

PAUL SOTO

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Notes on *PAINTING WITHOUT AUTHORITY*

1. I recently got into an argument with a stranger about the moon. Or about the man on the moon. The stranger accused me of ignorance. To him, my belief in the story I had been told and the images I had seen was indicative of a kind of gullible laziness. “How do you know if we’ve been to the moon if you’ve never been!?” He nearly barked.

The absurdity and familiarity of the argument’s rhythm began to obsess me — his macho skepticism matched with the blatant need for absolute authority. The impossible conviction that he must see something for himself to not only understand it, but to believe in its existence. (Incidentally, I imagine it was this impulse that got man to the moon.)

But soon I lost track of the subject of the argument which became mostly irrelevant, overshadowed by his aggression and my realization of his stupidity. What began as a normal conversation quickly shifted to heightened and irrational — the subject of the conversation disappeared. The anger in his voice took over any point of view. The moon went away. The man on the moon too. The argument lost its point, it blurred with the energy of opposition between us and my desire to exit the conversation. But it was hard to resist the proximity to such a cliché. I wanted to find out how it got there without falling prey to the temptations of its familiarity.

I have never wished to go to the moon and see for myself.

2. Michael Fried writes of Baudelaire: “I understand a painting to be memorable in Baudelaire’s sense of the term if it somehow succeeds in activating the memory of one or more previous painting of high quality while at the same time not quite allowing such memories to surface explicitly in the viewer’s consciousness.” A memory never fully forming, no image, no other artwork, no past experience. Something new merges with the memories that never arrive. A painting like this relinquishes authority; it moves toward not one idea but a formation of muddled thoughts.
3. I go into a store full of baskets, ladders, wooden spoons and other redundantly functional objects. The store boasts of sustainability at a good price: a rustic vibe for your modern home. Everything is nearly the same shade of beige; even the sales girl wears a beige top, blending in with the merchandise. She moves and I realize she’s not just part of the store’s facade but a breathing, thinking person. She shuffles around the store putting things back in their place.

— Gracie Hadland

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