

four perspectives

a renoir painting



written by Haelim Paek

Hanging alone, day and night. Next to some others. I get tucked away behind a screen at closing. I've been displayed this way for quite a while now. Loneliness encompasses my existence. Time doesn't register anymore. Outliving my own creator, being passed from homes to museums--even being misplaced at times. This has been the nature of my being. My past experiences have become one, and the present moment uniquely grants me a sense of time. Everything, everyone is transient throughout my life. It seems that nothing will stick around with me long enough--there is no permanence. I am 127 years old, yet I feel that a new chapter of my life has begun once again by being in a new environment. Another 100 years from now, this moment will have taken its place among my numerous existing memories, only to be forgotten once again. I have found a new home in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I feel a sense of stability now, and maybe even a sense of community given the physical proximity to others who share the same state of existence.

Yet this sense of security I feel is interrupted by the short-lived interactions among the people who gaze at me, talk about me and sometimes even photograph me. I realize too that I will never see most of these people ever again, except for the few who make their way back. I will continue to exist in this way because this is what I am.

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"Now this is the European painting wing. Here is one of Auguste Renoir's most famous paintings. The reclining nude, dated 1883. Nudes and the grand tradition of classical art preoccupied Renoir in the 1880's. In this painting, he paid homage to Ingres's "Grande Odalisque" (Musée du Louvre, Paris), although he transformed Ingres's cool courtesan into a healthy, pink-cheeked girl, and the harem into an Impressionist landscape reminiscent of the Channel coast. ¹ The composition of this painting allows the audience to follow its strong diagonal path. Her relaxed posture gazing into the far waterscape suggests that the figure in the painting may have just come back from a swim."

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"Now this is beautiful."

"What do you think she is thinking about?"

"I don't know, it seems like she's just reflecting."

"Who lays around like that in the Nude?"

"There's water there, so she probably just came back from a swim."

"I remember when I skinny dipped for the first time. It feels so weird. I was at my friend's lake house and it was like zero degrees outside."

"Oh. Well I like the colors."

"It's so much more than that. Look at the fluid brushstrokes. The feeling you get when you look at this is so...I don't know."

1. http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/european_paintings/reclining_nude_auguste_renoir/objectview.aspx?collID=11&OID=110002469

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Walking back into the MET, I enter into the European painting wing. I have been here before, many times. I stop in front of a painting that evokes a certain memory only documented in the photos shoved somewhere beneath my bed. The memory is of my mother, with her hair buzzed standing next to my father in front of this painting. It was one of our last trips before she passed. I am the person behind the camera.

“I love Renoir, I love his paintings. The colors, how the women are painted, it’s all so beautiful,” said my mother.

“Let’s take a picture. She’s nude in the painting, I want to be in the picture,” said my father.

The whole day my father had been taking photos next to nude paintings all throughout the gallery, tapping into his inner teenage mind at 50 years old. I stood in front of the painting, waiting for them to pose.

“Take off your hat,” said my father.

“I don’t want to...my hair.”

“Your hair looks great. You’re beautiful,” my father said while gently moving my mother’s hat.

The click of the camera button took more than just the photo captured that day.