

Blank stare, Blank glance, Blank gaze
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2012

It is important not to look too much at artworks. All objects are traps for ideology, but art objects are the worst kind of object because they are supposed to speak for themselves. Anyone who says the artwork should speak for itself is an ideologist. And anyone who says a picture is purely visual is an ideologist too. Artworks speak for themselves only if they are ventriloquized by ideology.

Mustafa Hulusi is an artist who palpably understands the need for art to hold something back from the eye, to risk the judgement that it fails to speak for itself precisely because it insists on a surplus to the visual. So, if we think the work is conceptual (not in style, but in its structure of meaning), then this is nothing but a recognition of its resistance to ideology. In a word, Hulusi's work is never transparent. It would be wrong to assume that the meanings in his work must therefore be encoded, as if its transparency were merely delayed or mediated by an additional step. Instead, his work functions like those linguistic elements that Saussure called 'shifters' - words like 'now', 'there' and 'me' whose meanings shift according to their context and usage. This is why, when faced with his work, as well as looking at the object, we need to look around.

There has been a palpable blankness to Mustafa Hulusi's work from the outset when he plastered his name across the cityscape on posters and commercial signs. The work is all subject and no predicate. Like a self-portrait of a man without qualities, the name announces itself without announcing anything. Names are not classic 'shifters' because they refer to individuals but we know that context will often be crucial in determining the referential of 'John is going to be there' or 'I love Dolly'. Which John? Dolly who? The meaning of a name is always given outside the name. Names operate like 'shifters': the only way you can give any meaning to the name is to find out about the person. This is how Hulusi's artwork announced itself, as a name. Blank.

The blankness that characterizes Hulusi's work is closely aligned with ideology critique. Instead of drawing on ideology's spontaneous meanings, his works say little or nothing unless we treat them as mediated by signifying systems and social economies outside them. The flower paintings are a case in point. Since Romanticism, the depiction of nature, in landscape but also in still life and poetry, has been mediated by the idea that its meanings are not mediated but spontaneous. In fact, the whole Romantic project - from its individualism to its emancipation from the academy, and from its enmity to rules and conventions to its celebration of emotions and the inner life - is predicated on the discovery of spontaneous meaning (ie authenticity, expressiveness, feeling, intuition etc). Hulusi's flower paintings are post-Romantic not only insofar as they abjure expression, idiosyncrasy and so on, but more profoundly by renouncing spontaneous meaning. Of course, it is possible to read these paintings Romantically - you can 'feel' and 'interpret' them to your heart's content - but knowing that the first series of flower paintings were based on photographs of Cypriot flowers familiar from his childhood disturbs the Romantic reverie. Thus, Hulusi converts the Romantically abstract into 'shifters' that derive their specific meaning from a very particular context.

This arms-length approach to the content of his works reflects both his thinking on art and his relationship to the world at large. It is a post-Romantic position. And this is why it is ultimately impossible to regard his works as beautiful, especially when they depict beautiful things like flowers and statues. This is to the work's merit. Other artists might make exquisitely beautiful and deliciously seductive work but Hulusi's work has a more sophisticated relationship to beauty and seduction than this. The work trades in what, twisting Hannah Arendt a little, we might call 'the banality of beauty'. References to beauty, or the incorporation of beautiful things in one way or another, fill the work but without 'first order' commitment. There is a flatness or depthlessness to the beauty in Hulusi's work, as if the work points to beauty without feeling it. In the 1980s this was mistakenly called pastiche, which mixes the loss of critical distance with an eclecticism towards free-floating signifiers. The banality of beauty present in Hulusi's work is, by contrast, critical and pointed.

The latest flower series consists of roses found in London. Hulusi says, "there's a fantastic, iconic miniature painting of Sultan Mehmed Fatih smelling a red rose painted by court artist Siblizade Ahmed (inspired by the Venetian artist Bellini) after a victorious conquest. It symbolizes an appreciation not just of battle but of culture". The conventional symbolism does not become the meaning of the work, it indicates a complex, contradictory context in which the image is charged by the economies through which it is circulated. London roses might spontaneously signify the English garden or the expression of romantic love commodified by greetings cards and florists, but the ideology functions as a kind of bait for Hulusi, who is after bigger fish. Which is to say, the context can be extended and the stakes increased. Knowing that Hulusi is interested in how the London roses are related to this specific encounter between the Italian merchant republics and the Ottoman Empire. The paintings do not deliver this information but they are deliberately transformed by it.

Hulusi's work is never over-eager to disclose the truth. Rather, they are as quiet and unobtrusive as assassins. The statues almost embody this patient resistance to spontaneous meaning. No heavy-handed device accompanies them to recontextualize them or reveal their hidden truth. Statues are always captive to ideology, memorializing and glorifying their society's highest ideals, but because of this they are also time-bombs, waiting for the trigger that will reconnect them to the social conditions that they were erected to suppress. These particular statues, even though they take the universalized form of the neo-classical tradition, are replicas of one found in Hulusi's home district. These are not nostalgic mementoes of innocent times, they are yet another difficult encounter between European and Muslim civilizations, this time witnessed by Hulusi himself.

Thus, we can start to see what Hulusi *does* in his work, from the act of placing his name in the street to the replication of classical statues. He does not provide meaning so much as his works act like credit notes for meaning. In this sense Hulusi's works are the very opposite of the fetishized commodity which is supposed to contain its own value rather than draw that value from social relations. Hulusi's works defetishize meaning by consistently pointing beyond themselves, by always being completed by the signifying economies that surround them, and by remaining blank. This is why we should not feel compelled to 'know' the works, or even to 'feel' them. Confusion is better because confusion suspends the spontaneous meanings of ideology. Confusion is therefore a precursor to critical thinking and politics.

Names are political. 'Mustafa Hulusi' is an Islamic name. This is why its appearance as a monumental print in a western metropolis could never be anything but political. Words are political too. Even the word 'rose', via French, Latin and Greek, derives from the middle-eastern word for flower. Pictures are no exception, as Hulusi's paintings of flowers demonstrate. Objects are political too. Classical statuary is exemplary in this regard. Of course, all these things are thoroughly ideological so long as their politics is held at bay, naturalizing their spontaneous meanings and blocking all invocations of alternative readings. The difference between ideology and politics is the difference between trusting and not trusting your senses - because your senses have always already been hijacked and colonized by ideology. This is why Rancière builds his politics around 'the redistribution of the sensible' (a phrase which breathes new life into what Althusser, Rancière's teacher, called ideology).

Art has no special dispensation. Remember, it was the Romantics who gave us the idea that art has unusual capacities for self-making (based on their assumptions about authenticity, individualism and expression that attempt to give a good account of spontaneous meaning). Art is ideological or political by virtue of whether it depends on the flow of spontaneous meaning or interrupts that flow. This is why the avant-garde preferred shock, nonsense and chance to custom, truth and virtuosity. This is why T. J. Clark has defended 'vulgarity' and those 'practices of negation' such as 'deliberate acts of incompetence', or what Terry Atkinson called 'botching'. What is being negated in these practices is art's ideological basis. Blankness effaces dominant and spontaneous meanings too, arresting the flow of ideology with a cool stare instead of a burning jab.