

Joel Carreiro

The art of seduction follows an entrenched pathway; beguiled at a distance by unexpected stimulation, we are silently invited to approach the source. We may already know the artifice and trickery being employed - perfume, a touch of mascara, the lock of hair allowed to fall just so - and yet we place ourselves within striking distance until there emerge hints of pleasure and connection all the more attractive for being novel. The critical twist waits, coming at the moment desire is finding its satisfaction and - Wham! - all expectations are confounded. Still, we come back for more. Shards of culture high and low become our own in this way. The syncopated intro to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama", (you have just found it lodged in your mental playlist), and Melville's invitation to "Call me Ishmael" draw us to them with a magician's dexterity.

Entering a gallery hung with Joel Carreiro's work, standing quietly, it will happen that a single piece among several, the stranger across the room with glittering eye, begins to exert its fascination. Without immediately naming what we are seeing - a celebration of light and motion, a variation of pattern and line - we move closer until the abstraction has not one name but many; trees and sunlight, a mother's cheek, the small feet of an infant. Boats and castles, summer petals and the sweep of a blue dress, these images already know us as we know them, and look how intimately they know one another. Boundaries are forgiven, animal and mineral become vegetable in a promiscuous fling of interpenetration. Call me Ishmael or call me Lynyrd, tell me the distinction between the two if you must or roll them into an infectiously lyrical Sweet Home New Bedford, this is more fun than the isolation we have lived with for so long. We may know we have been pleasurably deceived, toyed with; seduction is what it was, yes, that is the word, and in its midst, who among us cares? Pour more wine and turn up the music, we are in no rush to go anywhere else. This is where we pause.

This is where the puzzle asks to be disassembled with tomorrow's sobriety and steady hand.

Carreiro is the least deceitful of men. Speak to him for ten minutes or for twenty years and you will come away with the same certainty: You have not been lied to in the least. The truth hasn't even been shaded as much as is practiced, not only by mortal men, women and children but by common house cats. What you see in Carreiro is what you get.

How can it be that these works of such uncertain gravity flow from this man? Don't we assert beyond doubt that any form of art is a reflection of its maker, that the art and artist, if genuine, are inseparable? Picasso's exuberance leaps into our hands for this argument; it is everywhere to be seen in even his smallest utterance. Rothko's spiritual aspirations, Bacon's misanthropic desire, Leonardo's scrupulous observation born of curiosity; these are the sinew and vein of their art. How can a man of Carreiro's straightforward nature have given us this complex swirl of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't? Well, maybe he saves it all for his art. Maybe the seduction is not for the purpose of an hour's pleasure but is a portal to the most vexatious of desires - commitment. Maybe he is giving us a greater truth than we are immediately capable of sensing. Maybe it is a greater truth than he himself knows.

Go back to the work and look at the whole. Change your distance and shift focus as often as you like, single out a dozen of the hundreds of discrete parts. They are separated by centuries, distinguished by culture and country of origin, defined by their own natures. Select a dozen more. The parts claim various histories having little to do with their current location. They may be working at cross purposes with their neighbors, may have identities that slip from

anyone's grasp except in moments of recognition and epiphany. Migrants and strangers, every one, and yet here they have landed, funneled through some Ellis Island of the spirit onto a clean birch panel, laid out and waiting. Carreiro's grid is a city, it is a bank of windows within the city, it is a house of many rooms, a voyeur's paradise or a prison of small cells or the cells of any organism.

The grids are set quite reasonably and then fought against, everyone trespassing, reaching across their boundaries to explore the terrain, substance, position and identity of everyone else. The borders themselves are so uncertain — sharp-edged one moment, diaphanous the next until, in another instant, there seems no boundary at all, one patch of crimson merging with another to form a shape neither of them could have envisioned in solitude. Nothing in the work has the independence to stand alone. Isolated and amputated, each piece is only that — a fragment in need of completion by others, a completion at once restless, organic, threatening to float away from its moorings, its members rising into thinner air, being pulled toward netherworlds at a bottom edge, hoping to slip off undetected under the western fence, ready to change their names, trade clothes, start over, not call home for a while. This is the truth of our collectivity. It is also the truth of what we call, with some vanity and hopefulness, each individual life; not a single thing but an agglomeration of acquaintance and partnership, cooperation and abrasion, dependence, tutorship and love. We are crushed together and we feel alone. We hustle and struggle, show up for assembly into half-organized masses, only to swiftly rebel against the massing, wanting to be called by our own name under a fluid banner of some larger name, setting sail with strangers on a questionably worthy boat across a sea filled with creatures whose colors make them oddities, leaving because what has been promised at voyage's end sounds richer than what we know.

Such would be a hard thing to express, if the goal of expressing it were to be articulated, but Carreiro tosses this off. He makes it look like a charade when in fact it is a statement of an elemental truth that is everywhere in evidence. He is the least deceitful of men and there is no conundrum here, no disparity between artist and art, no game at all. He is giving us a simple gift. His grid contains us at the same moment it is contained within us. This is who we are as a whole. And it is how each of us is composed, privileged for a while to become a piece of the whole. He invites us to come as close to that truth as we wish, to dwell in it at our pleasure.

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Paul Bochner has won several international awards for his short films, produced at the National Film Board of Canada. He has held a Guggenheim Fellowship in painting. As a writer he has been published in *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly*.