

Subtle Affinity

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From April to October in 2017, I created an installation of abstract oil paintings displayed together with plants in the historic greenhouse at The Frick, a museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The installation and the film made to document it were both titled *Respiration Paintings*. With its elevated heat and humidity, a greenhouse is an unlikely location to view paintings; it is a painting conservator's worst nightmare. Choosing to sacrifice the longevity of my paintings, I gave them a different sort of life cycle than they would typically have hanging on walls. The fertile air of the greenhouse catalyzed the paintings' materials, inducing them to change at an accelerated rate. The paintings in the greenhouse were made with essential plant oils and human urine, two very alive substances. Part human, part plant, the paintings were hybridized forms, sharing affinities across species. Living in the greenhouse with plants, fungi and insects, the paintings were given another kind of agency to communicate. The exhibition now over, and the paintings stored in crates, I am writing to tell the story.

The greenhouse at The Frick was designed in 1897 by the architects Alden and Harlow, a firm known for their significant cultural commissions, including the Carnegie Museum of Natural History also in Pittsburgh, and the City Hall in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Frick family, the same Fricks who would also create The Frick Collection in New York, originally hailed from Pittsburgh. Henry Clay Frick made his fortune turning coal mined in the nearby mountains into coke, a material necessary for the production of steel. Selling much of his coke to the steel-manufacturer, Andrew Carnegie, Carnegie took him on as a partner in 1882. The Fricks moved into their family mansion in 1883, calling it "Clayton." The greenhouse was primarily used to grow flowers for their Pittsburgh home. As their wealth increased, and their estates multiplied, the cut flowers were transported eastward by train to their other homes in New York and Massachusetts.

Around the same time that these first glass and steel structures were being built in the mid- 1800s, the term "greenhouse effect" came into use to describe the impact of gases which trap infrared radiation in the atmosphere, keeping earth's temperatures constant. One of the primary greenhouse gases is carbon dioxide, which has now increased to a critical level in the earth's atmosphere due to the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal. Coal is a rock formed from dead plant matter converted into peat millions of years ago. When Frick's greenhouse was built it was as yet unknown that increased carbon dioxide would lead to global warming.

The idea to display paintings in a greenhouse grew out of my use of essential plant oils in the making of my oil paintings. These oils are used for natural perfumery, as well as medicinally in aromatherapy. Researching the oils and their various properties, I learned that what we call oil painting is in fact plant oil painting. Around the 15th century, painters started mixing dry pigments with plant oils. This invention has historically been attributed to Jan Van Eyck, also known to be an alchemist, which may have influenced his experimental attitude with materials, plant matter in particular. Plant alchemy was practiced as a form of herbal medicine and tinctures created from distilled plant matter were used as remedies. The same substances used to heal were also used to paint. This connection exists even today. Linseed oil, the primary medium of oil paintings, comes from flax, the same plant that flaxseed oil comes from. People ingest flaxseed oil for its fatty acids especially its omega 3's, which are believed to have a wide range of health benefits.

As I became increasingly invested in the essential plant oils as materials, my research led me to the source of the oils: the plants themselves. I read about plant communication and learned that plants and trees release pheromones to ward off predators and to warn other plants of impending danger. They also use these airborne molecules to attract pollinators in order to spread their genes. Learning about plant communication, it occurred to me, was I somehow communicating with the plants when I was painting? I was breathing in the smells that have evolved as a form of communication in the natural world, but since I am not a pollinator, what messages were the plants communicating to me? The aromatic molecules first entered my nasal passage, then proceeded to my olfactory bulb in my forebrain where the information about the odors was processed and then sent to other parts of my brain. The molecules were physically entering my body and connecting with my memories, thoughts and moods. During long hours of painting and breathing the plant oils, I noticed a change in myself. I was more present, more connected to the materials I was working with. I wondered, was that communication somehow reflected in the paintings that I made with the plant oils? It was this communication with the plant essences and their inspiration that I sought to share in the greenhouse.

In addition to paintings made with essential plant oils, I also made oxidation paintings to display in the greenhouse. These paintings are made by applying urine to a copper ground. The urine substance oxidizes the copper, turning it green. This form of painting was invented in the 20th century, by Andy Warhol, who grew up in a neighborhood in Pittsburgh not far from Frick's greenhouse and even closer to his steel mills. Unlike my paintings in the greenhouse, Warhol's oxidation paintings were not meant to keep changing after they were finished. To prevent the paintings from continuing to oxidize stringent climate controls are required, keeping the temperature at a constant 70 degrees Fahrenheit and 55% relative humidity. The oxidation process cannot be stopped completely, only retarded by a stable climate. By putting my oxidation paintings in a greenhouse, I invited the paintings to change, to complete themselves by continuing the oxidization process.

Thinking about paintings that change led me to Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in 1890, 7 years before the construction of the Frick greenhouse. Envyng painting's ability to resist time, Dorian wishes he could switch places with his portrait and remain himself visibly unchanged, while the painting aged. When he realizes that his wish has magically been granted, and he first perceives the physical changes to his portrait, Dorian wonders more generally if there is some connection between ourselves and all matter. He asks, "*Might not all things external to ourselves vibrate in unison, with our moods and*

passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity?" The affinity Dorian experiences between himself and the painting is at once magical and scientific. In its scientific use, affinity, also known as chemical affinity, describes the force by which atoms are held together in chemical compounds. Happening inside matter and below the threshold of visibility, chemical affinity is not something we can typically see with our naked eyes. The title I have chosen for this text, "Subtle Affinity," is a term I have borrowed from Oscar Wilde to describe the experience of the paintings changing in the greenhouse. Subtle affinity suggests that with close attention and prolonged looking the connections in things may become perceivable. In these slowed-down moments, the aliveness in things can be felt and experienced. The word "subtle" comes from the Latin *subtilis* literally meaning "finely woven." The idea of subtle affinity I am proposing here is like looking into the weave of a fabric and seeing the individual threads, threads that at first glance may not be discernable.

Looking into the weave of history, perhaps there is a subtle affinity between Dorian Gray and Henry Clay Frick. Frick was 41 when *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published. Did he read it? Considering the scandal it caused, it is likely he had at least heard of it. Frick was known for being a ruthless man of business. By 41 he was one of the richest men in the world, known as the "King of Coke." In 1889, eight years before the construction of the greenhouse and the year before *Dorian Gray* was published, there had been a flood in Johnstown, Pennsylvania that killed over 2000 people. The flood was caused by a break in the South Fork Dam, which contained Lake Conemaugh, a man-made reservoir. On the shores of the lake, was the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club, a private club for a rustic getaway and recreation of wealthy Pittsburgh industrialists. The club was an escape into pristine nature from the soot and smoke of the city, pollution which was caused by the industrial enterprises of many of its members. Frick was one of the founders of the club, involved in the purchase of the land and its development. The club owners were apparently aware that the dam was faulty, and with heavy rain could potentially fail, but they took no action to shore it up. The fateful day came, and with unusually heavy rainfall, the dam broke, flooding Johnstown with a ferocious force. There was not time to evacuate the city and people became trapped in the debris that piled up against the still standing Stone Bridge. The debris and wreckage caught fire. Those who didn't drown, burned. It was one of the worst disasters in American history. Despite evidence that the club members had been warned and knew that the dam was vulnerable, the courts ruled that the flood was an "Act of God," and they were never held legally or financially accountable. It is possible to look back on this event now as a harbinger of things to come with global warming, and the increased severity of natural disasters exacerbated by human activity. Though there was never a public admission of guilt by the South Fork Club members, there was a confession of sorts made indirectly by Frick. On his deathbed Carnegie asked to speak with Frick, and he responded with a note that read, "Tell him I will see him in hell, where we are both going."

The relationship between Carnegie and Frick had soured years before. In order to force Frick out of his company, Carnegie had given him a massive settlement. With this payment, Frick moved to New York City in 1905 and he spent the remainder of his life collecting art. One of the prizes of Frick's collection is *St. Francis of the Desert*, 1476-1478 painted by Giovanni Bellini. Painted 35 years after Jan Van Eyck's death, *St. Francis of the Desert* is a remarkably well-preserved early oil painting. St. Francis is known as the patron saint of animals and the natural environment. He was said to be able to communicate with other species, calling other creatures his brothers and sisters. Once when he was walking in the wild he came upon birds in a tree, he stopped to preach to them, and they flocked around to listen. In Bellini's painting, St. Francis is seen arms open, facing the sun. Perhaps he is receiving inspiration for his song, *Canticle of the Sun*, also known as *Praise of the Creatures*. In the upper left-hand corner of the painting is a Laurel tree, which is also communicating with the sun, bending dramatically in its direction. Is it possible that living with this painting in his New York town house provided Frick with some healing? The spirit of St. Francis could be felt in the greenhouse where my paintings were hanging. Along with humans, non-human visitors came to see the show, including bees and butterflies, praying mantises, moths, spiders, occasional birds that flew in, even the neighborhood cat. The insects were the most frequent visitors, they became a part of the experience of the paintings; flying around them and on them, sometimes even dying in front of them, almost as if paying tribute to them.

The summer of 2017 was particularly wet in Pittsburgh, there were frequent torrential rain storms. These "rainfall events," associated with climate change would soak the greenhouse, muddying the plant beds surrounding the paintings. Despite the museum's best efforts, the paintings got rained on from above, and splashed from below. Contact with the rain accelerated the paintings' rate of change. The moisture saturated them, quickening their organic ingredients, making the paintings perfect hosts for living organisms. Time passed. Over their six-month stay in the greenhouse, the paintings revealed new images than the ones I had made, they developed identities of their own. The raw canvas darkened as the mold infiltrated its weave; in response the paint brightened, creating a new contrast. The paint seemed to emanate, glowing brightly, incandescently, as if lit from within. The mold grew in organic patterns over the straight lines I had drawn. The surfaces reflected their lives lived. It was not easy for me to watch the process of the paintings changing and decaying. The mold was eating them, they were food. In the studio, I had spent many months making them, realizing their forms. They were finished. When I first saw the mold on the paintings, it was physically painful. It took a little time for me to adjust to the emergent appearance of the paintings. Once I could let go of my idea of the paintings as fixed objects, I could let the paintings speak to me, speak of their experience. I saw a new beauty in them. Some of the plants seemed to grow towards the paintings, as if seeking them. One of the Lantana plants grew so close to one of the oxidation paintings that the oxidation dust fell on the plant's leaves, dusting it with bright turquoise pigment. Other plants grew onto the paintings, the Lavender, French Marigolds, Cone Flowers and Blackeyed Susans in particular. The colors of their petals joined with the colors in the paintings, sometimes even matching them perfectly. The paintings and the plants had become one. I could surrender the paintings to the process.

In late summer the show was at the height of its vitality. The plants were in full bloom, and the paintings were too. They had developed and blossomed manifesting their resilience. In the early autumn, the greenhouse was graced by visits from bumble bees and monarch butterflies. The butterflies landed on the paintings, drawn to them by their colors or their smells or perhaps both. The presence of these pollinators was a hopeful sign.

Respiration Paintings was shown at The Frick, Pittsburgh from April 15th-October 22nd 2017

Respiration Paintings, The Film, 2017 is an experimental film made by JPC Eberle in collaboration with the artist. It was recorded on 16mm film and the soundtrack was composed of ambient sounds from the greenhouse. The film is 7:37 minutes long and was commissioned by The Frick Pittsburgh.