

Damaged
by Baleh David

In painting, a basic monotone method had been utilized in Asian Ink and Wash since 650 CE., where a preference for shades of black over variations in color, and an emphasis on brushwork and the perceived "essence" of a subject prevailed over direct imitation.

Grisaille, from the French word "gris", (grey), has its origins in Western painting in the illumination of manuscripts, within a limited color range. These ashy tones can range from light to dark, transparent to opaque, warm to cool, flat to reflective and is most commonly used when describing paintings in oil, acrylic and watercolor. At a time when colors were scarce, artists employed this limited palette, pushing each pigment to its maximum capacity. Yet, the method was also used deliberately for a specific visual effect. Examples can be found from Anglo-Saxon times in Ireland and Northern England and as early as the 13th Century in France. Giotto used Grisaille when painting some of his Scrovegni Chapel Frescoes in Padua between circa 1303 and 1310. By choosing Grisaille he was able to achieve the effect of reproducing stone. In contrast to its early use in Asia, during the Renaissance this technique was used as a tool in the "academies" as an uncomplicated learning method. Since coloring was much more demanding and required more skill, this practice was also often chosen as a faster and less expensive alternative. At the same time, students were able to improve their skills surrounding composition, shadow and form without the interference of color.

Grisaille was adopted by the Netherlandish masters; Robert Campin: the Master of Flémalle, Jan van Eyck, who used this method in one of his most well-known works *The Annunciation Diptych* created between 1433 and 1435, and Hieronymus Bosch who famously employed it to paint the Creation, on the outside of his altarpiece *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Utilized as underpainting, color was added to a complete grisaille work resulting in transforming the texture and depth so that the painting became luminous and rich.

During this period, it is noted that Grisaille painting was not to be confused with drawing, where color washes were added. The monochrome of drawing's intention was to stand as an abbreviation for and indication of its polychrome surroundings. The 15th Century, with its stylistic innovations changed the condition and acceptance of Grisaille. Netherlandish painters such as Maerten van Heemskerck, Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Jan van Goyen continued the tradition.

With the understanding of Grisaille paintings origins with its essence in finding the underlying essentials of representation, to express uniquely or to build upon, and then simultaneously fast forward to the age of technology and reproducible art, the photograph stands out as a method to not only create, but capture time and space in two-dimensional form. While still representing it as accurate.

Walter Benjamin writes about reproduction, and the disappearance of aura associated with an original work of art. According to Benjamin, the aura is an effect of a work of art being uniquely present in time and space. It is connected to the idea of authenticity. When reproduced, along with their authenticity, objects also lose their authority. Populism contributes to the loss of aura by constantly seeking to bring things closer, by creating reproducible realities, hence destroying uniqueness. He continues, that the originals worth or value is depreciated because it is no longer unique. Even the experience of seeing “art” or an object is compromised by the mere fact that there are others reacting to the same thing, collectively or individually at the same time.

The question arises; although viewed individually, is art, specifically in a public setting such as a gallery or museum, nevertheless subjective to the collective experience, just by the mere fact that there is more than one person looking in a singular space, at the same time, and establishing an overall opinion of the experience, which can be exchanged with one another at that specific time or at a later date?

In the early 1960's with the use of the relatively inexpensive Kodak Brownie camera thousands of images were taken, to document, capture and memorialize. On occasions, families would document its members individually and in groups, for later satisfaction of re-living and experiencing the moment. The exactness, the stark nakedness of these black and white photos often proves to be evocative as well as revealing. The pared down color scheme communicates the essence of its subject matter.

These photos unearthed in cellars and attics, many faded and forgotten, become the archeological equivalent of bones and artifacts haphazardly discovered when digging down for new construction on ancient land. They acknowledge a time, not so long in the past, when the world was still on the brink of a technological explosion but was fascinated by the sheer possibility that this wave of the future could bring to the masses.

To grapple with this specific exercise, of remembering and re-experiencing via a lone black and white chemically reproduced image, and then take that image and re-create it, along with the experience, into once again a unique work of art by using the Grisaille technique is the aim of the series of drawings, *Damaged*. While at the same time invoking a collective response by the use of repetition but remaining true to the concept of a singular original artwork.

To invoke Grisaille in drawings, a practice that can be more intimate than painting, the tonality of the work focus on its subject matter, allowing the internal as well as the external to shine through. The depth of the drawings becomes a meeting point between painting and drawing, while loosely observing the prescribed rules of both painting within Grisaille and drawing, whether with or without color.

To take into account a period of time and circumstance, the repetitive aspect of the drawings only serves to illuminate their originality and allow each drawing to become new, in contrast to the mass reproduction Benjamin is concerned with, and contrary to the

accessibility and simplicity of the modern camera. By retrieving the essential of drawing in color by eliminating “color” these drawings stretch the limits of possibilities within a very regimented framework. Here the subject, and therefore object, are the primary focal point.

The title leaves open for interpretation, by the viewer, the possible deeper or superficial meanings connected to it. When something is damaged, is it no longer whole, is it still usable, or must it be repaired? The lack of “color”, and its associations, also harks back to a time when introspection and study of a subject was foremost to access the essentials of the depiction. Within the process, of exploration and achievement, the finished work purveyed the exact intention of the artist.

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