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DEBATES

DAY'S EYE CLOSED

05 | FEB
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BY ELISE ADIBI

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The daisy gets its name from the fact that it opens its petals at daybreak and follows the sun throughout the day as it travels across the sky. The flower was originally called *day's eye* in old English, but the name was shortened over time to daisy. When night falls the daisy closes its petals, folding them over its eye and turning its vision inwards.

Daisies close their petals at night to protect themselves from predators as well as to keep moisture in. They need this moisture at night to continue to metabolize the light they receive during the day. Plants transform sunlight into chemical energy during the day and then store it as a starch that they can use to keep growing at night. While daisies and other plants appear to be sleeping, they are continuing to metabolize the sun's light in the darkness.

Humans cannot metabolize sunlight directly the way that plants do. But since plants are at the base of our food chain, humans do metabolize sunlight once removed when we eat plants, and twice removed when we eat animals that eat plants. Creatures on earth rely on plants to transform cosmic energy into an embodied form that we can consume and use to create with. Like plants, our bodies continue to metabolize food while we sleep. This metabolic process happens inside us, with our eyes closed, while our conscious minds are asleep. We are not receiving optical stimuli from the external world, but we continue to see images internally in our mind's eye while we dream.

Both waking and sleeping, darkness is integral to human formation of images. While awake we form images in our minds, but no actual physical light enters the brain. Rather, light enters the eye and is there turned into an electrical signal, which is transmitted to the brain. The visual

cortex processes the electrical signals we see into forms. The images produced in us are created in the darkness of the brain.

Some of the first known images painted by humans were made in dark caves. The images they painted were primarily of the animals they ate. These first painters went into the darkness of caves, removing themselves from the light of the sun to create images. Thousands of years later, no longer in caves, painters had increased their ability to faithfully render external reality. Even though more optically accurate, painting remained a way to see more than meets the eye. As Paul Klee once said, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible."¹

In 1475-80, Giovanni Bellini made a painting called *St Francis in Ecstasy* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Francis_in_Ecstasy_\(Bellini\)#/media/File:Giovanni_Bellini_-_Saint_Francis_in_the_Desert_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Francis_in_Ecstasy_(Bellini)#/media/File:Giovanni_Bellini_-_Saint_Francis_in_the_Desert_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)) which makes visible an inner state of being. In Bellini's painting, St. Francis of Assisi is shown standing barefoot, hands open, and eyes looking upwards towards the light. The painting is set in the mountains of La Verna, Italy, where St Francis is known to have gone on a spiritual retreat in 1224. He went there to fast for 60 days in preparation for Michaelmas, a celebration honoring saints at the end of September. In the painting, St. Francis has just emerged from his rustic open-air study located in front of a dark cave where presumably he sleeps. Behind St Francis is his desk with a book and a skull to meditate on. His sandals are tossed off, as if he was called forth suddenly by the light. The source of the bright light is not depicted in the painting just its glow. It is ambiguous: is the glow coming from the sun, or some other cosmic force? Following St. Francis's line of sight upwards we see a laurel tree bending at an acute angle, as if blown by a strong wind, while the rest of the tableaux appears calm and windless. This strange, localized wind is not a known solar phenomenon, but rather hints at an other-worldly presence in the painting.

Along with his eyes being open and his hands outstretched, St Francis's mouth is agape. It has commonly been assumed that he is singing his *Canticle to the Sun*, a song of thanks for life on earth. St. Francis has little wounds in the palms of his open hands. These wounds have been interpreted as the stigmata that St Francis purportedly received on Mt Verna in 1224. In Bellini's rendition of the miracle, the Saint's wounds are not bleeding but rather are painted as

dark little holes. Perhaps these dark holes are where the light can enter? St Francis is both receiving light and transmitting it in the creative act of song. One can imagine that the song St Francis was singing to the light was so uncannily beautiful, so breath-taking, that all the other creatures in the painting: the donkey, the bunny, the kingfisher, and sheep with their shepherd in the distance, all seem to be listening in rapture.

St Francis in Ecstasy is currently housed in The Frick Collection in New York City. It was bought by Henry Clay Frick in 1915. Reportedly Frick did not initially like the painting. He was in the process of sending it back to the gallery when he was stopped by his art advisor who insisted it was a masterpiece.² Before Frick passed away in 1919 Bellini's painting had become one of his "most beloved." The painting, now framed and hanging on a wall, appears to be a landscape, but it was originally made as part of an altarpiece for a wealthy owner of a palazzo in the Lagoons of Venice. As a devotional painting, it would have been used as a guide and an aide in prayer and meditation.³ That Frick did not "see" the painting at first may be because it takes time to see this painting with the mind's eye.

In Bellini's painting, St Francis strikes a daisy pose, with eyes open and arms outstretched. If you look very closely, in the far bottom right corner of the painting behind the Saint, there is a small patch of little flowers. They are daisies. This species of daisy with its violet-hued petals is called a Michaelmas daisy, because it blooms at the end of September, the same time as the holiday. In Bellini's painting there is a strong diagonal trajectory from the top left to the bottom right, starting with the arcing laurel tree, through the singing saint, and ending in the open-petaled daisy. All three figures, tree, human and flower, have a similar cupped shape, opening to the light, they all look like satellite dishes receiving energy from the sky and transmitting it back to the cosmos.

My relationship with daisies began with my painting studio on Daisy Ave in Pasadena, California. After about a year of making paintings on Daisy Ave, I realized my paintings were mostly yellow. It got me wondering: was there any connection between my yellow-colored paintings and my street name? The particular yellow pigment I have been using is called Bismuth Vanadate. When applied to raw canvas this yellow makes the canvas ground appear to

have a subtle violet glow. The purplish color is not physically there but supplied by the mind's eye. Purple is the complementary color of yellow. The mind projects the purple onto the raw canvas as an afterimage.

Complementary colors are opposite each other on the color wheel, when seen next to each other they cause each other to vibrate with increased intensity. This phenomenon is called the law of simultaneous contrast, discovered by the French chemist Chevreul in 1839. The other complementary pairs on the color wheel are red and green and orange and blue. These colors are the main components of visible light, the spectrum of electromagnetic radiation which humans can see with their naked eyes. The spectrum of visible light is red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, the colors of the rainbow.

In *Daisy Grid*, one of my yellow paintings, the violet afterimage is visible even in the photo of the painting. The square shaped painting is abstract. I draw the grid on the raw canvas with a graphite pencil and then fill in spaces with paint. The painted and unpainted spaces are married into one, becoming a field of color. *Daisy Grid* transmits and receives light, like a daisy. Since the purple color is only there if the painting is being looked at by a human, it is not physically there. This ghost color exists only in the mind's eye, in the dark space where images are created.

I did not consciously set out to find a studio on Daisy Ave, nor did I consciously decide to start making yellow paintings. It was through creative communication with the light on Daisy Ave that I became connected to Daisy consciousness. It is not too far of a stretch to think of the yellow *Daisy* paintings as metabolized light.

Photo Credits

Elise Adibi, Daisy Grid, 2022, graphite and oil paint mixed with distilled lemon essential oil on raw canvas sized with rabbit skin glue, 30" x 30" photographed by Ruben Diaz

Notes

- 1 Klee, Paul, *Creative Confessions*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2013) pg. 7
- 2 Schreiner, Samuel, Jr., *Henry Clay Frick: The Gospel of Greed*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995) pg. 260
- 3 Hopkins, Christopher Snow, *Mapping Provenance: Bellini's St Francis in the Desert*, The Frick Collection Website, April 6, 2022,
https://www.frick.org/blogs/curatorial/mapping_provenance_bellinis_st_francis_desert
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Elise Adibi is an artist and writer with a background in philosophy and architecture. She created a 6-month installation of plants and oil paintings in the greenhouse of Henry Clay Frick at The Frick museum in Pittsburgh (*Respiration Paintings*, 2017) and wrote *Subtle Affinity* (2018) published in *Forty-Five: A Journal for*

Outdoor Research. Some of her solo gallery shows include, *A Priori* (2010), *Da Capo* (2012) and *Substance* (2015) all in New York and *Metabolic Painting* in Cambridge MA (2013).

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