Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

# On form and content

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, April 3rd, 2019

*"Form is formulation – the turning of content into a material entity (…) Form is the very shape of content."*

— Ben Shahn, *The shape of content*

*

**Context**

What is the content of this series of drawings, what do they try to "formulate"?

Essentially memorized *qualities of environmental experiences that became, by association of a pattern of physical elements with certain emotions, the content of these drawings.*

**The process of drawing**

Aiming for a visual expression of the remembered experiential quality, the drawing process starts with a rough sketch using simple graphic conventions of shape, scale, tonal patterns and visual composition studied to magnify the expressive effect of the rendered drawing.

The feature image, titled "Meditation on a sylvan huddle by moonlight" …*attempts by focusing on the single source of light to communicate the generic experiential quality of huddling at night as its expressive core … its content.*

**Meditation on a morning syntagma – '08**

A syntagma is a set of things belonging together, usually in terms of their use such as the functional set of coffee mug, cereal bowl, spoon and tray.

*The small circular motif of cup and bowl and spoon united by the larger one of the metal serving tray suggested the experiential quality of "starting the day alone".*

Meditation on a morning syntagma

**Meditation on a passage – ‘08**

Riding the bus, through one of these popular residential districts that still harbors housing with interior yards accessible via a carriage entrance, I catch a glimpse of one of them: the naked hole in the brick wall pointing to a generic, unspecified, “there” to be reached from “here”.

*The crowning and signaling dimensions of the concrete lintel are the sole sources of perceptual and emotional effect.*

Meditation on a passage

**Meditation on night lighting – ‘08**

There is something reassuring about night lighting of the exterior extensions of a house, be it balcony or porch, etc.

*The three main tonal areas going from the lighter ceiling to the darker sky, via the in-between tone of handrail and post, make no doubt as to where safety lies and where the danger may come from.*

Meditation on night lighting

**Meditation on the ceremony of rising – ‘08**

The line-up of trees along a slope seems to direct one toward the steps as would a row of valets, during a ceremony, direct the guests.

*We are on the grounds of the Mount Royal Cemetery, where the destination of one’s movement invites meditation indeed!*

Meditation on the ceremony of rising

**Meditation on nature and culture – ‘08**

Visually unified via the alignment of vertical and sloping edges, visually codified via the sense of depth produced by the contrasting tonal areas, the drawing suggests the quintessential assemblage of tree, car and house … of nature and culture.

*This drawing, exhibited with the others among many, was the only one to be purchased by a visitor who was elated at having decoded its content!*

Meditation on nature and culture

**End note**

I am much indebted to the artist-photographer Ben Shahn who wrote in his *The shape of content*:

*“Form is formulation – the turning of content into a material entity (…) Form is the many faces of the legend – bardic., epic, sculptural, musical, pictorial, architectural;* ***(…) it is the expression***

***and the remnant of self****. Form is the very shape of content."*

— Shahn, Ben, *The shape of content – the Harvard Charles-Eliot-Norton lectures.* Vintage books, N.Y., 1957, (page 62)

*Credit Maurice Amiel for all drawings.*

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