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THERE IS NO NEUTRAL SPACE: AT HOME WITH RODRIGUEZ-WARNER'S "UNTITLED"

written by Joshua Ware | July 26, 2018

Denver's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) recently launched their [Octopus Initiative](#): a program that brings fine art into the homes of the general public. According to their website, the museum will offer "any resident of the Denver metro area the chance to borrow and live with a work of art made by a Denver-based artist for ten months." The program intends to "demonstrate a commitment to Denver artists by supporting them with commissions, while also deepening the connection between Denver audiences and the art and the artists working in their city."

The parameters for the Octopus Initiative are rather simple. Entrants register online, "heart" artwork in the collection that they like, then wait to find out if they've been selected during a monthly lottery. If selected, winners pick up artwork at the museum for display in their home. The first round of artists solicited for the program include [Molly Bounds](#), [Suchitra Mattai](#), [Clark Richter](#), and [Derek Velasquez](#), among others. A second round of featured artists will soon follow, which includes the work of [Diego Rodriguez-Warner](#).

MCA recently featured Rodriguez-Warner's artwork in an exhibition titled *Honestly Lying*, which ran from February 2 through May 13 of this year. According to the [museum's press release](#), it showcased the artist's output from the last five years, which is:

“informed by woodblock printing and characterized by *trompe l'oeil*, collage, and art historical references. [Rodriguez-Warner] enhances the *trompe l'oeil* by carving into and staining the plywood panels on which he works. Painted shadows and subtly carved ones confuse the eye. This sensation—that of the possibility of depth—is amplified by the layering of forms, figures, and patterns that twist around, melt into, and overlap one another. Some of these fragments, those cribbed from works by *ukiyo-e* master Yoshitoshi, Henri Matisse, and George Grosz, among others, appear familiar, while others elude identification, even as simple shapes.

The artist's deft technique, aesthetically and materially expansive panels, and indebtedness to past masters met with positive reviews. Michael Paglia of *The Westword* called the "pop-surrealist character" of Rodriguez-



Warner's work "downright spectacular"; *The Denver Post*'s Ray Rinaldi declared *Honestly Lying* to be a "dazzling museum debut" that was "smashingly visceral [and] overloaded with big and colorful collages you can't ignore"; and Cori Anderson of *303 Magazine* went so far as to claim, perhaps a bit hyperbolically, that Rodriguez-Warner "**might be one of the best artists of our time.**" With such acclaim lavished upon his show, the chance for Denverites to display one of his works (or the work of other artists) in their homes is, no doubt, a thrilling opportunity.

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Honestly Lying, though, did not receive unanimously positive feedback. Julie Carr, in a *Hyperallergic* article titled "Who Decides What's Violent in a Museum," penned a decidedly critical review of the exhibition. The target of her criticism focused primarily on her belief that MCA director Adam Lerner, artist Cleon Peterson (whose work exhibited simultaneously with *Honestly Lying*), and Rinaldi tacitly affirmed misogyny and racism through their respective curation, creation, and criticism. While not the object of her critique, per se, Rodriguez-Warner's work did not remain unscathed.

Carr noted that while his paintings are "colorful, playful, and citational," they often contain violent images wherein women's "breasts, vaginas, or legs" are "carved up and partially pieced back together." When viewing *Honestly Lying* in February, some of the concerns Carr articulated troubled me as well. The disembodied limbs and fragmented bodies of female figures in Rodriguez-Warner's paintings echoed or gestured toward the all-too-frequent violence enacted upon women in daily life. Likewise, the excess of Asian imagery appeared fetishistic and culturally appropriative. While enamored with the artist's evident technical skills and aesthetic prowess, I shied away from critical engagement with *Honestly Lying* because of, at least superficially, its problematic nature. Several months later, though, Rodriguez-Warner introduced himself to me after a performance at a local gallery, and we made plans to discuss his work.

* * *

During our conversation, I asked Diego about my issues with his work. Of the dismembered bodies, he referenced "the psychotic nature of empathetic leaps in contemporary culture." That is to say, he wanted to render within his paintings the manner in which news and media outlets bombard us, as consumers of information, with an incessant barrage of stories that resonate with disparate emotional frequencies. Whether scrolling through social media feeds, watching cable news, or reading the daily papers, we might encounter a story about a school shooting, followed by celebrity gossip, followed by a terrorist attack, followed by a humorous but inane meme. As such, we're conditioned to transition quickly from one emotional state to another, then back again. To Rodriguez-Warner's mind, these rapid and constant emotional transitions (or "empathetic leaps") induce within us a state of psychosis or derangement. By situating vibrant, colorful, and playful images adjacent to inherently violent ones, the artist attempts to mimic the psychological state contemporary media engenders within us.

With regard to his use of Asian bodies, influences, and signifiers, Rodriguez-Warner spoke of his intention to develop images not predicated upon stock, Latino tropes. This swerve, to his mind, enables him to undermine expectations of what a Latino artist can or should create. By engaging eastern iconography, he challenges viewers to reconceive the link between an artist's identity or ethnic heritage and the content found within their work.



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Of his “empathetic leaps,” though, one may rightly ask: why replicate the worst aspects of cultural consumption? What benefit does a viewer or artist derive from aestheticizing widespread psychosis? Likewise, one could question Rodriguez-Warner’s use of Asian imagery: does an artist’s desire to free himself of ethnic stereotypes or expectations justify cultural appropriation? What are the implications of advancing a personal aesthetic or professional career through commodification of another’s heritage?

Whether or not I agree with Diego’s ideas or conceptual strategies, I suppose, is moot. But after listening to him discuss the intentions, motives, and concepts underlying his practice, I felt more sympathetic toward his artwork. Although it was too late to write a review of his exhibit, I wanted to engage his work critically in order to, perhaps, provide an alternate lens through which to view his art: a stance somewhere between the canned affirmations and guilt-by-association critiques previously leveled.

* * *

At one point in our discussion, Rodriguez-Warner referenced Walter Benjamin’s relationship with Paul Klee. Specifically, he mentioned the former’s essay “[On the Concept of History](#)” wherein the latter’s monoprint “[Angelus Novus](#)” functions as a damning metaphor for the discourse of history. Of Klee’s piece, Benjamin famously wrote:

“*There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.*”

While not a “review” or “critique,” so to speak, Benjamin attends to Klee’s work in such a way that it acts as an emblem for the concept of history and a catalyst for deeper meditations on the philosopher’s chosen topic. Moreover, the passage now serves as an exemplar for interdisciplinary studies and the reciprocal capacity disparate art forms possess that allow for the transformation, re-imagination, or enlivening of one another.

With this cultural touchstone in mind, as well as his imminent involvement with the Octopus Initiative, I emailed Rodriguez-Warner a few days after our meeting with a proposition: would he loan me one of his paintings from *Honestly Lying* so I could engage it critically and intimately. He accepted my offer. The following day, I drove to his studio and picked up one of his newer, untitled works.

* * *

In an essay first published for his 1993 Pace Gallery show “[Donald Judd: Large Scale Works](#),” Judd wrote the following:

“*Any work of art, old or new, is harmed or helped by where it is placed. This can almost be considered objectively, that is, spatially. Further, any work of art is harmed or helped – almost always harmed – by the meaning of the situation in which it is placed. There is no neutral space, since space is made, indifferently or*”

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intentionally, and since meaning is made, ignorantly or knowledgeably.

Material context, for Judd, necessarily alters our perception and interpretation of an artwork. Far from functioning as an autonomous entity, a piece's surroundings encroach upon it, transforming its basic identity in fundamental ways. To wit, art is not a closed or hermetic system; rather, it is an open system that interacts with the world around it, mutating and adapting to external contingencies.

Judd's thoughts on placement are particularly apropos for my temporary acquisition of Rodriguez-Warner's "Untitled." To begin with, the shifting objective or spatial context necessitated that I reorient my relationship to it, in addition to posing material problems for its display. When I originally viewed "Untitled," it was on the first floor of the MCA. The high ceilings and large white walls engulfed the wood paneled painting. Likewise, several concurrently displayed, 8' x 16' pieces dwarfed its 5' x 4' dimensions. Indeed, the work of art looked deceptively small in its *Honestly Lying* context.

In stark contrast to the museum setting in which I initially view "Untitled," I live in a small, brick row house in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Denver. 9.5' ceilings, limited wall space, and narrow rooms create objective difficulties for hanging a 5' x 4' painting. Where I could hang "Untitled" became a product of available and viable wall space. In fact, only one area in the entire house (i.e. near the front door in my sitting room) could reasonably serve as its temporary home.

Instead of being engulfed or dwarfed by its surroundings, "Untitled" dominated my domestic space. Before I could hang the piece, I needed to de-install a smaller, collage-based triptych. Then I moved a bookcase in order to create the necessary clearance for the painting's length. Once I hung the painting, another problem arose: the room's narrow width. To gain an unimpeded view of the painting without feeling claustrophobic, I needed to dismantle a large, overhead bike rack on the other side of the room. Dismantling the structure provided me with the requisite space to look at "Untitled" without difficulty.

Once I removed the bike rack, though, the room's other objects began to assert themselves and impinge upon my awareness. In order to clear psychic space for the painting's presence and my critical faculties, I further overhauled the room. The bookcase that I moved to create clearance for "Untitled"? I boxed up the books and moved them and the case into the basement. I cleared the mantel above my bricked-in fireplace of bric-a-brac, tchotchkes, and ephemera. I removed posters and sophomoric wall hangings, replacing them with art that might compliment the painting's aesthetic energy.

I radically pared down the domestic elements and household furnishings in the room. The alterations, to my mind, provided me with a physical and psychological space wherein I could most thoroughly and rigorously focus on Diego's work. Certainly, my impression of "Untitled" changed when its objective context shifted; but the painting, concomitantly, changed (or induced a change in) the space in which I placed it. To this end, the artwork and the space interacted in a reciprocal, mutually modifying manner: one in which both served as catalyst for objective *and* relational transformations.

To be sure, many of the alterations that I made inside my house resulted from an agitation which the introduction of a large piece of artwork into a small space fostered. But, similarly, the changes were also a product of reverence for a museum-quality work of art now on display in my domestic space. Indeed, both of these feelings motivated me to modify the objective realities and material parameters of the space.

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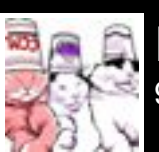
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After spending two days modifying my home, I assumed I would be prepared to engage “Untitled” critically. This was not the case. Rather than attend to the piece in an analytic, intellectual, meditative, or philosophic manner, I became enrapt by the fact that a large, aesthetically gorgeous, and museum-displayed artwork now hung in my house. My critical capacity ceded to awe: a palpable sensation of wonder induced by my temporary possession of “Untitled.” I noted both general qualities and specific details when viewing the piece, but I did not attend to the work in more than a cursory fashion.

Days passed. Nothing happened. I began to wonder: when would I approach Diego’s painting in a more meaningful way? What was preventing me from more insightful consideration? In short: why was I stuck? Was it the painting’s presence that prompted my critical delay: an awe induced by proximity to beauty? Was it my space and its material limitations that stunted me? Was this simply procrastination? Or did I, on some level, know that the sooner I composed an essay, the sooner “Untitled” would leave me? I don’t know, per se, the answer to these questions; but, in all reality, the answer lies in some combination of all these factors. What I *do* know is that I felt an overwhelming sense of anxiety. Each time I looked at the painting without acknowledging it in a critical manner, I imagined myself as a poor steward and flaccid critic.

* * *

After several weeks, I found myself alone in the house. One of my housemates left for Europe, while the other travelled to Austin for an extended weekend vacation. With a reoriented space now empty of people, I finally began the process of engaging “Untitled” in more depth.

As a point of critical entry, I returned to the text on the placard for “Untitled” that accompanied the painting at MCA during *Honestly Lying*. It read as follows:

“*Untitled manifests a breakthrough for Rodriguez-Warner. In the work, appropriated forms appear heavily edited, some to such an extent that they become unrecognizable. They have been aggressively fractured and twisted, and stripped of color and distinguishing details. The remnant white silhouettes morph into one tangled mass. Importantly, in Untitled, Rodriguez-Warner does not refill the layered bare figures or the larger form they create with new imagery or even plain color...Instead, he leaves them almost completely devoid of information, allowing them to stand on their own or become something new.*

While the placard opens with a helpful, visual description of the work, it concludes with less instructive insights that, in all actuality, serve to undermine the work’s aesthetic power and rhetorical stance. The central nexus of figures found in “Untitled,” in fact, contains an overwhelming amount of information, exists and is best understood in conjunction with a slew of art historical touchstones, and is less “something new” than a re-imagination, re-invention, or remix of something old.

For example, the distorted and disjointed figures that occupy the central space in Rodriguez-Warner’s “Untitled” bear a striking resemblance, and thus act a contemporary homage to, Picasso’s “Guernica.”

Like its predecessor, the figures in “Untitled” are primarily white or contain dull, fleshy hues. Moreover, disembodied eyes hover above the violent scenes depicted in both paintings, surveying the human-induced carnage below them. Likewise, both works contain open jaws frozen in painful scream or imminent gnashing.

But most noticeably, disjointed and fragmented limbs aggregate into a grotesque amalgam of broken human forms.

While Picasso's "Guernica" elicits many interpretations, [the artwork's most vulgar meaning](#) is that of a "powerful political statement, painted as an immediate reaction to the Nazi's devastating casual bombing practice on the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War." To this extent, the piece "shows the tragedies of war and the suffering it inflicts upon individuals, particularly innocent civilians." As such, Picasso's seminal painting "has gained a monumental status, becoming a perpetual reminder of the tragedies of war, an anti-war symbol, and an embodiment of peace."

A similar mode of thought could be applied to Rodriguez-Warner's painting. While "Guernica" employs a specific, historical instance that acts as an emblem for human-induced tragedy, Rodriguez-Warner's "Untitled" appears to aggregate the compounding violences of contemporary society—as well as their perpetual dissemination via media—into a single but multifarious nexus of dismemberment. Instead of focusing on a single instance of tragedy, he focuses on an amorphous but decidedly wicked zeitgeist of our current epoch. To wit, Rodriguez-Warner's painting is anything *but* "devoid of information"; the artwork, rather, contains an excess of historical and contemporary touchstones.

But if we take seriously Rodriguez-Warner's concept of "empathetic leaps," then we must also attend to how the painting vacillates between disparate emotional registers. The background upon which the artist sets his grotesque, nexus of violence provides viewers with such emotive dissonance.

If the vortex of broken forms embodies the savagery of contemporary society, then the bright swathes of vibrant color could just as easily parallel all that is frivolous and comical in our culture: [YouTube videos](#), [viral memes](#), [celebrity gossip](#), and [RickRolling](#). Such an interpretation of the background in "Untitled" finds credence in yet another art historical reference: Henri Matisse and his Fauvist comrades.

Generally speaking, "[optically dynamic works of bright, clashing colors](#)" created by a coterie of Parisian painters during the early-twentieth century marked a work as Fauvist. Historians consider their use of color to be "[vivid, expressionistic, and nonnaturalistic](#)."

More importantly, Matisse once declared that he wanted his artwork "devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter" with the hope that it would foster "a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue." By harnessing a Fauvist-like aesthetic on which he paints his primary figure, Rodriguez-Warner challenges the viewer to engage contrasting aesthetic and historical references in a single, optic experience. While, no doubt, such an engagement engenders both emotional and cognitive dissonance; it also replicates the psychotic nature of contemporary media which the artist mentioned in our previous conversation.

* * *

Yet, reading "Untitled" as an aesthetic manifestation of our culture's psychotic nature, in fact, is no more or less valid than the perfunctory affirmations of Paglia, Rinaldi, and Anderson. Likewise, it is no more or less legitimate than Carr's claims of misogyny. For an interpretation of a work of art, when rooted in critical examination of the text, enters into a broader discourse about the piece, art history, and culture in general.

No single interpretation should be read as most essential, regardless of who crafts the argument. Rather, interpretations that critically engage an artwork should be read in conjunction with one another: a complex aggregate of thoughts, beliefs, and theories that function as discreet but interrelated voices in a dialogic milieu.

Perhaps even more revealing, the individual voices that comprise a certain conversation are themselves products of a vast network of influences, agendas, educations, and ideologies. To this end, the authority or credence given to one interpretation over another speaks less to the veracity or credibility of an interpretation, but more to the external systems of validation that serve to re-enforce established systems of power. Just as there is no neutral space, there is no neutral interpreter. Moreover, none of these interpretations should be considered “true” or “correct,” per se; rather, certain interpretations may or may not be more useful than others in a given situation when marshalled for a particular purpose.

This is all to say that, while I find aspects of the interpretations forwarded by Rodriguez-Warner, Carr, Paglia, Rinaldi, and Anderson understandable, none of them are mine. And, more so, none of these critiques encapsulate my experience with “Untitled.” Certainly, all of the reviews served as a doorway through which I could enter the piece. But to rely on these interpretations for comprehension amounts to intellectual lethargy and an implicit endorsement of gate-keeping.

* * *

What, then, is *my* interpretation of Diego Rodriguez-Warner’s “Untitled”? One of the more interesting elements of the artwork, to my mind, can be found in the vortex of human body parts that occupies the central space of the painting.

Situated in the upper, central portion of the fragmented figure is a woman’s breast, pulling itself to the forefront of the painting with its lone, attached arm. Under the shade of a curved swathe of flesh located just below the breast is a male phallus.

Rather than interpreting the vortex of limbs as emblematic of humanity’s violent tendencies, it alternatively can be understood as representative of a singular individual or identity. By this, I mean, the inclusion of both female breast and male phallus might suggest the presence or depiction of a trans-identity or body within “Untitled.” If that is the case, then, how does one read the painting? In other words, how does a viewer interpret the artwork’s composition if its figuration does not speak to a collective human condition, but, rather, to a particular, gender-queer segment of the population?

To begin with, one could read the fragmentary nature of the displaced body parts as a metaphor for the variance between a trans-individual’s identity and their biological assignation, in addition to the ambivalence one experiences during transitional periods. To be born into a body that does not align with one’s sense of self has the ability to produce “[disruptive effects upon a trans subject’s continuous identity](#),” a schism between one’s internal state and their corporeal shell. In his memoir *Finding Masculinity* excerpted at [The Advocate](#), Nick Krieger writes about how he oscillated between feelings of “abject terror to unfettered joy,” and, oftentimes, “the fear and excitement mixed and mingled, seemingly one and the same” during his transition. To wit, artistic fragmentation could serve to aestheticize the disruption of continuous identity, as well as ambivalent or contradictory feelings.

But Krieger, importantly, notes that every trans-narrative is different for each individual. To this extent, one should not assume his experiences are indicative of all such stories. But reading through similar narratives from *The New York Times* exposé “[Transgender Lives: Your Stories](#),” *CNN.com*’s “[We’re not Caitlyn Jenner: Stories of transgender transitions](#),” or *The Guardian*’s “[Transgender stories: ‘People think we wake up and decide to be trans,’](#)” the variance between self-identification and biological assignation can result in confusion with or desire to alter the body into which one was born.

Additionally, one could also read the fragmentary limbs and body parts as emblematic of the surgical, hormonal, and medical procedures a body must undertake in order to integrate one’s physical self with one’s internal identity: a body, literally, sliced, augmented, and redistributed in an effort to synch internal and external states. In this reading, the vortex of limbs suggests a liberating, thus affirmative, transformation.

In contrast to these interpretations, the fragmentation and displacement of limbs could also represent violence experienced by trans-individuals in today’s society. In a 2013 report on the impending release of the DSM-5, the [National LGBTQ Task Force](#) noted that members of the trans-community “suffer from unnecessary abuse and discrimination from both inside and outside the medical profession” and, oftentimes, are “forcibly subjected to abusive ‘reparative’ therapies designed to ‘cure’ them of gender variance.” The report further states that:

“*As long as gender variance is characterized by the medical field as a mental condition, transgender people will find their identities invalidated by claims that they are “mentally ill,” and therefore not able to speak objectively about their own identities and lived experiences. This has even been used to justify discrimination against transgender people, such as in child custody cases, discrimination in hiring/workplace practices, or justifying them to be mentally unfit to serve in the military.*”

And these invalidations, abuses, and discriminations, obviously, do not account for the physical violence perpetrated against trans-individuals in society today by the transphobic. A recent report release by the Human Rights Campaign, titled [Fatal Violence Against Transgender People In America 2017](#), notes that trans-individuals “face bigotry and unjust barriers that threaten their dignity and too often put them at risk of violence.” Moreover, such abuses are “sometimes ruthlessly endorsed and enforced by those at the highest levels of our government.”

The beauty of art and art criticism, though, is that none of these arguments within a trans-reading of the piece needs assert itself as dominant or correct. Rather, *all* of these arguments exist simultaneously, offering viewers a more complex and nuanced rhetorical experience.

* * *

If we read the central figure as both the variance experienced by a trans-individual *and* the violence enacted upon trans-bodies by contemporary society, does “Untitled” offer commentary on these issues? Or does it merely aestheticize a segment of our population? While aestheticizing a population through a representative body in-and-of-itself could be construed as a championing of trans-identities and causes, one can read “Untitled” in such a way that it provides more than an implied validation of the trans-community. To this end, the flowers in the bottom-right corner of the painting offer an instructive suggestion.

In an article titled “[Botanical Imagery in European Painting](#)” on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website,

author Jennifer Meagher writes about the “twofold” purpose of floral representations. First, painters incorporate flowers into their work for their “decorative properties”; in short, artists include flowers into their paintings, oftentimes, merely for their received and ubiquitous assumption of beauty. In addition to this quality, though, the incorporation of botanical elements frequently serves as a conduit for “symbolic meaning or association that relates to the subject of the painting.” In other words, a flower is not only a flower, but also a metaphor for something else.

“Untitled,” it would appear, both employs and subverts this tradition of using botanical representations for the purpose of both decorative beauty and symbolic imagery. On the one hand, the botanical images in the bottom right-hand corner of “Untitled” *do* act as a symbol. But, on the other hand, the manner in which Rodriguez-Warner renders them actively undermines received notions of normative beauty. To explain: the vibrant colors (and, obviously, fragrant aroma) of the flowers in “Untitled” have been removed from the image. Instead, the artwork presents the viewer with an armature or skeleton of botanical elements. Rather than sumptuous visual offering, the artist creates flowers from thin pencil marks scrawled on a white background. In such a manner, “Untitled” empties a normative symbol of its superficial characteristics that we typically consider pleasing. Instead, we “see inside” the flower, so to speak: an unadorned white space stripped of external qualities, revealing its internal or essential characteristics. In such a way, the painting asks us to look *beyond, below, or inside* external or superficial representation.

As a symbol, then, we can read the skeletal flowers as a commentary of both transgender identity and transsexual bodies. Vis-à-vis gender identity, “*L’essentiel est invisible pour les yeux.*” With regard to trans-bodies, the painting suggests we recalibrate or disavow standard notions of human beauty in order to open a space for different, new, and constructed bodies—bodies that, by their mere presence, act as affronts to biological determinism.

To my mind, such a reading of Rodriguez-Warner’s “Untitled” fascinates because it addresses timely conversations in contemporary society. I will not claim that this interpretation is more accurate than other readings of the artwork; nor do I know if the artist or those who champion his work look at this piece through such a lens. But this matters little to me. What does matter to me is that the critique situates “Untitled” within a prominent, contemporary dialogue for the purpose of calling attention to a marginalized segment of society.

* * *

In my former life as a college professor, I would regularly teach the essay “My Friend Lodovico” by David Masello. I used the essay, first published by *The New York Times* on 08 February 2004, as an example of how one could construct a detailed, mental image of a tangible object through precise, descriptive language. But what remains in my memory of Masello’s article is the love affair he developed over the years with an Agnolo Bronzino painting.

[The Frick Collection](#) in Manhattan houses Bronzino’s portrait of Lodovico Capponi. Masello visited the museum regularly when he initially moved to the city, calling the painting a “constant in my early years in New York.” Towards the conclusion of the essay, he writes:

I can’t claim that an image in a painting became one of my first real friends in New York, but I can say that I

“visited the painting so often when I was new to the city that, as an object, it became friendly and familiar.
The painting and the room where it hangs became, and remain, constants in my life.”

While Masello knows that an inanimate object cannot transform into a “real friend,” he does realize that, through repeated engagement, artwork can become “friendly and familiar” to a viewer in a way that a single, casual observation does not afford. Returning to a piece, though, produces a particular type of intimacy that mimics or parallels the parameters of human intimacy.

Although I have not spent decades with Diego Rodriguez-Warner’s “Untitled” (as did Masello with Bronzino’s Lodovico), I have spent the past two months fostering a close relationship with it. At first, yes, the painting generated within me an ambivalent sense of awe and anxiety. But those feelings, eventually, ceded to endearing sentiments and intimate moments.

Regardless of what I felt, though, the artwork asserted itself in my life every day. Sometimes I would merely glance at it as I walked out the front door. Other days, I sat in chair in front of “Untitled,” thinking and writing about its meanings or ramifications. And, on the best days, I simply stared at it for extended periods of time and lost myself in its artifice: a mind not working critically, but a person immersing themselves within an artistic milieu.

No doubt, the familiarity I developed with “Untitled” is a product of prolonged engagement with a single work of art. It is the type of relationship that cannot be achieved by viewing a piece briefly at a museum or gallery, or secondhand in reproduction. Like any intimate bond, it is connection formed through patience, effort, and understanding. For those who are luckily enough to experience such a sustained encounter with a work of high-art, via Octopus Initiative or otherwise, it is an opportunity to cherish.

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JOSHUA WARE

Joshua Ware is a visual artist and poet who was born in Cleveland, OH. He currently lives in Denver, CO and works as a landscaper. IG: @joshua.ware // URL: www.joshua-ware.com

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