ForeWord Reviews

What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art
Julian Bell
978-0-500-28101-7
(May 1999)

With similar timeless presence (in terms of location, if nothing else) the stark figures which haunt the cave of Lascaux and the secure pastels of countless hotel walls share an unlikely address: both are, by definition, paintings. Through the process of painting, these images endure. But, what is painting? Which then (if either) are art?

With What is Painting?, Bell rests his palette to contemplate this age-old quandary in a series of stages, culminating with a personal theological view of paintings, their origins and their multi-faceted function within a culture. He focuses attention rigidly upon painting as a single limb of the dauntingly gnarled and complex canopy of art in general, in an effort to address several questions, and seek rational answers. Specifically, Bell questions what the common denominator of all paintings, as objects, may be, as well as the definitive causes for the sweeping changes in art over the past two centuries. Within this context, he examines the idea of representation and the inherent levels it labors upon, as well as pondering the place of paintings in our modern world.

Considering the breadth of the subject matter masked with such a teasingly inviting title, the relatively short length of the book limits its impact. Spattering successive pages in a fury of concept illustration are ample reproductions of artwork of the centuries. The book ushers its readers fervently through these centuries of artistry as if it were a curator, theorems cast with each hollow footfall. Yet, the admiring visitors at times find themselves lingering behind as the narrative forges on, echoing off the indifferent and tight-lipped portraiture.

Bell's writing style is comfortably relaxed, yet retains an obvious academic edge that often delivers engaging insights. The brevity of its foray into the enigmatic nature of painting renders it an ideal choice for those with a reasonably established knowledge of art history, who simply enjoy an entertaining discussion of art theory. What is Painting? is unassuming in appearance, a pliable, slender book which may appeal to a wide audience, whether practicing artisans, art enthusiasts or scholars who are otherwise put off by voluminous, unapproachable texts.

Karen Wyckoff