

THE CRITICISM PYRAMID

Criticism and Visual Language

Written by Daniel Chard ©
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“I don’t know much about art, but I know what I like.” Although overused, such a comment remains a handle for art talk. This statement also reveals much about how we approach art criticism. It is something of a confession that the likes and dislikes defining criticism, however strongly felt, get in the way of new experiences and the development of aesthetic sensibilities. Aesthetic experience can be aided by knowing there is no relationship between our likes and quality in art. We can dislike a painting, for example, and decide that it is a good painting. Further, all of the following propositions are plausible (Ecker and Kaelin):

It is a good painting and I like it.
It is a bad painting and I like it.
It is a good painting and I don’t like it.
It is a bad painting and I don’t like it.

Thoughtful criticism can determine aesthetic merit independent of our likes and dislikes. Further, thoughtful criticism can increase the quality of our experience with art.

Rather than dwell on our established likes and dislikes, we should *experience* the art; encounter it, see new things, see things differently, and experience its connections to other art forms and ideas. Experience in art is largely the result of perceptual dynamics in the image. These dynamics produce psychological energy (to the prepared spectator) through relationships of color, shape, line, and tone in space. Gestalt psychology explains much about these dynamics. Perceptual dynamics produce the phenomena that are avenues to the larger aesthetic meanings. Perceptual dynamics can tug, pull and twist our sensibilities and bring art to life—much as it was experienced in another time.

The spectator’s expectations for realism are often an obstacle to the perceptual language and the larger meanings. We can expect a realist painting to match our visual knowledge of the world around us—but not really. Actually, the translation of the three-dimensional world to photographic imagery is the default standard for realist imagery, realist painting being normally perceived in the context of the photograph, with a history of conditioning at work from our infancy. When we talk of realism, the photo is the cultural standard directing everyone’s perception, with the possible exception of those highly skilled and trained in realism. Realist imagery by itself is craft, technology, and science, but not necessarily art. The principles of linear perspective and light and shadow, as part of

illusionism, are only tools that may or may not lead to the aesthetic. Having said that the photograph is the standard, there are great limitations for a two-dimensional image in representing the 3D world; the realistic image never becomes the thing represented. A realist image is a quite superficial record of a 3D subject.

Written language has an enormous impact on our orientation to language. When the expectations for written language are transferred to an encounter with a painting, the expectation is literal realism. The well educated often have trouble getting beyond literal interpretations of visual arts imagery, abstraction seen as too amorphous. With this orientation, the fine arts are seen as mere descriptive illustrations, and making nonrepresentational of the last century largely inaccessible. The kind of “left-brain learning” that has been valued in education doesn’t encourage the experimental behavior, the divergent thinking or the perceptual skills necessary to experience the phenomena of art. Further, it is creative behavior that people outside the arts have difficulty understanding, seeing creativity more like a magic act. This lack of understanding leads many people see art as something “thought up,” because that’s how *they* would do it. Indeed, some art *is* thought up. But the rich and durable imagery that comes to stand for the most basic human feelings is the consequence of creative behavior. This imagery is unique because the perceptual arts are unique in their potential to tap the unconscious. Little understood is the manner in which people learn to behave and perform with media through these perceptual languages. Through facility with an artistic medium, creative artists can access the deepest and most profound meanings in artistic expression. (This is more clearly demonstrated in jazz, as musicians create music in the act of the playing, without a plan, often creating variations of melodies and progressions new to them. Accomplished facility with an instrument makes it possible.)

The imagery of the perceptual arts is dynamic in its expression and comes to life for the prepared spectator, much as the imagery was alive for the artist who created the form. We not only experience the work similar to what the artist experiences, we experience the work similar to the people of the artist’s time. Dynamic art forms provide and sustain connectedness to our past and what we share with other people in other times. Ideas are not merely described in the visual arts, but they are presented in perceptually dynamic phenomena, existing in their own form. They exist as cornerstones for civilization. *Herein is the justification for a phenomenological approach to art experience.* The meaning and the spirit of the past exists for us as phenomena in historic art forms, only limited by our preparation to experience it. Here is the appropriate starting point for an approach to aesthetic criticism: preparing a proper orientation and appreciation of a perceptual language. Moreover, this concern is at the core of arts education—another language and another way of thinking.

A Phenomenological Approach to Art Criticism

Art criticism can be thought of simply as talk about art. Just as writing can clarify thinking, so art criticism can clarify art experience. In each case, there is need for careful thought about the process. Thoughtful application of art criticism to a painting can help us see the particular piece of art, as well as improve the

quality of future art experiences. An effective process for criticism can help us to see and experience more.

Anything can be given our aesthetic attention. What we see in art experience is determined by what we are ready or prepared to see. Do we open our eyes for the confirmation of what we know or the exploration of something new? Of course, we are somewhere in between. Aesthetic experience is of the mind; aesthetic forms are directed to a mix of perception and thought. Edward Bullough helped identify what we call aesthetic in his phenomenological description of a fog at sea. The fog presents a very real danger and produces great anxiety as we watch and listen for “distance and unlocalized signals.” The ship movements and “her warning calls” take a toll on the passengers. For all the danger, however, the fog “can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment.” We may from moment-to-moment slip into a frame of mind where we consider the phenomena as a “veil surrounding you with an opaqueness as of transparent milk, blurring the outline of things and distorting their shapes into weird grotesqueness.” Bullough continues with his example: “the curious creamy smoothness of the water, hypocritically denying as it were any suggestion of danger; and above all, the strange solitude and remoteness from the world, as only can be found on the highest mountain tops.” These descriptions of the phenomena lift us beyond the practical world into the world of the aesthetic. Bullough describes this transformation as a moment “when our practical interests snaps like a wire from sheer over-tension, and we watch the consummation of some impending catastrophe with the marveling unconcern of a mere spectator” (Vivas and Krieger p. 640-41).

Natural phenomena in the practical world seem to take us more easily into an aesthetic orientation. A breathtaking vista can easily lead us to consider and reflect on the world around us. Snow-capped mountains and starry nights have a scale about them that forces us to reconsider our very existence. Art forms, however, are more tangible and finite; they cannot compete—nor should they compete—with the scale and the forces of nature. Art language is a language that speaks to our being through perception, concept and myth; artists do not usually seek to replicate nature in art form. The artist uses the familiar to articulate larger meanings, the unexpressed.

Art forms speak to us through the perceptual dynamics of the medium. These dynamics are complex. One example would appear in the dynamic of gravity as applied to a painting on a wall; placing the same painting flat on the floor will reveal a loss of gravity (Figure 1). We expect to see gravity at work when we look around us, but not when we look down:

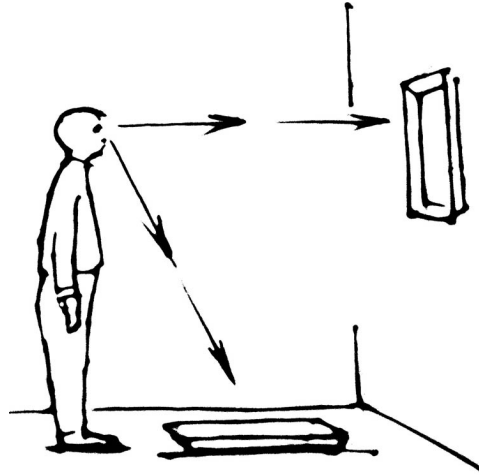


Figure 1

Another example of perceptual dynamics is revealed in the tendency to read imagery from left to right. A diagonal line between bottom left and top right will appear to be ascending, while a diagonal line between top left and bottom right will appear to be descending, as in Figure 2:

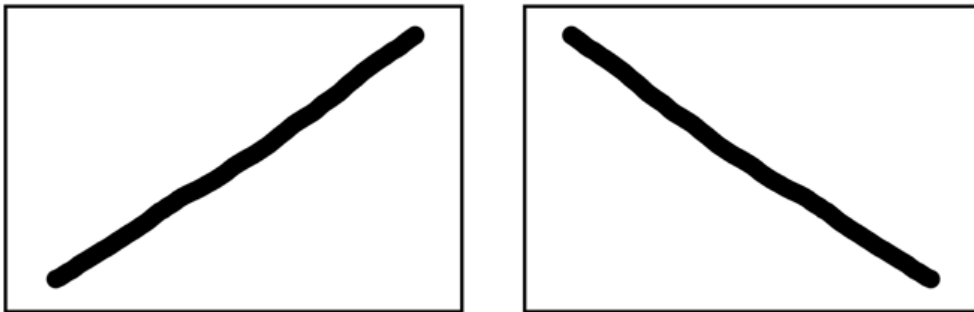


Figure 2

Another example of the normal and expected flow from left to right on the picture plane can be seen in two sets of vertical lines. The lines leaning to the left will appear more dynamic than lines leaning to the right because they oppose the left-to-right tendency (Figure 3).

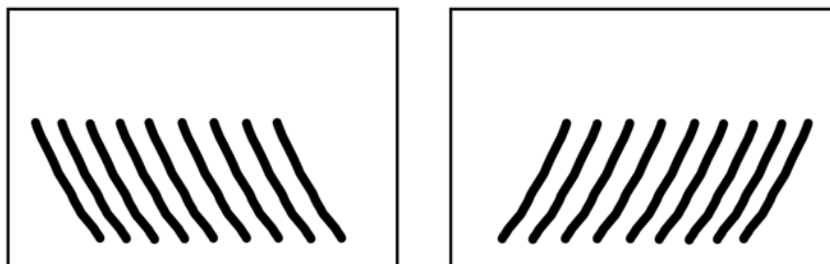


Figure 3

Applying this theory to a painting in Figure 3a, Orozco's "Zapatistas" shows the forcefulness of diagonal lines leaning to the left. Here the soldiers appear more aggressive because this principle is at work. Reversing the image (Figure 3b) shows the image weakened and less forceful. In fact, the coherence of the entire image is undermined by the reversal.



Black and white version of Orozco's "Zapatistas"
Figure 3a



Figure 3b

These examples provide a small indication of the broad and complex language fundamental to aesthetic experience in the visual arts. Rudolph Arnheim has written about the elements of this language in *Art and Visual Perception* (1954, 1974). We need not be knowledgeable about the underlying theories explaining phenomena in art. However, the study and application of these principles will lead to greater sensitivity and appreciation of art. But the experience is always more valuable than the theories, experience more important than thought (like breathing is more important than thinking about breathing). The understandings can expand the experience if we are vigilant in remaining open to the phenomena.

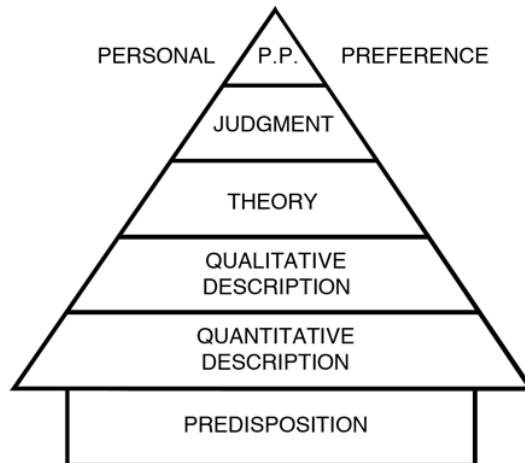


Figure 4

The **Criticism Pyramid** makes the criticism process more concrete by dividing the process into five discrete levels for art talk. It emphasizes engaging with the phenomena of the art while managing the talk that interferes with seeing and experiencing the phenomena.

Looking at the Pyramid, we can observe the tendency to move from the top down, beginning with our likes and dislikes (*Personal Preference*). We might say, for example, “I don’t like it (*PP*); it isn’t a good painting (*Judgment*), because the use of color (for example) doesn’t work, and the medium is not under control (*Theory*),” etc. With this sequence the phenomena of the work doesn’t have much of a chance. The early engagement with likes, theory and judgment derails the opportunity for a new experience. Rather than the top-down approach, the process of criticism should begin with what is seen and experienced, not with a reflection of the spectator’s psychological state, *Personal Preference*. Our predisposition always directs our aesthetic experience; it is not easy for us to acknowledge and identify the way it directs and shapes what we see and how we see. Even the most prepared spectator has points of view that reflect past experience, knowledge, personality and beliefs. But if the painting is to be fully experienced, we must spend time looking and exploring rather than simple recognition and classification; once a painting is recognized for its style, its use of content and use of media, it can be too quickly pigeonholed as something already seen, rather than appreciated as something new. Therefore, criticism should move bottom-up on the pyramid rather than top-down. The pyramid shape, narrowing from bottom to top, symbolically represents the broad amount of information available about the art at the bottom, as we access the image through attentive perception. Conversely, as the pyramid narrows toward the top, it represents a distancing from the art with less information about the art; in the upper part of the Pyramid we are more engaged in thoughts about the art than the art itself—with *Theory, Judgment and Personal Preference*. Goethe’s quote, “thinking is more interesting than knowing, but less interesting than looking”,

explains the hierarchy; we are more alive and expanding as we are engaged in the phenomena of our lives-looking. A thought about experience cannot represent experience, although thought has its purpose—as in this paper—in leading us to understand, and prepare to expand the looking, to see more. Expecting to see more can lead us to see more. Knowledge, however, leads us to defend what we know, shutting the door on change.

We may begin the criticism process by opening our attitude to the experience as though we have followed a mountain trail, through a narrow passage that opens into a breathtaking vista. Approaching a painting, as we may approach nature, can make the art experience an adventure. Early in the encounter, we may take inventory of what we see, searching rather than simply recognizing and categorizing. The shapes, the colors, the space, and the patterns—we can take inventory of all the visual features. Counter to the previous top-down approach, we could begin our criticism by listing our observations. In this bottom-up approach we must emphasize the *Qualitative Description* and the words used to characterize the phenomena.

Predisposition. The Criticism Pyramid provides a process to minimize personal bias in considering art, allowing us access to aesthetic form, to more fully experience aesthetic form. The *Predisposition* is a reality check for the viewer to reflect on their preparation to consider work that may be beyond their sensibilities. It would be ideal if we could simply be open to our new experience and take in all that is before us without applying past bias. But that's not going to happen. What is necessary to experience various works of art? Is the smile of the Mona Lisa seen and experienced similarly by everyone? Of course, it isn't. Would the smile mean more to someone who knows facial anatomy and can more easily see the duality of the smile and non-smile? Would someone who knows the history of chiaroscuro, seeing the unique subtle gradients, experience more than the inexperienced and unknowledgeable? What degree of knowledge is necessary to "see" the Mona Lisa fully? We all bring history and limited knowledge to the art experience, but we also bring prejudices and preferences. A modernist may see representational work as mimetic and irrelevant; so why ask them for a critique of a representational work? Conversely, a representational artist may not "get" abstraction, so their views on an abstract painting would have limited use. The Criticism Pyramid begins with consideration of our readiness to take in the work to be considered, the viewer's *Predisposition*. Any honest consideration of our experience should at some point be introspective: What are our biases? What could get in the way of our experience? What is our knowledge of art history? What is our psychological make-up? What are our tolerances for ambiguity? Of course, these kinds of questions are not easy to answer, even with the best intentions. But the questions can lead to humility and perhaps more openness as we seek an authentic experience with art.

Quantitative Description. A *Quantitative Description* takes inventory of obvious features and characteristics, those features not requiring interpretation or an emotional connection to the work. These described features are measurable and quantifiable, features that would be commonly accepted by observers. Examples include the image size, medium, painting surface, light or dark image, colors, level of

representation (or not), and obvious content. Parts of the quantitative information can help provide a foundation for developing the qualitative description.

Qualitative Description. The Qualitative Description identifies the phenomena—the magic—of the painting. This magic is in the form of perceptual dynamics, visual forces, forces that lead us to return to the work, over and over; as we return the work comes alive again, and we are alive. The qualitative description refers to and describes the phenomena in the art object but never becomes the phenomena—writing not being a perceptual language. The qualitative description describes the phenomena there to be accessed by the prepared viewer; it is not simply a personal idiosyncratic perception. The phenomena is always just beyond the description, eluding the description, although some critics have thought that paintings are mere illustrations for their criticism.

The phenomena of the painting are active because perception is active. When looking at a Rembrandt self-portrait, we're looking at the same perceptual field that Rembrandt manipulated and "saw." As the self-portrait was created by Rembrandt to give phenomenological form to him—how he experienced himself, or how he wanted us to experience him—we may, in many ways, experience what he experienced. Unlike a written autobiographical description, where words stand for the phenomena, in painting the phenomena is there in form for us to access.

Theory. Explaining the art is *Theory*; it is not looking, it's thinking. When we say "The painting is dramatic and intense because..." everything after because is theory. Theory has its place and can at some point lead to new perceptions, but too often it shuts down the looking. Navigating around a work of art requires sensing and intuition as well as theory, the left-brain and the right brain.

Judgment. Considering the descriptions and theories to draw conclusions about the merit of the art is *Judgment*. After we've seen the art and considered relevant theories, we are in a position to make a conclusion about the merit of the art. *Theory* comes after the fact, like Monday morning quarterbacking—hindsight. The fact is the art, and the theory comes after the fact. The principles that explain the visual dynamics in art were developed long after the visual dynamics were integrated in the work of the masters. For example, the Golden Section, developed in antiquity, is a method for creating an ideal proportion; its truth is in the phenomena of perfection, not in the theory that explains it.

Personal Preference. The psychological report reflects the history and knowledge of the observer, toward the observed. It is about likes and dislikes, always present in a discussion of art, no matter the irrelevance. With criticism experience it will be easier to flag the intrusion of personal preferences.

Application of Criticism Pyramid.

Let us now apply the Criticism Pyramid to an actual painting, "Dirt Road," a painting completed by this author in 1987. The following text and illustrations suggest ways in which the Criticism Pyramid may be applied to criticism of a specific art form.



Figure 5- "Dirt Road" 13" x 30" 1987 Daniel Chard

Quantitative Description.

"Dirt Road" is an acrylic painting on hardboard, 13" x 30", painted in 1987, by Daniel Chard. The surface is relatively smooth with a subtle texture. The brushwork is very fine, although noticeable. The subject matter is a winter landscape with a large light sky with just a few clouds, the image appearing quite realistic. The location is rural, with large open spaces and patchwork fields, some tilled and others green. The colors are earthy. There are only a few buildings, small in size within the larger image.

Qualitative Description.

The painting image presents a wide-open landscape, with dynamic undulating fields, taking the viewer toward the distant horizon. The air is clear—little suggestion of atmosphere and almost unlimited visibility. There is a tightness at the horizon as both the ground and the sky pull together, as though pulled by a magnetic force, both sky and ground drawn to a place beyond our vision, this adding significance to the earth's edge. This, with the complex rendering of the painting's ground—the fields—gives a heaviness to the earth. The gravitational pull toward the horizon is amplified by the progression of field shapes, large to small. Simultaneously the fields also move laterally, weaving—around and through each other—across the picture plane. The energy in the fields stirs, sandwiched and compressed between the large sky and the dark calm of the foreground. The ground and sky are proportioned shapes, producing a calm yet dynamic image.

The Qualitative Description, in describing the art of the art form, uses words and phrases to point to the magic. In the description above the following words are used to locate the phenomena:

- *wide-open landscape*
- *dynamic undulating fields*
- *taking the viewer toward the distant horizon*

- *air is clear*
- *tightness at the horizon*
- *the ground and sky pull together as though pulled by a magnetic force*
- *both sky and ground drawn to a place beyond our vision*
- *adding significance to the earth's edge*
- *a heaviness to the earth*
- *amplified by the progression of field shapes, large to small*
- *simultaneously the fields move laterally, weaving-around and through each other-across the picture plane*
- *sky and ground drawn to a place beyond our vision*
- *weaving-around and through each other-across the picture plane*
- *the energy of the fields stir, sandwiched between the large sky and the dark calm of the foreground*
- *calm yet dynamic image*

Theory.

The painting presents a very simple Golden Mean horizon without the horizon being rigid; the general rectangular shape below the horizon is $2/5^{\text{th}}$ of the painting's height, and from the top the sky shape is $3/5^{\text{th}}$ of the painting's height—this a “calm yet dynamic proportion.” As described in the *Qualitative Description*, there is compactness in the shapes approaching the horizon. The energy of the painting is focused in this small area, made more intense by the large simple sky shape and the generally simple ground shape (Figure 7)—“sandwiched.” The subtle clouds are sufficiently subordinated, providing minimal value variations in the sky rectangle, therefore not interfering with or distracting from the strength of the large rectilinear sky-shape. Similarly, the large dark foreground rectangle exists as a large simple rectangle, leaving less than a two-inch horizontal band of contrasting dark and light field patterns.

The heaviness of earth, the result of a highly defined ground plane, the heaviness more easily seen in an upside-down version of the painting (Figure 8). Though the sky and ground rectangles are separate and different in character, they are connected compositionally, as the clouds and the dirt road create a diamond shape, connecting the sky and ground (see Figure 9). The diamond-shape presents two phenomena simultaneously: a flat diamond-shape resting on the picture plane and a 3D diamond-shape that moves from the immediate foreground to the distant clouds.

The image suggest scale, owing to the detailed brush work and the overall subordination of shapes and spaces in the proportioned picture plane, despite its relatively small size, 13” x 30.” The subordinations are tightly designed and often graphic, giving the illusion of a large space and a large painting.



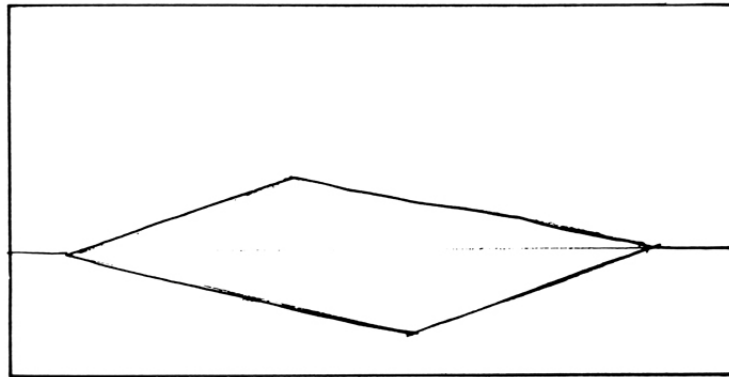
Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



The rectilinear shape of the horizontal plane is also part of a parallelogram that unifies the picture plane around the horizon.

Figure 9

Judgment.

The painting, "Dirt Road," may be considered effective because its phenomena with the landscape image are engaging and complex. The theoretical explanations provided, with emphases on composition and proportions, may be sufficient to judge the painting successful. Further, the very precise technique may help carry the sense of the complex landscape as it provides more than the unaided eye can see. However, the theory—the explanation—should underscore the phenomena and not be an end in itself.

Personal Preference.

Among the hundreds of paintings I've done, "Dirt Road" continues to interest me, and *I like it*. But, of course, my likes and dislikes add nothing to the critical thinking and writing about this painting.

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