

# An Irrational Feeling

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2011

*Paper Monument*

It's a small painting, and its palette is rich and darkly hued. Long, denim-sheathed legs extend from the vicinity of the seam where a couch's seat cushions meet its back. The legs are wearing white sneakers, and one foot is propped on an ottoman that looks like a layer cake, with alternating stripes of black and white. The legs are not attached to a torso, at least not one that is visible. It's possible that the torso—and the head and arms that go with it—is tucked into the couch.

Those legs look like they belong to someone who is halfway here and halfway somewhere else. The denim is a deep azure; the background (consisting of brown walls and a wood floor) is earthy, peaty. The couch cushions are upholstered in a nubby red fabric, and the back looks like well-worn Naugahyde—it is the kind of couch you might find in a railroad apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. There is one especially odd detail: a white electric socket on the wall. Perhaps the socket is a jolt of reality, reminding us that this is not a dream. Or it could be the opposite, a mysterious conduit that pulls the viewer away to wherever the upper half of the jeans-wearing body might be.

Last night I had a dream that I had to defend my decision to write about this artwork, an untitled 2010 painting by a young artist named Emilie Gossiaux. The dream was set in an art school; it looked like a Renaissance-style palazzo designed by M.C. Escher. Lots of marble stairways leading to nowhere, and no ceiling, just a uniformly gray, open sky. The walls were stone, and hung with eighteenth and

nineteenth-century portraits, and there were many pedestals supporting fragile objects. I was walking with a group of about ten or so people, probably students at the school, and they were criticizing my pick. One of them I recognized: a painter friend. She supported my choice at first, but then unexpectedly turned hostile. “The work is second rate, not well painted. It’s too trendy.”

I don’t remember if I argued with her or not during that bizarrely Socratic stroll. I told myself that she didn’t know what she was talking about, and that of course she preferred lifelike figuration since that’s what she made. But the words stung, and I awoke feeling insecure.

I know why I had that dream. Though I regularly write about art, I never reveal my visceral, emotional responses; I always maintain a neutral, third-person authority. Sometimes I worry about falling prey to “aesthetic puritanism,” which, as Mary McCarthy wrote, tends to be “based on a denial of one’s own natural tastes and instincts.” And so I have to remind myself that my personal reaction is the gateway to critical judgment. If an art object makes me feel irritated, or sad, or any similarly shadowy feeling, and I keep asking friends “what did you think of that?” I know I need to contend with it.

When I got home after seeing the painting at Recess gallery, I googled the artist. My fascination quadrupled. The details of Gossiaux’s story have been beautifully documented [elsewhere](#) and I don’t want to spoil the sense of discovery for anyone else. I will write, though, that she was in a terrible bicycle accident in Brooklyn, and ended up in Bellevue Hospital in a vegetative state from which doctors determined she would never recover. Yet she did recover, and the story of her recovery is extraordinary. But that isn’t the story that concerns us now, except for one important element that gives new, and tragically prophetic, meaning to the painting, which was

made before her accident: after the accident, Gossiaux said she felt as if she was separated from the world, as if plastered behind a wall.

“Authenticity” is a much-abused word in art and criticism. But how else to talk about a real experience, before it has been mediated and analyzed and categorized? Our desire for such an experience is the reason we rely on dreams and “outsider” or “non-traditional” art, on our impulses and instincts. I once heard a radio interview with a musician who said that he writes in the morning, while he is still half-asleep, so he can try to tap into that dreamlike place. “When I make a film, it is a sleep in which I am dreaming,” Jean Cocteau famously wrote. And nobody advocated more passionately for plumbing the unconscious than Andre Breton. I wonder whether the legs in Gossiaux’s painting belong to Breton’s “man cut in two by the window,” who he wrote about in 1924, in the first Surrealist Manifesto. The image came to Breton in the form of a phrase just before he was about to fall asleep, and as the phrase wormed its way into his mind he could faintly make out a “man cut half way up by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body.” This image unleashed a torrent of writing over which, Breton claims, he had little control.

Some have speculated that Breton’s amputated man was inspired by disfigured veterans returning home from WW I. Bodies are meant to be whole. Yet paradoxically it is the unseen—the legs of Breton’s man, the torso of Gossiaux’s—that carries us to unknown regions, past the threshold of consciousness to the limitless hallways of our imagination. There is no logical connection between the imagery in Gossiaux’s work and the event that threatened to end her life. Any link made between the two would be incidental, if not inconsequential. I can only speak to my own experience of the work, and I know the sense of empathy I felt when I saw her painting, a feeling that was insistent and subterranean, thrumming like the left-hand chords of a Chopin prelude, a feeling that I sink into and which I can hardly bring myself to confess to in print, because it seems to

reveal too much. This feeling—of alienation, or claustrophobia, or solitude—short-circuits my critical faculties. I am moved, bewildered.

I was so affected, in fact, that I asked about buying the painting. But according to the gallery, Gossiaux says it is not for sale.

There is a scene in *L.A. Story*, a film that came out in the early nineties, in which Steve Martin, playing a weatherman, pre-tapes the weather report because he is confident that the weather will be sunny and temperate, as always. Naturally it rains that weekend, and as a result he loses his job.

I felt similarly foolish and reprehensible this past week when *Paper Monument* published and then promptly retracted a thousand-word essay I wrote about a painting by Emilie Gossiaux. The essay describes my emotional response to her painting, and the value of the unconscious in relation to art. Part of the essay is premised on the fact that the painting was made after a truck ran into Emilie while she was on her bicycle. This chronology turned out to be untrue—the painting was made before this awful accident. How I got it into my head that it was otherwise, I'm not sure. Like Steve Martin's weatherman, I think I was accustomed to recounting a specific series of facts (I'd told multiple people about the painting and Emilie), and then was too lazy to verify them. Or perhaps too in love with the story I'd unintentionally fabricated to risk its undoing by the truth.

In any event, I regret the error.

I liked the painting before I knew anything about Emilie, and that response is honest and vivid and true. My interpretation was flawed, though to my mind, not exceptionally so. In apology, I have modified the essay—for which I received no financial compensation, by the way—and am posting it on my own site because I still admire the work and want it and my

thoughts about it to be known. And I'm also posting a link to the cached webpage with the original, flawed essay so readers can make up their own minds about whether I was ever disrespectful of the artist.

A few weeks ago, a book came out called *The Lifespan of a Fact*, written by experimental essayist John D'Agata and Jim Fingal. Fingal factchecked an essay D'Agata wrote for *The Believer* riddled with factual errors, and the tug of war between the writer and the factchecker is detailed in the book. I was intrigued by the debate about how far a writer can go to mold a nonfiction essay to fit his or her own ideas. But I never thought I myself would fall victim to this temptation. Now I know how easy it is for an oversight—the failure to doublecheck a date, the simplest task imaginable—to cloud one's understanding of the actual circumstances which in turn can challenge one's credibility. Let's just say the experience was instructive, and one I won't repeat.