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STATEMENT

Daughters of Leucippus

In my most recent series of paintings, “Daughters of Leucippus,” the close and precise observation of the fibers, tissues and corpuscles of torn fruit and vegetables is a way to examine the nature of living flesh more generally, with its universal processes of seduction, destruction and regeneration. The fruit acts as a surrogate for the human body. To make this substitution more explicit, I have borrowed the title of a Peter Paul Rubens painting, “The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus” from 1618. Several years ago at the Louvre, in Paris, I found my way to the Rubens' gallery. Teeming with anecdote and allegory, as alive to the sense of touch as to the eye, every inch of his majestic paintings seemed to swirl and twist under one’s gaze. It was as close to living flesh as any artist has every gotten with oil paint and brush.

In a century when oil paint and canvas sometimes feels ridiculously obsolete, it can be a little difficult to give oneself over to these grand visions. As part of my recent doctoral studies in art and cognitive psychology at Columbia University, I repeatedly visited Ruben’s work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. At first, I couldn’t imagine how to enter the mind of this painter who lived 400 years ago, under circumstances and in a society so vastly different from my own. I started to draw anyway, and in a matter of minutes, was flooded by my own intuitions of the artist’s thoughts and feelings as he worked. As my pencil traced the movements of his brush, I began to imagine I was truly able to see through his eyes.

We know things first through touch, feeling our way through the world: many baby mammals do not even open their eyes for days after birth. Yet, the newborn human’s gaze is intense. Cognitive neuroscientists suggest that the infant looks at you so directly to get inside your head, to understand your emotions and intentions, and perhaps even influence what you might do next. The capacities to observe closely and to imaginatively project ourselves into what we see develop in tandem. As we gain experience, we are always comparing current perceptions with prior knowledge, developing hypotheses and conjectures in response to an ever changing, shifting world. In these paintings, I invite you to look beyond a literal description of torn fruit, and see what else you might discover.