

A Dialogue in Search of Meaning

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I first encountered Noah Jemisin's work in 1977, in a show I saw on my lunch hour at a small gallery on West 57th Street in Manhattan. The painting from that show that I remember best, one acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had a solitary white gesso line that traced the nude torso of a woman. The line flowed with a sensual grace, especially where it outlined her belly. To my eyes, the line at that point had just the right fullness to it, conveying a ripe softness and a slightly dissipated muscle tone, implying a taste for erotic adventures.

The way Jemisin combines undefined shapes of intense color with a gesso line that suggests but does not dictate the content of these color forms, establishes a dialogue with the viewer about the meaning of these paintings. The shapes of color, standing alone, convey no specific meaning; what they signify has more to do with the viewer's psyche than anything the artist intended. But the gesso line in his best work characterizes these shapes in suggestive and often ambiguous ways. Such a characterization establishes the minimal level of common understanding needed for a dialogue between viewer and creator. By hinting rather than proclaiming, Jemisin avoids short circuiting the conversation.

That dialogue considers not only the form suggested by the gesso line, but also the meaning behind the particular choice of color loosely contained within that form. The conversation about meaning takes place within the context of this common understanding, but it reaches no permanent conclusions. Meaning remains uncertain and shifting and ultimately ephemeral.

Since 1977 I have lived with several types of his work. The painting I know best, *Divorced*. I acquired in 1979, in part because we recently both had experienced one. In *Divorced* the color juxtapositions surprise, especially the pinks and metallics. Jemisin's color palette includes many saturated pastel hues with a visceral appeal. His color sense rarely errs. If ordinary color contrasts are simple diatonic harmonies, his color juxtapositions create chromatic ones.

The male figure in *Divorced* appears in the classical pose of the discus thrower. The color serves to make the figure transparent, as if from an overlay illustration in an anatomy text. The gesso line establishes the external form, and the color reveals the muscles and internal organs. Key elements in the male figure are his stomach and the splotch of color along the raised inner thigh. The knotted abdominal muscles of the athletic figure signify for me both the well conditioned athlete (or a husband conditioned by the rigors and conflicts of a difficult marriage) and intestines tied in knots from the stress and emotional turmoil of divorce. Along the inner thigh flows a dark red crust the color of dried blood. It originates from a crotch denuded of the genitals customary with this classical pose, testimony to the savagery of marital dissolution.

The second figure in the painting, a bust of a woman's head, appears in the lower left quadrant. Reducing the figure representing the wife to a bust on a pedestal abstracts her individuality to a mere symbol, a museum piece devoid of the context which would enrich a fuller portrait. Whatever story her side would tell is irrelevant. At the terminal stage of divorce, spousal relations have become reflexive, responding more to the symbols of past grievance and injury than to the current substance of the conflict. These two figures show a relationship without hope of salvage.

The meanings I draw from this painting may well reveal more about me than Jemisin, but the use of the solitary white gesso line directs my own inquiry in clearer directions than would pure abstractions. And the loosely representational but enigmatic figures insist that I answer the questions they pose. The artist has provided no obvious answer, and the inquiry I am forced to make within the confines of meaning imparted by the white line compels a dialogue between artist and viewer in search of a common meaning. I must make sense of the artist's clues.