You over there, you ought to marry me!* And here, analysis begins.

“We move forth,” he said. “We should come to locate the place and the power of that particular moment in order that we may take it as a standpoint for the consideration of the work as a whole. This relation between the part and the whole should help us then to find a rule, and once we find that rule we should formulate that rule and we should state it clearly. This discovered and delineated interrelation that we have named and now stated will come to reconstitute the moment as a shape and a name for something greater than itself—namely, the painting. Writers of painting should give their readers a new and good way to think about the work, and if they do not, they should let go of their pens and put their minds to better use in the field of molecular gastronomical economics, and this is the first movement we will make in our writings on painting.

“If,” he continued, “we can achieve this movement, we will have written a paper that is good, but we will not yet have written a paper that is right. We move together! Once we have made our way up and out to this high elevation of formal generalization, out from our moment and into the whole, that is, into a particular reading of this fine painting, the paper that is right will climb *back* down the ladder of consideration and back to the brushstrokes themselves, back to some particular moments of the painting, these moments in all their particularity, and still and carefully and always in relation to the original moment of our original engagement. Once we are there, we should not stop but keep climbing down, and I should warn you that trouble may find us there on that ladder, rungs will be missing, there will be no light, but with tenacity and grace we shall not drop our pens until our movements have found us back on the solid ground

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of truth and actuality. And in our domain of painting, as in all others, that ground, I hope you know, is life itself.

“If we can do that, if we can house our writing in the locality of existence, and this is no easy task, let me tell you, nor is it required or expected, we will have done what we have needed to do as writers of painting. We will have achieved something finally worthwhile in this peculiar domain that is aesthetics.”

I loved him. The way he spoke was instinctive and wild; it seemed to be wise with centuries of understanding.

Yet something does bother me when I read back through these lectures that I transcribed. I cannot help but feel I was under some kind of spell or living in a dream while I was in his classroom, because in my notes, when the meaning of his words verges on conclusion, which it always does, and with high drama, the conclusion ultimately does not come, and this leaves me unsure of what I actually learned from him.

One of his final lectures focused on a painting by Gaston La Touche from the turn of the century called *Pardon in Brittany*. It was on display at the museum downtown, and he called it the finest painting ever made. He refused to project an image of it onto the classroom’s screen because, he said, “I am not a violent man.” We had to go see it.

“The *Pardon in Brittany* gives a sky that has gone lilac at dusk,” he told us. Pilgrims are gathered in black and white clothes. They are holding candles and standing close. There is a horse in the crowd and a priest there beside it, and a woman with a baby is sitting on the horse. A mess of white hats turns blue in the light. The faces are hard to see and so they are hard to describe, ripples of paint spilling into each other as they make their ways across the canvas. Bennahum described the painting with vividness and color, performing what he once called an optical exfoliation. But something strange happened towards the end of the lecture, something that was unlike him. At the time, I did not understand what exactly had happened, but now I do. He stopped before climbing down the ladder of consideration.

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"I have told you many things about this painting," he said, speaking now with a low voice, "and I could tell you many more still. I could speak about it for hours on end. I could recite for you a monograph from the heart, and, by God, I would find pleasure in doing it. Yet were we to compare this handsome treatise to the actual power of the actual painting, still after ninety-six hours of magnificent insight I will have nonetheless told you nothing of the painting. We could lecture on a painting until the deathbeds rumble in, and still we would never arrive there at the painting. In discourse, we must always come to a halfway moment before we come to its object as it is, and so we never do. All that I could tell you of the painting must be spoken from an impassable distance from what this painting actually is and what the painting actually does. It must be this way because all I have said and all I will have said and all, alas, that I could ever say about a painting will and will always be, indeed, objective.

"Now, dear students, it is our ninth week together, and here in this moment we have at last reached the signature puzzle which plagues the discussion of painting. It is this. When we speak of a thing, we do not speak of ourselves. When we speak of a thing, we speak of a matter at hand, and insofar as we speak of a matter at hand, we are speaking objectively. There are six hundred ways to speak about a painting as a matter at hand, and the librarians can direct to you to each of them with ease. Each of these discussions—mind you, I do not mean to disparage them—is worthwhile insofar as it is. There is much to say about a painting formally, historically, biographically, and so on.

"But who here among us," he said, peering around the room, "in our right minds could call a painting, when all is said and done, at the close of the essay and the heart of the lecture, something that is finally objective? How could we, in this course on the discourse of painting, painting as what it is, and not simply as a matter at hand, limit ourselves to the discussion of things, of matter and tangibility? Is a painting just a matter, just a thing, or is a painting much more than a thing?

"Indeed, I believe that it is *much* more. To speak of a painting and

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not *about* that painting we must speak subjectively, because in the painting the senses are awakened and a sense of ourselves and our being is awakened in the world and in time.

"Then again," he said, "in order to discuss something subjectively, we must speak always of the subject and of subjectivity, but when we do this, we must take fine care to not slip down the slope that tempts us. For if we do not take such care, the subject and subjectivity might well become nothing more than two more matters at hand! And when they do, the painting will have vanished, and we will find ourselves speaking without saying much of anything at all.

"At the same time, however, we must never once in our lives forget that writing is for reading while feelings are for feeling. This leaves us in a precarious tangle of linguistic contortion. After all, what can we then say that is not simply our feelings and, at the same time, is not simply a discussion about some matter at hand?

"When we speak to one another of a painting, what can we say that *is* the painting and the *being* of the painting and what is *right* of the painting?

"What I have been trying to say to you, dear students, is that *Pardon in Brittany* is many things, but beyond all these things, it is a painting, and as a painting, it is interesting."

*Interesting!* The word pierced me. His tone was high. He was almost screaming.



But look, it has Daddy's nose!



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His voice was inflected with the movements of drama, and this—*interesting*—was all he had to give us. I couldn't understand.

The lecture ended. The word did not. It haunted me for hours and through the night, the following days. Interesting did not belong in Bennahum's vocabulary, and yet there it was. That was it. His voice had risen and fallen. Something had to be coming, something good. But instead of resolution, instead of insight, he gave us a word that was meaningless, a stroke of nonsense. How could he call "still life" and "modernism" inhumane descriptors, irresponsible choices of language, and then go on to say that the finest painting ever made was all just very interesting!

Interesting was a word for when there were no other words. It was a word for affectation. It was not a word for Abraham Bennahum. *Interesting*—the word crawls like a gnat down my ear. "Now, *this is interesting*," says a man in a white suit waltzing through museum galleries. His observations end all discussion. Everything he describes gets closed beneath vitrine. To think of Bennahum dressed in this costume sent through me pangs of grief so intense and punishing that I'd be embarrassed to describe them in any detail.

Nevertheless, my anger did give way at some point, sooner than I thought it would, and it gave way to doubt. Was it possible that interesting did actually mean something? I had used the word before, but I was not Abraham Bennahum. I had used it many times even, especially at museums, and I have used it again since. Maybe what I mean to say when I say that a painting is interesting is that you should go look at it. Instead of a description, I should give directions to the museum. But maybe that is not what I mean at all, because maybe you should not go see it. Maybe you would find it boring, because our interests are not identical. Something about the word refers specifically to the speaker, and in that way it seemed to be an inappropriate concept for pedagogical or advisory purposes.

Clearly Bennahum did not worry in this way. At least part of what he meant when he called the painting interesting was that we *should* go see it, and so I did. Obviously it is a good painting. Something about it excited me. Bennahum had described it well, the lilac sky,

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the huddled pilgrims, the flames of light, the horse and priest and woman with child.

When I stood at *Pardon in Brittany*, I noticed that I wanted to be there. Not where I was, but where they were, the pilgrims, forgiven. Together they achieve absolution on the canvas, absolution from the priest, from God, and so too, presumably, from one another. I wish such an event were possible in my own life. Since the first time I saw it, this painting has assumed for me the shape of total exoneration, of communal forgiveness. The pilgrims seem to know each other fully and to love each other still.

An old comic once described a conversation he overheard at a party between a distraught young woman and a little crowd that had just formed around her. She expressed to them her longing for the promises of happiness she remembered feeling in childhood. “Oh yes,” an elderly man jumped in. “Yes, yes, yes, and above all, the happiness of childhood is to get a good beating!” It’s true that there is something about total forgiveness, final bliss, *Pardon in Brittany*, that one could achieve only with the mind of a child, an impossible conception of eternal righteousness—a slap, and it’s yours! Maybe that is what the old man meant at that party, and maybe that is what I like in this painting. Standing there by it, I am taken by this fantasy of total absolution.

Come to think of it, maybe that is what I liked about Bennahum too. There was something boyish and impossible in my reverence for him. I let his words ring in my head like an oracle, or like a child hears his parents, the words unfolding through time with meaning. What the professor said did not always make literal sense to me, but it did feel right, and it moved me.

### **Short Treatise on Interesting**

How meaningful can interesting be? On the one hand, it can mean nothing. Someone might say, “That is interesting,” and have said it just to have said it. Before objects of complexity, it can sound right when nothing else comes to mind, when one is overwhelmed. In this ungenerous reading of the word, interesting plays a social

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role as a pretentious substitute for meaningful observation.

What could a more forgiving reading of the word look like? To begin, we should distinguish between two kinds of a potentially meaningful interesting. The first is “interesting that.” When we say that something is “interesting that,” we mean to say that there is more to say, a comparison to be made, a connection to uncover. For example, “It is interesting that he put it that way.” We might also call this “interesting because.”

The second is just interesting. There are moments when we confront an object that is just interesting. There is nothing to say; there is just that it is, and that it is interesting. Any objective statement about this thing would obscure our actual relationship to it; that is, our immediate interest. Because it is difficult to describe, the just interesting remains mysterious and strange. Around it we are silent. A well respected person may announce with finality and seriousness that a painting is *really quite interesting*, or *beyond all else interesting*, and we will likely not ask what is meant for fear of revealing ourselves to be out of the loop or otherwise for sounding insolent. At the same time, it is a word that everyone seems to understand.

What makes something just interesting is, in the first place, some relation between a person and an object. To call something interesting, then, is not to say something about the



You didn't contact my agent, asshole.

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object so much as it is to say something about one's relationship to the way that the object presents itself to that person. Something can be interesting only insofar as it interests someone.

The just interesting, then, contains elements of both the subject, who is interested, and the object, which interests him. Because it is caught between the subjective and objective standpoints, which are conceptually opposed, language finds trouble. The just interesting individualizes the interested individual by opening this person to a relationship that involves both the person and the object. The just interesting waves away the distractions of the world to remind the individual of his own particular relation to the world. Without an exhaustive explanation of the interested party (who he is and how he got to be this way, what associations this object before him might evoke and why, how tall he is, when he last showered, what the air in the room feels like and who else is there, what he did this morning and what kind of shoes he put on, and so on), the just interesting could not mean to someone else what it means to him. Empty of objective meaning, the word has immediacy. This immediacy is its meaning.

Because works of art have historically been made to engage perception in this way, nothing can be said *of them directly* beyond that they are interesting or that they are not interesting. However, much may be said about them.