

Think Visual

By A.S. Byatt

Alberto Manguel is an expert explorer of what the French call the *imaginaire* -- a word that combines imagination, imagery and the formation of images in the mind. He is the author of a very practical Dictionary of Imaginary Places. His History of Reading is a brilliant account of the ways in which reader and writer meet and change each other. He understands the logic of Lewis Carroll's world of wonderland and mirrors better than almost anyone else. His own imagination is supple and generous, and his work is full of surprises.

The only dubious thing about his new book, Reading Pictures, is its title. The processes he describes, as he considers how we respond to visual images, differ from those of reading the written. He runs the risk of being lumped with the modern literary theorists' tendency to see everything as a subset of literary theory, whereas he is in fact someone who works accurately and idiosyncratically in ordinary language, to our delight. He is indeed interested in the ways visual objects resist being "read" or interpreted. He is happy to let mysteries remain mysteries. But he thinks furiously.

He explains that he had intended to write a book about "our emotions and how they affect (and are affected by) our reading of works of art." He says he has ended up "far, very far" from his imagined goal. It seems to me that this is not quite so: His chosen images, and his ordering and discussion of them, depend on the variety and subtlety of his understanding of the emotions of artist, viewer and mostly of the subject of the painting, too. He evokes unease, bafflement, delight, wit, fear, pity and indignation in his own readers. He explains and describes, but he conveys feeling.

There are 12 chapters, considering the image as story, absence, riddle, witness, understanding, nightmare, reflection, violence, subversion, philosophy, memory and theater. The works of art are paintings, ancient and modern; sculpture; architecture; photographs; and mosaics. The artists range from the Greek Philoxenus to Picasso and Jackson Pollock, from baroque Brazil to 15th-century Flanders, from abstract paintings to the memorial for (or to, or about) the Holocaust. Each chapter ranges widely and sure-footedly around its chosen subject, using Manguel's wide learning to make new connections. His chapter on Joan Mitchell's "Two Pianos" (1980) discusses her paradoxical rendering of sound in gold and violet showers of strokes. He widens this out into Byzantine iconoclasm, the Jewish mistrust of pictures of living things and an attempt to feel his way into the "formalised acceptance," by modern artists like Pollock, of a deliberate refusal to communicate.

At the other extreme is his discussion of Picasso's paintings of weeping women, specifically Dora Maar, and the curious and disturbing process whereby the private image of grief, induced by the sadistic pleasure of the painter, was transmuted to an image of public mourning when it reappeared in "Guernica." Again, Manguel follows what feels like a natural process of combining thinking and feeling, telling the story of Dora, expressing his own dislike of Picasso's narcissism, making wide comparisons with analogous works. It is the scrupulous, high-powered conversation of a learned man, rather than professional "criticism," and the better for it. This is also true of his discussion of the Holocaust Memorial -- he concludes, convincingly, that the only adequate memorial is a continually growing library, to bear witness and to make us think.

The British anthropologist Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, explains that cultures and religions reject the impure, the mixed, the liminal, things that cannot be put into categories. Manguel, a man knowledgeable about ghosts and monsters, at home in many cultures, is drawn to hybrids and anomalies. Some of his most haunting images (literally -- they have got into my dreams) are mixed in many ways. I did not know the work of either Lavinia Fontana (Italian, 1570s) or Marianna Gartner (Canadian, of Hungarian origin, alive now). Fontana's portrait of a woman called Tognina, who was born with a gene that covered her

body with hair, like a cat or a wolf, stands at the center of the chapter on the image as understanding. Tognina appeared in books of monstrosities, and became a court curiosity, like dwarfs or mermaids. Manguel discusses the compassion and respect with which Fontana represented her defiant, wary, unsmiling stare over her rich dress. Manguel is convincing about the emotion of painter and sitter -- and onlooker.

Gartner paints what he calls "privately ambiguous" nightmares. Her works are hybrids of photograph and painting. In "Diablo Baby" a naked child sits on a floral globe of a cushion. He has small, curving rams horns, and is tattooed with skulls and demons. In "Tightrope Clara" a very nice little girl holding up her skirt stands on a tightrope in a void, between two panels containing skeletons quoted from a 17th-century Dutch anatomy lesson and a 19th-century French Vanitas, where a pretty woman encounters her own skeleton as double. These images are simultaneously realist and entirely fantastic, drawing on many cultures and traditions, intensely present as something new and individual.

So are the extraordinary sculptures of the Brazilian master Aleijandhino, at the center of the chapter on the image as subversion. Aleijandhino was a hybrid, born in the 18th century, bastard son of an African slave and a Portuguese architect, who forged a new style incorporating the Portuguese baroque with something native, working in the soft soapstone of the country. His ferocious imagination is not effortless but endlessly energetic and inventive.

Maybe the central chapter, as far as the imaginaire goes, is the one on Philoxenus, "The Image as Reflection." It begins with a mosaic of a lost painting of the battle of Issus, in which a dying soldier sees his own face, perhaps for the first time, reflected in a shield. This leads to a wonderfully elaborate series of reflections on portraits, self-portraits, mirrors, doubles, secret sharers, doppelgangers. All portraits are self-portraits in a sense. All self-portraits require the imagination to see the subject as an object, an other. Both desperate attempts at precise realism and extreme projections of fantasy stem from this same source. We haunt ourselves, see ourselves in others, make new hybrids in our imagery from what we see. The perception of sameness in difference and difference in

sameness, Coleridge said, was the essence of metaphor - - and perhaps, of the thinking process, and of art as part of that. No one understands this better than Manguel, which is why his own reflections, so unconstricted, so clear, so strange, are so very satisfying to his readers. A.S. Byatt's novels include "Possession" and "The Biographer's Tale."

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