



Melon Series #16, a painting by Dennis Wojtkiewicz, is currently on display at the Robert Kidd Gallery in Birmingham, Michigan.

nating and rise up, coiled on their tails, waving their heads as if in time to a rhythm. During the brief nights that interrupted the days, even we experienced unquiet slumbers, crammed with multicolored and indecipherable dreams. We have not managed to establish whether the smell that pervades the island emanates directly from the males or whether it is secreted by the inguinal glands of the *nacunus*.

Their pregnancy lasts about thirty-five days; delivery and lactation are unremarkable. The nests, built of twigs in the shelter of a rock, are prepared by the males and lined on the inside with musk, leaves, and sometimes sand; every male prepares more than one. Approaching delivery, each female chooses her own nest, examining several with attention and hesitation but without dispute. The "children of the wind," born between five and eight to a litter, are tiny but precocious: only a few hours after delivery they go out into the sun. The males learn at once to turn their backs to the wind like their fathers, and the females, although still lacking their livery, show themselves off in a comic parody of their mothers' dance. After only five months, *atoula* and *nacunu* are sexually mature and already live in separate herds, waiting for the next windy season to prepare their remote and airy nuptials.

[Essay, January 1986]

## THE WHITE BIRD

*From The Sense of Sight, a collection of essays by John Berger, edited by Lloyd Spencer and published by Pantheon. Berger is the author of several novels and volumes of art criticism.*

FROM TIME TO TIME I HAVE BEEN INVITED by institutions to speak about aesthetics. On one occasion I considered accepting and I thought of taking with me a bird made of white wood. But I didn't go. The problem is that you can't talk about aesthetics without talking about the principle of hope and the existence of evil. During the long winters the peasants in certain parts of the Haute-Savoie used to make wooden birds to hang in their kitchens and perhaps also in their chapels. Friends have told me that they have seen similar birds, made according to the same principle, in certain regions of Czechoslovakia, Russia, and the Baltic countries. The tradition may be more widespread.

The principle of the construction of these birds is simple enough, although to make a fine bird demands considerable skill. You take two bars of pine wood, about six inches in length, a little less than one inch in height, and the same in width. You soak them in water so that

the wood has the maximum pliability, then you carve them. One piece will be the head and body with a fan tail, the second piece will represent the wings. The art principally concerns the making of the wings and tail feathers. The whole block of each wing is carved according to the silhouette of a single feather. Then the block is sliced into thirteen thin layers and these are gently opened out, one by one, to make a fan shape. The two pieces of wood are joined together to form a cross and the bird is complete. No glue is used and there is only one nail where the two pieces of wood cross. Very light, weighing only two or three ounces, the birds are usually hung on a thread from a mantelpiece or overhanging beam so that they move with the air currents.

It would be absurd to compare one of these birds to a Van Gogh self-portrait or a Rembrandt crucifixion. They are simple, homemade objects, worked according to a traditional pattern. Yet, by their very simplicity, they allow one to categorize the qualities that make them pleasing and mysterious to everyone who sees them.

First, there is a figurative representation—one is looking at a bird, more precisely a dove, apparently hanging in midair. Thus, there is a reference to the surrounding world of nature. Second, the choice of subject (a flying bird) and the context in which it is placed (indoors, where live birds are unlikely) render the object symbolic. This primary symbolism then joins a more general, cultural one. Birds, and doves in particular, have been credited with symbolic meanings in a wide variety of cultures.

Third, there is a respect for the material used. The wood has been fashioned according to its qualities of lightness, pliability, and texture. Looking at it, one is surprised by how well wood becomes bird. Fourth, there is a formal unity and economy. Despite the object's apparent complexity, the grammar of its making is simple, even austere. Its richness is a result of repetitions which are also variations. Fifth, this man-made object provokes a kind of astonishment: how on earth was it made? I have given rough indications above, but anyone unfamiliar with the technique wants to take the dove in his hands and examine it closely to discover the secret that lies behind its making.

These qualities, when perceived as a whole, provoke at least a momentary sense of being before a mystery. One is looking at a piece of wood that has become a bird. One is looking at a bird that is somehow more than a bird. One is looking at something that has been worked with a mysterious skill and a kind of love.

Thus far I have tried to isolate the qualities of the white bird that provoke an aesthetic emotion. (The word "emotion," although des-

ignating a motion of the heart and of the imagination, is somewhat confusing, for we are considering an emotion that has little to do with the others we experience, notably because the self here is in a far greater degree of abeyance.) Yet my definitions beg the essential question. They reduce aesthetics to art. They say nothing about the relation between art and nature, art and the world.

Before a mountain, a desert just after the sun has gone down, or a fruit tree, one can also experience aesthetic emotion. Consequently, we

[Recollection, September 1995]

## A WRITER'S GIFT

*From an interview with Eudora Welty in the Spring 1995 issue of The Paris Review. The interview was conducted in 1994 by George Plimpton at Welty's home in Jackson, Mississippi.*

GEORGE PLIMPTON: Do writers ever come down here to see you?

EUDORA WELTY: Yes. Henry Miller came one time. We had him for three days. My mother said he'd never enter my house. I got two or three boyfriends to help me with him and drive the car and protect me from God only knew what my mother thought.

PLIMPTON: Did you like Mr. Miller?

WELTY: Not much. He was so dull. He never looked at anything. I guess he was bored by being in Mississippi. During his visit they were going to move the hospital for the insane down on North State Street to the next county, to a bigger place. The patients were helping move themselves. I thought that would be a funny sight for Mr. Miller, especially since the superintendent was named Love. Superintendent Love, moving the insane hospital patients from Jackson to across the river. It meant absolutely nothing to him.

PLIMPTON: That's hard to believe.

WELTY: I thought so, too. It's not every day there's something like that in Jackson to offer anyone. These poor old crazy people carrying their own beds out and putting them in a truck and driving away. Don't you like that?

PLIMPTON: It's wonderful. Did you ever write about that yourself?

WELTY: No. But I thought it was a gift that I could offer as a hostess.

are forced to begin again—not this time with a man-made object but with the nature into which we are born.

Urban living has always tended to produce a sentimental view of nature. Nature is thought of as a garden, or a view framed by a window, or an arena of freedom. Peasants, sailors, nomads have known better. Nature is energy and struggle. It is what exists without any promise. If it can be thought of by man as an arena, a setting, it has to be thought of as one which lends itself as much to evil as to good. Its energy is fearsomely indifferent. The first necessity of life is shelter. Shelter against nature. The first prayer is for protection. The first sign of life is pain. If the Creation was purposeful, its purpose is a hidden one which can only be discovered intangibly within signs, never by the evidence of what happens.

It is within this bleak natural context that beauty is encountered, and the encounter is by its nature sudden and unpredictable. The gale blows itself out, the sea changes from the color of gray shit to aquamarine. Under the fallen boulder of an avalanche a flower grows. Over the shantytown the moon rises. I offer dramatic examples so as to insist upon the bleakness of the context. Reflect upon more everyday examples. However it is encountered, beauty is always an exception, always *in despite of*. This is why it moves us.

It can be argued that the origin of the way we are moved by natural beauty was functional. Flowers are a promise of fertility, a sunset is a reminder of fire and warmth, moonlight makes the night less dark, the bright colors of a bird's plumage are (atavistically even for us) a sexual stimulus. Yet such an argument is too reductionist, I believe. Snow is useless. A butterfly offers us very little.

Of course the range of what a given community finds beautiful in nature will depend upon its means of survival, its economy, its geography. What Eskimos find beautiful is unlikely to be the same as what the Ashanti found beautiful. Within modern class societies there are complex ideological determinations: we know, for instance, that the British ruling class in the eighteenth century disliked the sight of the sea. Equally, the social use to which an aesthetic emotion may be put changes according to the historical moment: the silhouette of a mountain can represent the home of the dead or a challenge to the initiative of the living.

Yet there seem to be certain constants which all cultures have found "beautiful": among them, certain flowers, trees, forms of rock, birds, animals, the moon, running water.

One is obliged to acknowledge a coincidence. The evolution of natural forms and the

evolution of human perception have coincided to produce the phenomenon of a potential recognition: what is and what we can see (and by seeing also feel) sometimes meet at a point of affirmation. This point, this coincidence, is two-faced: what has been seen is recognized and affirmed and, at the same time, the seer is affirmed by what he sees. For a brief moment one finds oneself—without the pretensions of a creator—in the position of God in the first chapter of Genesis . . . And he saw that it was good. The aesthetic emotion before nature derives, I believe, from this double affirmation.

Yet we do not live in the first chapter of Genesis. We live—if one follows the biblical sequence of events—after the Fall. In any case, we live in a world of suffering in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our Being, a world that has to be resisted. It is in this situation that the aesthetic moment offers hope. That we find a crystal or a poppy beautiful means that we are less alone, that we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe. I try to describe as accurately as possible the experience in question; my starting point is phenomenological, not deductive; its form, perceived as such, becomes a message that one receives but cannot translate because, in it, all is instantaneous. For an instant, the energy of one's perception becomes inseparable from the energy of the Creation.

The aesthetic emotion we feel before a man-made object—such as the white bird with which I started—is a derivative of the emotion we feel before nature. The white bird is an attempt to translate a message received from a real bird. All the languages of art have been developed as attempts to transform the instantaneous into the permanent. Art supposes that beauty is not an exception—is not *in despite of*—but is the basis for an order.

Several years ago, when considering the historical face of art, I wrote that I judged a work according to whether or not it helped men in the modern world claim their social rights. I hold to that. Art's other, transcendental face raises the question of man's ontological right.

The notion that art is the mirror of nature is one that appeals only in periods of skepticism. Art does not imitate nature, it imitates a creation, sometimes to propose an alternative world, sometimes simply to amplify, to confirm, to make social the brief hope offered by nature. Art is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally. Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the hope of receiving a surer reply . . . the transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer.



From "Deep South: Landscapes of Louisiana and Mississippi," by Sally Mann. The series was shown at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in New York City last fall.

The white wooden bird is wafted by the warm air rising from the stove in the kitchen where the neighbors are drinking. Outside, in minus 25°C, the real birds are freezing to death!

[Ficciones, October 1985]

## A MUSEUM OF SECRET AFFINITIES

From *Atlas*, a collection of writings by Jorge Luis Borges, published by E. P. Dutton. Translated by Anthony Kerrigan.

*Hotel Esja, Reykjavik*—The most modest things in life are often a kind of boon. I had just arrived at the hotel. I was, as always, in the middle of that clear haze visible to the eyes of the blind,

and I set about exploring the undefined room which had been assigned me. Feeling my way along the walls, which were rather uneven, and circling the furniture, I discovered a large round column. It was so wide I could scarcely encompass it and had trouble getting my hands to meet behind it. I knew at once it was white. Firm and massive it rose toward the ceiling. For some seconds I experienced the curious happiness one derives from a thing that is almost an archetype. I know that at that moment I recovered the elemental joy I first felt when the pure forms of Euclidean geometry—the cylinder, the cube, the sphere, the pyramid—were revealed to me.

*Ars Magna*—I am standing on the corner of Raymundo Lulio Street in Mallorca.

Emerson said that language is fossil poetry. As confirmation of this dictum, we need only remember that all abstract words are, in effect, metaphors, including the word *metaphor*, which in Greek means "transfer."