

CHAPTER 1



Gone, Missing

I am privileged, as it were, not only to dream about the specters of the night in all the helplessness and blind trust of sleep, but also at the same time to confront them in actuality with the calm judgment of the fully awake. . . . I long to say a last goodbye to everything up here, to go down into my burrow never to return again . . . [but] I find great difficulty in summoning the resolution to carry out the actual descent . . . without knowing what is happening behind my back and behind the door after it is fastened.¹

In the late summer of 1911, Franz Kafka lines up with thousands to see a blank square of empty wall, a patch of vacant white marked only by four iron pegs. A few miles away, Pablo Picasso stares up—with unblinking, half-seeing eyes reaching out from the side of his face—at the police who have taken him into custody. Kafka leaves the Louvre with his friend Max Brod and the two men make their way to the theatre, settle down in the darkness, their vision adjusting as they prepare to watch the five-minute film *Nick Winter et le vol de la Joconde*. Thrown together just a few days after the theft itself, the film satirizes what all of Paris has been talking about: someone has stolen the *Mona Lisa*.

The absence of da Vinci's iconic work is news all across Europe. But not since Napoleon moved the painting into his private bedroom have the French, especially, pulled together to claim the woman with the strangely painted smile as legitimately their collective property. Now, though, the smile is like that of a Cheshire cat, faded from the wall, fading even from memory (*see figure 1.1*). They



FIGURE 1.1. H. Peter Steeves. *The Missing Mona Lisa*. 2012. Photomontage.

must go to the museum to not-see it once more. The Louvre, having shut down for a week as the criminal investigation began, agrees to re-open. Picasso is soon exonerated. (It was his friend, poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who, it turns out, had implicated the painter while being held in jail on suspicion of the theft. Apollinaire, no lover of “high art,” had recently called for the Louvre to be burned down. Only the police, it would seem, deem to take a poet at his word.) As the search continues for the true thief, attendance records at the Louvre are broken. Lines stretch out and around the museum with pilgrims coming to view the missing painting, shuffling past the empty spot on the wall in tears.

They come to see the *Mona Lisa* knowing they cannot see it. As historian and curator Helen Rees Leahy will later explain it, “[they showed up] to gaze, overcome with emotion, at the blank space. . . . According to one newspaper, the crowds ‘contemplated at length the dusty space where the divine *Mona Lisa* had smiled. . . . It was even more interesting for them than if the *Giaconda* had been in its place.’ This was an understatement: the blank wall was the sensation of Paris, [as patrons] . . . filed past . . . and paid their respects to the emptiness.”²

The thief, it turns out, does not share the Parisians’ sense of collective French ownership. But neither is he in it just for himself. Instead, Vincenzo

Peruggia, a low-level Louvre employee, has stolen the *Mona Lisa*—at first hiding it in a broom closet and then simply walking out of the museum with the painting under his top coat—in order to return it to Italy where he feels it truly collectively belongs. In two years, Peruggia will be caught in Florence. And the Italians will agree to return the masterpiece to Paris—after, of course, first taking several months to exhibit it throughout Italy. They will also refuse to extradite the thief, praising him for his patriotism and giving him a minor punishment in the name of good border relations. The *Mona Lisa* will thus eventually be restored to the wall of the Louvre in 1913; and, having repeatedly come en masse to celebrate and see its absence for two years, patrons, less interested, will begin cutting back their trips to the museum. The curators and the marketing department will learn an important lesson: presence is sometimes overrated.

But tonight, Kafka and Brod sit in the dark, unable to see how the future will unfold. The film unspools and, like most films, presents something like a truth (see figure 1.2).

Detective Nick Winter, stares at the blank spot on the wall where the painting used to hang, eventually turning around and noticing a shoe button on the



FIGURE 1.2. Still from the film *Nick Winter et le vol de la Joconde* [Nick Winter and the Theft of the Mona Lisa]. Dir. Paul Garbagni and Gérard Bourgeois. Pathé Frères, 1911. *Bulletin Hebdomadaire Pathé Frères* 34 (1911): N. pag.

ground. With this as his only clue, he disguises himself as a shoe-shiner, hoping no one will see his true identity. He begins stopping Parisians, forcing them to get their shoes shined in hopes of finding the thief—a man he imagines to be marked by the absence of a button. Unfortunately, the director of the Louvre, Monsieur Croumolle, is missing just such a button, and Winter mistakenly focuses all of his attention on the poor, innocent Croumolle. In the final moments of the film the museum is in turmoil; and though it is packed with people, no one notices—no one pays attention, no one sees—the thief sneak back in, replace the *Mona Lisa*, and steal away with Velazquez's *Princess* instead, taking time to drop off a note that reads, simply: "Forgive me. I am nearsighted. I actually meant to take the painting beside it."

This happened to me for the first time—unless I am blocking out all of the others, unless they are being blocked out, unless they have blocked themselves out—in the fall of 2000.

I had had a headache for three straight days. They were familiar to me at the time, nauseating and crippling, often moving me to tears and forcing me to retreat into a dark room. For as long as I can remember, I have preferred to be in dark spaces, even when my head was not hurting. I turn off as many lights as I can—always turning off all *fluorescent* lights—and work, see, and live with the dimmest of lamps after the sun goes down, which it always seems to have done no matter what time of day it is, since I refuse to open curtains and blinds at any hour, even covering most windows with dark, light-blocking fabric that gives the appearance of not so much stunting their ability to let in sun as obscuring the very fact of the windows, covering them over, pretending that they aren't even possibly there. Living with me is not easy, I know. One has to appreciate burrowlike conditions. And this night, more than a dozen years ago, seemed like any other night to be in pain. The only light in my office was from my computer screen, and I was wishing that I did not have to ride the train home because I knew that there would be noise, the smell of bodies, people, but mostly light—far too much light.

Caught up in such worries, I noticed in that moment that I suddenly could not make out the lower portion of what I had been typing. The screen, it seemed, had simply disappeared there—not gone black, really, but rather somehow strangely become invisible. Before I could even panic—and this was surely a cause to panic for me as I have loved darkness but ironically feared blindness my entire life—something in the empty space took shape and began to look like a fat caterpillar, an organic squiggle of bright neon light that was pulsing yellow, gold, green, orange, white, with spirals of bright color twisting up the body like the moving stripes on a barbershop pole. The vivid light grew in intensity; and my fear grew, too, as I turned to look in a different direction, horrified to find

that the caterpillar followed me, always staying in the same field of vision. It was not a part of the computer screen; it was a part of my seeing. When I closed my eyes to escape the creature, it stayed with me, growing in magnitude again in the complete black of my inner eye, like some sort of afterimage from having stared for hours directly into the filament of a now unseen light bulb. It was a part of *me*.

I did not know at the time how literally this was the case, as a scotoma of this nature is actually a visual manifestation of the firing of neurons located in the back of the head within the occipital cortex. I was, reluctantly, “seeing” the activity of my forebrain. And, of course, this act of seeing was itself an instance of brain activity with its own neuronal structure. The caterpillar not only twisted and warped in on itself but was premetamorphosed: it was, in some real sense, the biophysical manifestation of the act of seeing that I was seeing—not so much a noumenal appearance of a Kantian moment of engaging with the world, but a sort of aberrant Husserlian *epoché*, a reduction where *noema* and *noesis* were truly two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the same moment of consciousness. This is what it looks like to look at something. Tellingly, as my brain struggled to put that experience itself into something visual, it necessarily also manifested as a sort of blindness: what it means *to see* is *to be blinded*.

But that night, sitting in the dark, I understood and saw very little. More lepidopterist than phenomenologist, I did not know then that it was my own brain that squirmed in front of me, pinned down yet never for a moment under control. At the realization that I might never escape seeing it, I felt terror. Not only was I unable to see what was there in the world behind this thing, unable to see whatever it would possibly obscure for the rest of my life, but I also might never be able simply not to see *it*. Closing my eyes had only made it worse. And the realization that it might now always be on, always be visible—that it might take from me the ability to see only darkness—was overwhelming and worse, even, than the thought of being blind.

Within fifteen minutes it began to dim. Half an hour after it had first appeared, it was gone. It would not return, missing, for another year.

This happened to Matthew Girson for the first time—unless I am misremembering the story he told me several months ago, unless he is misremembering the story his mother told him because he was too young to remember it himself, unless she was misremembering what took place years ago, unless we are all somehow blocking out something—in the summer of 1970.

As a toddler, Matthew Girson went missing. His parents searched for him everywhere. He had been seen just moments before on the kitchen floor behind his mother, plain as a button, but now he was gone. Everyone knew that he was too small to have stumbled or crawled very far in such a short amount of time. The fact that he was not to be found in the house, each room empty, must have

meant that, in the back of their minds, everyone was thinking the worst. As the search progressed they ran through the permutations of “gone”—lost, abducted, missing—until his mother heard laughter coming from her bedroom. Underneath the bed, pressed up against the back wall in an impossible way in such a small space, Matthew Girson sat, covered in a blanket, laughing in his own dark world.

Within fifteen minutes he had been found. He would not go missing again for another year.

Memoirs of the Blind is one of Derrida’s most personal works, though his person is always visible throughout all of his work, of course. Here he tells the story—or at least the narrator tells the story—of a youthful infatuation with drawing and the way in which his brother’s talent, far greater and receiving more familial praise, drove Derrida to turn to words rather than lines in order to create. After recalling his failure to copy his brother’s copies of family photographs—after admitting to something of a fratricidal desire—Derrida writes:

I have never in my life drawn again, not even tried. Except once last winter—and I still keep the archive of this disaster—when the desire, and the temptation, came over me to sketch my mother’s profile as I watched over her in her hospital bed. Bedridden for a year, surviving between life and death, almost walled up within the silence of this lethargy, she no longer recognizes me, her eyes veiled by cataracts. We can only hypothesize about the degree to which she sees, about what shadows pass before her, whether she sees herself dying or not.³

Derrida has been slipping in and out of tenses, seeing and not seeing, and speaking of childish things. Not only his own boyhood memories, memories that Freud will tell us are always on the verge of being unseen, but of being a child even when one is older. Always a child before one’s mother’s eyes, seeing or not. A child who asks philosophical questions about art: “The child within me wonders: how can one claim to look at both a model and the lines [*traits*] that one jealously dedicates with one’s own hand to the thing itself? Doesn’t one have to be blind to one or the other? Doesn’t one always have to be content with the memory of the other? The experience of this shameful infirmity comes right out of a family romance.”⁴ This is where Derrida tells the story of his brother, a story I omit here only to point out that *jealousy* and *copying* are already at work in Derrida’s text before he gets to thinking about the relationship between art and being seen by one’s mother, between what is hidden in aesthetics and what is hidden in the family.

The child within Derrida is asking whether or not all drawing is founded on blindness, and thus if all seeing is as well. The worry is most clearly seen if we focus on the self-portrait, but it is there with all drawing and painting in general.

If I turn to look into a mirror in order to see myself in order to paint myself, I must study what I find in the mirror—an image of myself—but then I must turn my gaze to the canvas as I make the marks there that will represent what I see. To be more precise, though, we should not say “the marks that will represent what I see” but rather “the marks that will represent what I *have seen*” since at this particular moment of painting I am necessarily no longer seeing the image of myself in the mirror but I am, instead, now looking elsewhere. I am seeing the marks I am making on the canvas. As I make those marks, I am *seeing* the canvas and apparently just *remembering* the image I saw in the mirror. Thus, the act of painting is an act of blindness, an act of not-seeing what it is I am trying to paint. Similarly, when I turn back to the mirror in order to judge what I need to change, fix, add, work on next, etc.—when, that is, I turn back to the mirror to compare it to what I have put on the canvas—I am no longer looking at the canvas and thus am forced to *remember* the canvas image and compare it to what I am now directly perceiving. No matter which way I turn, I am apparently blind. No matter the direction toward which I instruct my gaze, I am forced to concentrate on what I *don't* see, on what I merely remember. Seeing, it would seem, is fundamentally a not-seeing. Or at least we could say that seeing X is fundamentally not being able to see X because Y is being seen instead.

Whether the subject of the painting is the artist him- or herself, a still life of apples, a land- or sky-scape, or anything at all, this same dynamic is supposedly always at work. If one paints from imagination, without a model present, the structure is even more apparent, though imagining takes the place of remembering. To *imagine* the temptation of St. Anthony is to have a mental image that is not an act of *seeing*. And to put such a scene down on canvas with paints is to go back and forth between the imagined and the seen, the scene imagined in one's head and the scene that is seen directly on the canvas. No matter where one is looking, it's what is *not seen* that is doing the most work.

All of this, however, while pointed in the right direction still basically misunderstands the structure of the aesthetic act. While it is true that the unseen is always making the seen possible, it is not the case that memory—or, for that matter, imagination—is a key ingredient for painting. Memory and imagination might very well be the first move, the initial acts of consciousness that spur one on to create, but when it comes time to put brush to canvas, they are used very little. Painting is all about seeing. It's just that seeing itself is always about presence and absence, what is seen and what is not-seen.

Say I wish to paint a portrait of a child. I sit her down in my studio, look at her carefully—which means looking at the way the light creates the color that creates her as-seen for my eyes—and then I turn to my canvas, brush full of paint, to put down a line, a mark. When I am putting that mark on the canvas

I am not phenomenologically engaged in an act of memory but rather in an act of direct perception, an act of seeing. The key is in correctly noting *what* it is that I am seeing in that moment. I am not, for instance, seeing a patch of color or a stroke of paint. I am, instead, seeing the whole of the child there before me on the blank canvas, though she is mostly apperceived, mostly present as absent, at the moment. Each bit of paint I put down brings her more fully into presence, but it is always an act of seeing in which I am engaged.⁵ The child *is there on the canvas*—the same exact child that is also sitting as a model across the studio. This is because a painting is never a copy of something, an imitation. It is, rather, a literal re-presentation: a making present (again) of its subject. It is the subject that is thus present to consciousness on the canvas, not a copy of the subject. To think otherwise is to be caught up in a double-thing epistemology—as the history of metaphysics from Plato to Kant once forced us to be. Within this history, vision itself is seen as something of an artistic act since the mental representation, created through the subjective activity of the mind, is merely an imitation of whatever is “out there” in the world. We have spent 2,500 years trying to get things back together again, to cross the chasm, to undo the dreaded artistry of the eyes that gave us the representation rather than the object itself. But this cannot happen until we realize that appearance is not truly separate from being: appearance is never *mere* appearance. The object itself is precisely what is given to us through appearance, experience, consciousness, representation, subjectivity.

There are many ways for a child to be present. I can look directly at her, remember her, imagine her, say the word “child,” look at a photo of her, paint a picture of her, etc. Each of these is a way of making the same thing—the same child—present, though each is marked differently by various structures of presence and absence. Language, for instance, does not denote. The word “child” is not a sign that stands in for a child, but is instead a way of making a child present. Language has a great deal of absence to it, but the object of consciousness is the same whether I say the word or look directly at the child in my studio. And the same is true in painting. In a way that is parallel to the manner in which language does not evoke a memory in order to call up a referent and come to sense, so, too, does the act of painting not rely on memory. What it means to be painting a portrait of a child is already to see the child on the canvas. When I say, “I am painting a portrait” I mean precisely this. That this seeing involves apperception as well as perception—absence as well as presence—should not be surprising. All seeing is thus.

Consequently, Derrida’s specific childish worry is unwarranted, but it points to an even deeper truth about the relationship between seeing and blindness. One might come to this truth by means of phenomenological investigation, but one might also come to it through painting.⁶ What it means to be looking at



FIGURE 1.3. Victorian photograph. Unknown artist and subjects.

something is to be necessarily blinded—not because an act of memory or imagination gets in the way of the act of seeing, but because seeing itself is structured by what is not seen. And still the not-seen has its own kind of presence.

The Victorian camera lens, like the artist's eye, takes a while to see (*see figure 1.3*). In both cases, subjects need to be patient, to remain still in order to be seen. Children notoriously squirm and fuss, sometimes even running off, missing. And it was for this reason we imagine (because here we can only imagine, having nothing left to perceive) that the Victorians produced the tradition of “the hidden mother” photograph in which, to comfort the child whose portrait was being taken and to keep the child physically still, the photographer would have the mother sit in a chair holding her child, but since it was merely a portrait of the child that was wanted, the photographer would first cover the mother in a dark curtain, her body hidden from view in plain sight. Because once processed these photos would seem to depict a strange, ghostly figure holding a child, a further erasure would take place for the final presentation: a paper overlay would

be placed on the finished photo with a central oval cut out—an oval just big enough to hide most of the covered mother and expose the child, who now seemed merely nestled in and surrounded by a strangely lumpy and crumpled bit of cloth.

It is often the case that the heavy curtains we place in our windows, that the darkness we seek, only amplifies the light. This is because it was always the case that the light was appearing all along by means of the darkness. If we say that capitalism is blind to the work that mothers have done precisely because it obscures this work by failing to call it “work,” and if we say that men are blind to the oppression women have felt because what it has meant to be a woman is to have been seen by men, and if we say that missing children would usually not be found were it not for the unseen arms of mothers reaching under the bed, then we are saying the same thing about the doubly-hidden mother—the mother whose first hiding was not yet hidden enough, so it required a further hiding of the act of hiding—in the Victorian’s photograph: what makes it possible for the child to appear is the present absence of the present steadying embrace of the mother behind the paper and behind the shroud. Our not-seeing her is what makes it possible to see that which is not-her. Let us be clear: there is always an ethic already at work in every act of seeing.

What remains in a sentence when □ is gone? How do □ make sense of it when that most prized of (non)things is obscured and does not appear? The subject, in all its dappled glory, hidden from view, forgotten and veiled. Why bother to speak: the subjectless sentence seems to be about nothing? Why bother to paint: the canvas with hidden subject seems empty of all meaning? Why bother to live: who, in the end, would be doing the living anyway?

What is consistently most startling in Matthew Girson’s work is what appears as absent, what is so skillfully made present in its absence—a chance to speak, paint, and *be* without the need for a traditional subject. One cannot today take up oil painting and remain aloof from the history of oil painting, and yet one cannot—or should not—perpetuate the myth of the subject, the Cartesian thinking self that pulls at its own mental bootstraps, motherlessly slouching its way toward existence. With the (virgin) birth of the modern subject comes the birth of the object as well: objects to stand apart and at a distance from us; to be used and to delight us; to be owned and exchanged and valued by subjects; to be known through a vision that is thought to obscure—a *seeing* that, in relation to all of the other senses, most requires and celebrates distance from what is known. Girson’s work demands that we stand back and read it through the context of history, and that we do so with an eye toward what is necessarily unspoken, our illusions of coherent subjectivity behind us. It demands, for instance, that we negotiate the obscuring shadows of German landscape painting, German Romantic images of the sublime, German horrors and holocausts.

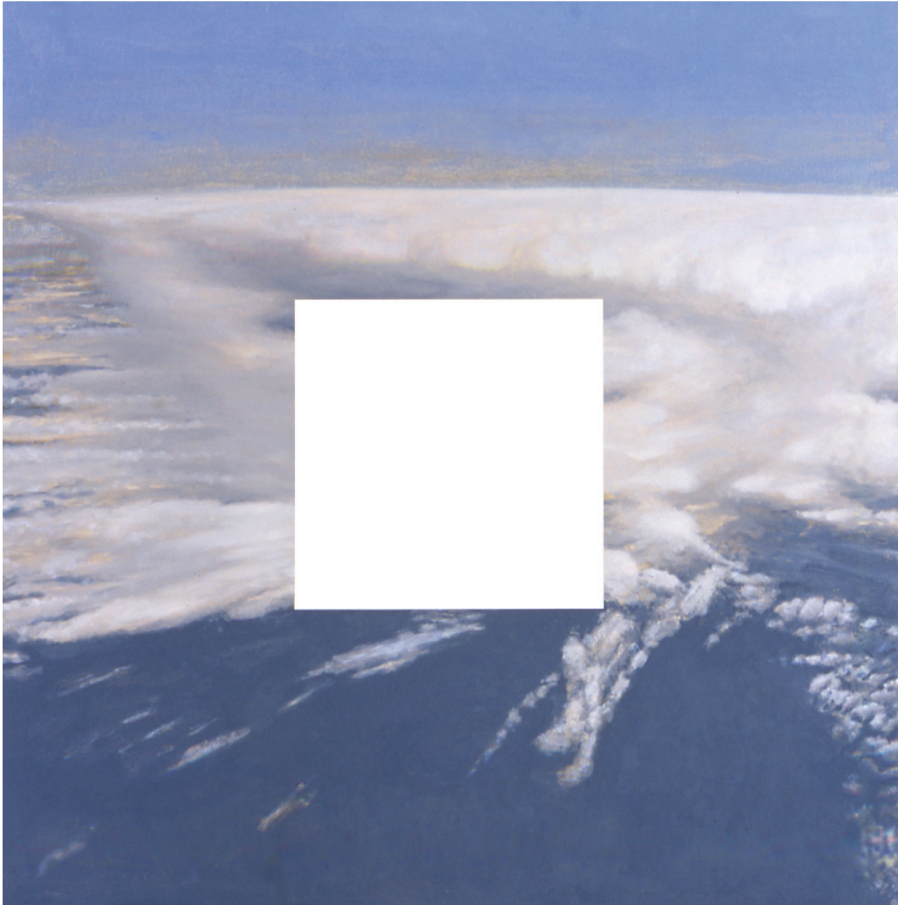


FIGURE 1.4. Matthew Girson. *Untitled (Scotoma) #6*. 2004. Oil on canvas. 63 inches x 63 inches.

I am recalling Girson's 2006 exhibition, *Satellites and Scotomas: After and Above*, in which the scotomas referred to large square canvases (63 x 63 inches) with cloudscares blocked by a central square of white paint (see figure 1.4).⁷ In each of these scotoma paintings, the square obscures the center of the canvas, the spot where we have come to expect the subject, blotting it out like an inverse eclipse of light. Elsewhere in the exhibition, Girson presented a series of *Satellite Views*, paintings of hurricanes as if seen from space, and a complete orbital map of his own head entitled *Dizzy Heights*. Here, there, and everywhere there is always something missing in Girson's work, something seen from above that is not quite fully seen because, perhaps, there is no longer truly any place that is above.

The central theme of how *presencing* simultaneously obscures is what concerns Girson and what is always at the heart of all seeing. It is, after all, the very act of looking that makes possible the blind spot, the act of painting that leaves parts of the world out-of-frame, the act of remembering that makes of forgetting a theme. What we forget is thus central to the question of what we presence, even if remembering is not the same as seeing. What constitutes the blockage is often thought to be the pathology, though without the pathological, too, there would be no norm.

The medical scotoma comes in many varieties. The *asthenopic scotoma* can make it appear as if parts of letters on a page have vanished.⁸ The *negative relative scotoma* manifests itself as a partial blank or void. A *positive absolute scotoma* can appear as an hallucinatory pattern or a patch of white. Doctors struggle to find words for it all. The *positive scotoma*, they sometimes claim, is actually an “*enhancement of vision.*”⁹

Psychoanalysis struggles as well, balanced precariously between modernity and postmodernity. An insistence that there is a self to be analyzed runs counter to Girson’s desire to move painting in a different and self-less direction; a refusal to conflate the Ego and the self, a denial that conscious life is the whole story, propels him forward. After Freud, to be is to be hidden from one’s self—motives, desires, and dreams stand back in the haze, with the mind, fractured, unable to theorize itself fully. How fitting, then, that so many of Girson’s canvases are covered with clouds. One sees in clouds a Rorschachian harmony that uncovers those aspects of the psyche that typically remain unarticulated. One makes of the apparent cloudy chaos, order—the fluffy sheep, the little bunny, the happy squirrel, the foreboding vaginal chasm of the future opened wide to swallow one whole—and the order that is provided says something about the viewer, about those parts of the viewer that are hidden and obscured.

And yet it is not as if something is actively hiding from us in this work; it is not that Girson has obscured a secret that he means for only the most clever among us to uncover in full, in truth, in full disclosure of a hidden truth. Still, there is a certain anamorphic quality to his painting that helps us understand the necessary relationship between anamorphosis and all painting, between what is hidden and what is shown.

Let’s back up for a moment and take the wider view.

Lacan’s seventh lecture on the ethics of psychoanalysis argues that anamorphosis arose at a very particular point in the history of art, that it marks a very particular problem with perspective (both visual and conceptual). That is, at the moment when painters mastered the idea of the vanishing point as the way to manipulate perspective on a flat canvas, the problem of how *anything* shows itself was reframed. Suddenly, it became apparent that “the illusion of space is not the same as the creation of emptiness.”¹⁰ Vanishing-point perspective in painting

is thought to give the illusion of space on a flat canvas. But the “space” in which a representation of something can first come to be—the pregnant emptiness of the blank canvas that is full of perspective (and truly full of the apperceived subject) yet demands no particular perspective immediately; the emptiness of thought itself that does not ask the question “is the image different from what is real?”—is theorized anew. Anamorphosis is thus a response to this. As such, it is always asking after the ontological status of the work of art, the object of consciousness, the act of seeing, knowing, and comprehending.

Again, and to be clear, it is not as if the anamorphic image seen from the side is getting us at what is *really* there. The hidden skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), arguably the most famous anamorphic painting ever made, is not leading us to what is truer or closer to reality. Indeed, Lacan makes it clear that in order to see the anamorphic skull that is hidden in the painting (hidden, we might add, in the same blatantly unhidden way that the mothers are hidden in those eerie Victorian photographs: hidden conspicuously, hidden in plain sight, not hidden at all), the “main” image itself has to be obscured, blurred, and moved into non-sense. As one tilts the painting to make the skull come into focus, the rest of the painting becomes a blurry mess. What counts as “main” and “secondary” thus comes into question. What counts as original and representation thus also comes into question. Indeed, the point is that anamorphosis suggests that the very idea of *representation* is itself problematic when representation is thought to be still within the history of metaphysics. And thus *meaning*, too, is undermined by precisely those structures that we thought gave rise to meaning.¹¹

The lesson, then, is that even when the hidden is finally exposed, we would be foolish to think that we now have uncovered the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This is why Hagi Kenaan goes so far as to suggest that the hidden image is actually that which obscures the hidden image even in *The Ambassadors*. That is, the anamorphic skull in the famous painting is there to point to (while at the same time obscuring/hiding) what cannot be seen, what it is forbidden to see: the homosexual relationship between the two men in the painting. In other words, the somewhat obvious inclusion of the anamorphic image of the skull is a marker in the painting to get us to think about the manner in which it is a red herring, hiding what it is that the artist “truly” wishes to obscure. By means of a careful analysis of the curtain in the painting (again, these curtains) and the nature of wedding portraits of the same era, Kenaan thus argues that this go-to example for discussions of painted anamorphism is actually tied to queer theory from the start, and that the question, “What is it that is being obscured?” is always up for grabs because an answer to the question is itself a revealing, and revelation always carries with it an act of obscuring as well.

Squint from the side. Tilt these pages in your hand. Bring history through an awkward door to see it all, and fail to see it all, from an impossible angle. Look again at Girson's painting concerning what we cannot look at again.

In the *Scotoma* skyscape, one is intrigued by the *production* of the scotoma area as well as its effect. Girson obviously paints the white central square last. He paints, that is, the whole of the painting and then layers on the white square with a knife, thick and heavy, like mortar, like plaster, like all the technology of human building that obscures as it creates. Paint over paint over pain. The central scotoma area is tall. The paint is so thick that it literally stands above the clouds and casts a slight shadow on them. With a Marxist squint, we note how this marks the disappearance of labor. It is important, that is, that there is a central patch of clouds under that blockage, that the work of the artist disappears during—and due to—the production of the art. In capital's desire to reproduce, there is always more than what we see. One of the blind spots of capitalism, rising in tandem with the end of nature, is the exploitation that is fundamentally necessary to keep it going and keep us forgetting.

Writing in Germany—at about the same time and in the same place that Karl Marx is born—Carl Gustav Carus concludes that landscape painting in general cannot help but create a sense of the sublime, a sense that “*you are nothing; God is all.*”¹² Girson's work, however, comes in at an angle and provides us with alternative insights without making the modernist's mistake of inverting the claim by elevating us and denigrating God. Even the pure mathematics of Girson's canvases speaks in poetry. The “subject” of each painting is curved and soft—orbs, circles, balls, spirals, globes, clouds, heads. And yet the canvases themselves are rigidly square (not merely rectangular), and their order is square as well. The *Scotoma* paintings are divided into nine squares in a tic-tac-toe grid. It is the center square that is hidden, white, scotomized. It is as if there is a cross on the canvas, and the center of that cross is empty. No God, no salvation, no ethics after Auschwitz. The Cross is vacant, but not from something or someone ascending into the clouds. This triple trinity of threes leaves us only hollow, the Church as silent as a Heideggerian dormouse, and therefore just as complicit.

Everywhere there is the theme of what has gone missing in our ethics and our ontology. *Dizzy Heights* offers us eight views of the artist's head, turning, turning, turning—and where is the ninth (see figure 1.5)? Where is the center square, the conscience of the flesh, the subject—human or divine—to stand in the crosshairs? Where is the missing painting in an exhibition of paintings that keeps repeating the number nine? Is it hidden by its own production, like Girson himself decades earlier beneath the bed where his parents made him?

Stop. Squint. Pay attention to that which cannot be paid attention from another angle.

We are invited to see the *Scotoma* paintings as paintings of cloudscapes with a central image obscured. But what if nothing is being obscured? Or, more



FIGURE 1.5. Matthew Girson. *Dizzy Heights VIII*. 2005. Oil on canvas. 20 inches x 20 inches.

properly, what if what we thought was being obscured is just obscuring something else, like Holbein's hidden, squishy skull hiding a forbidden relationship between the male subjects? What if the white square in the middle of Girson's *Scotoma* cloudscape is not covering over what is already there but rather is waiting for something new to fill its void? What if the *Scotoma* paintings are actually frames—if they themselves are not the subject, not the art, but are instead massive, decorative frames for a missing square of art meant to be hung at their centers? What if these are cloudy borders created to enframe, hold, point to, and present some other smaller painting—some smaller square painting—that will someday replace the central square of white? Such a painting would have to be just over 20 inches x 20 inches to fit in that middle square. And this is, in fact, the exact size of the eight self-portraits in *Dizzy Heights*. The artist's head is perfectly sized to fit at the center of his scotomized canvases, surrounded by a border of clouds.

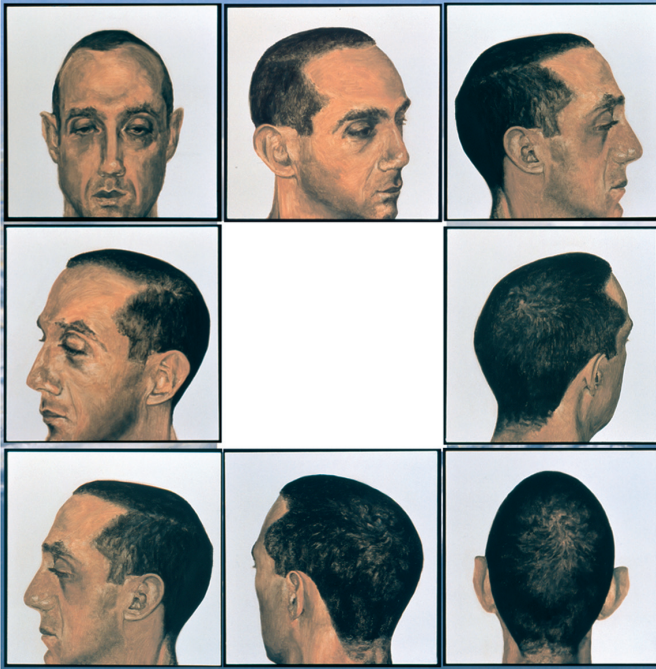


FIGURE 1.6. H. Peter Steeves. *The Dizzy Heights Frame*. Montage with eight paintings from Matthew Girson's *Dizzy Heights* series covering over Girson's *Untitled (Scotoma) #6*. *Dizzy Heights* paintings by Matthew Girson. 2005, oil on canvas, 20 inches x 20 inches.

The fact that there are only eight self-portraits and nine *Scotoma* cloudscapes, however, makes us pause. Even if we placed Girson's small rotating head at the center of each large *Scotoma* frame, there would still be one *Scotoma* cloud canvas without a subject. Is this what the work asks us to do? Do we rehang this exhibit in our mind, placing the eight small self-portraits in the center of eight (out of nine) of the large cloudscapes, leaving one cloudscape without a subject, empty, waiting, missing, hiding, vacant, like Elijah's chair in the clouds (see figure 1.6)?

No. These eight self-portraits, though perfectly proportioned to fill the void and stand in as *art*, will not take the place of the ninth white square. But, because they are perfectly proportioned, they could still be laid over the images of the clouds, mapping onto a single *Scotoma* canvas, tiled around the edge of the eight painted segments until the cloudscapes are obscured and only the center white scotoma is still visible. They could, that is, create a new frame—eight pieces of an enframing puzzle, now constituting a 360-degree trip around the author's globe. Yet to do this, to solve the hidden puzzle, would leave us with

the central scotoma still remaining, now with a new blockage as well: the still-present scotoma square *and* the newly hidden cloudscapes.

We continue to await the coming of the subject. There is no possibility of completion here, no final uncovering, no hope to be done with history, interpretation, and duty. Man does not take the center square to block or to win. More truth only pushes something else into the shadows, out to the border.

One thinks of Caspar David Friedrich's early nineteenth-century canvases—the pinnacle, in many ways, of German Romantic landscapes—with their top-heavy skies, skies stretching past tomorrow and into heaven itself. For Friedrich, the horizon cannot be low enough, God's crosses cannot be old, rugged, full, and metaphorical enough.¹³ Heinrich von Kleist, dramatist and contemporary to Friedrich, stands appropriately in awe. Writing on Friedrich's ability to "convey the sublime in nature," von Kleist remarks that the understanding is so clear and fully present in Friedrich's landscapes that it is "as if one's eyelids had been cut away."¹⁴

In a world without even the thoughtful respite of a nonseeing blink, one dreams of the scotoma, of the acknowledgement that no matter how the sublime is thought to appear, the cost is that which is ever-present and tragically obscured. It was, in fact, shortly after writing these loving words that von Kleist set most of his own work on fire, entered a Romantic's pact with a cancer-stricken woman, set out at the Christ-like age of thirty-three on a sunny, cloudless day to have tea on a sublime German hillside, and, having picnicked and chatted of art and talked up the sublime, shot the girl in the heart then himself in the head.

Let us think—using hearts and heads—about what is obscured, what goes unseen here. *Satellite View* is a series of paintings in which Girson presents the beauty of the hurricane without picturing its destruction (see figure 1.7, page 32). There is no white-square scotoma, yet our attention is always drawn to what is missing. In a hurricane itself, the eye *is* the scotoma rather than *has* a scotoma. The eye of the hurricane is, ironically, the one place it is hardest to see what surrounds us: the storm is not visible; the destruction is not visible; the peace and the beauty are there precisely as caused by the horror that is unseen. Is it because we have been thinking about Lacan and Freud that when we look at the still, calm center of the storm in Girson's painted hurricanes, the clouds seem to pucker and topologically turn in on themselves more like a scotomizing anus than an eye? There is a nineteenth-century argument that has, more recently, become more of a joke that an invisible but thoughtful God is more rational to believe in than an invisible and thoughtless evolutionary process. "Take the cat," so goes the argument. "Can random, blind chance have made it such that the cat's fur just happens to have three holes in it perfectly lined up where the eyes and anus are?"

This is another way in which Girson's work is to be separated from the past even as it takes its place in line with all that has come before. The huge canvases on which Georgia O'Keeffe worked late in her life, filling them up with perfect

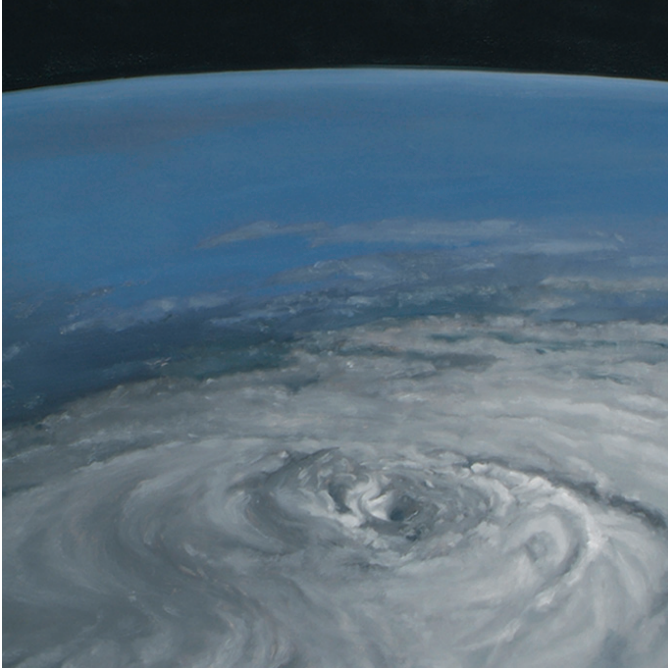


FIGURE 1.7. Matthew Girson. *Satellite View I*. 2006. Oil on canvas. 72 inches x 72 inches.

little ordered clouds, have all of the rationality and yet no hint of the horror.¹⁵ They are cloudscapes on which the whole of heaven is seemingly visible, no apparent scotoma, no shying away from the pastel sunset, devoid, even, of the clinical sexuality at work in her paintings of flowers. For O’Keeffe at this point in her career, the close-up view of the earthly flower had been replaced by a far-away view of the cloudy sky, but it is as if the eye itself has ceased functioning in her work when she looks from above.

With most of Girson’s canvases, the high horizon line continually places us below, down in the muck and the haze of existence. Even when we are caught in the clouds of the *Scotoma* paintings, the heavenly horizon is typically extraordinarily high, the heavens themselves out of reach. *Satellite View* keeps the Earth and its problems centered, the dark-cosmic-space-horizon again high on the canvas: we are stuck in orbit but will not rise further. And the self-portraits of *Dizzy Heights* refuse to center the head of the artist, instead offering us a cut-off chin and extra headspace; the horizon line always high, the effect again one of lowering us, grounding us, refusing us the chance to rise even as we mistakenly think these paintings might be about rising above.

Margret Dreikausen's contemporary paintings of hurricanes seen from space are, like O'Keeffe's work, unhorrific.¹⁶ Filled with angles and squares rather than orbs and spheres, there is beauty here, but the viewer is not caught up in the painting and made responsible. There is no hint of our complicity in the horror of the destruction that is taking place in the margins (which here means "in the center of the painting," for that is where the hurricane is doing its work), no sense in which the very means of production—as well as the technology being employed and the modernist ideology being accepted—mark our collusion with the violence.

It is the horror of memory that is always present—both present as present and present as absent—on Girson's canvases, hinting at the impossibility of the sublime. The portraits that comprise *Dizzy Heights*, for instance, stand like mug shots of the artist, testaments to some crime committed off canvas, the protean perpetrator of seven deadly sins plus one. Girson, standing in for us all, spins around like a hurricane caught in a strobe camera. The boy in the center of the painting, held aloft and static in each of the eight frames by an invisible mother's arms. Still he turns and spins and conducts his violence.

And yet, what does this miss? What, we must keep asking ourselves, is obscured by this act of whirling precession-presence?

Girson's work typically offers us a perspective that would be impossible without technology. He draws our attention to the mediated view, the construction of the sublime with the help of the subliminal, pointing to our complicity in allowing ourselves the distance of "objectivity" and selective memory.

The bombing of Dresden was said to be sublime from the sky; the perfect rationality of the Final Solution played out like a demonic mathematical proof full of Platonic Truth and Beauty. The illusion of detachment, the eye given to distant hazy unawareness mediated by the reason of machine and logic, made possible this collapse of horror into beauty, evil into good. Rationality will not save us. Reason—marched through history to its willful triumph—leads us to the techno-mechanization of Auschwitz, not away from it. And yet the Romantic, too, is on the same path, separating us from the world and reveling in detached awe at the spectacle of it all. This too, is the closeted legacy of the Holocaust: nature lovers, in techno-ecstatic delight, made mass murder into science . . . and called it art.

In *Dizzy Heights* we know that the artist, to make of himself an "object" for us, must employ technology to see—to separate himself from his self. Like any good magician, he uses mirrors. We are told that each of these self-portraits was done in one rushed sitting—the hurried and harried look of the artist legitimately captured as immediate and fresh. And we see him in these self-portraits looking down at the mirror, despondent, despairing, exhausted at the task. Thus he paints himself as given by the tool, as he appears in the technology. It is not a painting from memory, but a painting as he sees himself immediately as mediated by the

mirror before him in the canvas. He rotates before us, seeming fully an orbiting orb, a cyclonic “subject,” as well as a modern man in the throes of a computer scan in preparation for a 3D CGI technorgy that offers no chance for true ecstasy, no hope for living flesh as it is “perfected” in a binary world.

These paintings of the artist’s head from eight different angles mark a fascination with the face. As part of the *Scotoma* exhibition, we struggle to take the *Dizzy Heights* paintings at face value. We see, or perhaps think we see, that Girson is giving us an overabundance of access to the apparent site of his subjectivity, that most celebrated seat of the Ego since Descartes: his head and his face. The Levinasian ethical demands seem overpowering: before ontology, before the subject and its concomitant object, comes the *Thou Shalt Not Kill*. Girson turns to and around us, and asks us to face up to our responsibilities. But more than this, we cannot help but read this series of paintings in conjunction with the history of art that scotomizes, and here we are drawn to Magritte’s *The Son of Man* (1964).

Surely the most famous painting to deny us the traditional, centered subject, Magritte plays with the faux-scotoma in a way that is radically different from Girson: the businessman of Magritte’s painting has his face obscured by an apple, not a square of white. Many have argued that this blocks out the most important part of a portrait, that Magritte’s subject is thus no longer truly there. But of course, there is always a presence when such absence is created. There is, after all, an *apple* in the upper-middle part of Magritte’s canvas, an apple that is a perfect subject for this painting. And it is thus that modernity’s project is, in fact, unhinged: an artist is incapable of creating a truly subjectless painting. To admit this, even while trying to achieve it, is the (dizzy) height to which postmodernity takes us. As if to point to Magritte’s limitations, Girson thus offers us not merely a series of scotoma paintings, but a full set of images to fill in the gap of Magritte’s unpainted face. The head, and only the head, appears in *Dizzy Heights*. And it is thus as if we have *The (Other) Son of Man* before us as a confession of just what cannot be obscured in art.

Further, until we were asked to take up the perspective of the satellite—to embody a satellite view—few would have seen beauty in a hurricane. It is the technology that makes of nature a sublime object, as if “the big picture” is beautiful precisely for the way in which it diminishes my responsibility and obscures your suffering. In the *Scotoma* series, the skylscapes rather than landscapes also employ a point of view only attainable through technology—this time the airplane, the flying machine. The land no longer appears at all; those tied to it no longer matter. In these two series of paintings we see from the vantage point of the bomber and the fighter pilot, the robotic death drone and the Fox News Corporation broadcast satellite. The Other is in our sites, but our target is obscured. We stand aloft and find that the view from nowhere is actually only thought to