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ARTS

All Things Ornamental

REVIEW

Double Images

Discovering the “nature of me.”



By Jane Biberman | Brian Peterson was only 13 or 14 years old when he attended a concert in his hometown of Missoula, Montana, and found himself fascinated by the graceful and idiosyncratic movements of the two viola players.

“The seed of selfhood recognized itself in them and said, ‘Where those men are is where I want to be,’” he recalls in *The Smile at the Heart of Things*. By that he didn’t mean performing on a stage but following the creative path of an artist. Finding that path is the theme of what he describes as “a weird hybrid sort of book.”

Consisting of memories, reflections, journal entries, and meditations on the soul of art, music, and religion, *The Smile at the Heart of Things* is also handsomely illustrated with reproductions of

paintings and photographs that are especially meaningful to Peterson, the chief curator at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. For the past 15

years he has led a “double life,” Peterson notes. While his business card says *curator*, “most of the time the more accurate title would be *middle manager*.”

There is another dimension to this very personal book, though, which Peterson was compelled to create when he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease two years ago.

“I had no idea what course the illness would take, but I knew my future was tenuous,” he writes. “*The Smile at the Heart of Things* is my attempt to integrate all aspects of my life.”

The book’s title comes from Peterson’s essay on photographer Emmet Gowin, whose work he admires for its simplicity. He describes Gowin’s black and white images as “humble affirmation of the magic and poetry of intimacy,” adding: “Gowin’s photographs tell me that living life honestly, with a sense of connection to self and community, is actually a sacred duty. If we can somehow let our souls become big enough and innocent enough, we can still find the smile at the heart of things.”

Looking back on his arrival at Penn in 1974—a lonely transfer student from the University of Montana, carrying a little blue suitcase and looking for the financial-aid office—Peterson reflects on a journey filled with excursions and detours. His journal entries in the mid-to-late-’70s reflect the probing nature of his self-discovery and drive to become independent, which coincided with his dropping out of Penn’s music department for a few years before graduating cum laude in 1981. Changing his focus to pursue an MFA in studio art at the University of Delaware, he evolved into a photographer of some renown, taught photography, and did a lot of freelance curating before joining the Michener.

Peterson includes some of his own powerful photographs of family and friends, including a haunting portrait of the late composer George Rochberg, whom he met at Penn and who became one of his closest friends.

“Despite his fascination with ideas, his love of all things intellectual, at his core George Rochberg was a dreamer who wondered about other realities and imagined other worlds. Everything he said, everything he made, grew out of a silent but deeply felt spiritual life.”

A visit to Seattle’s Pike Place Market inspires these reflections: “Every booth, every shop is both a question: ‘Do you need things?’ And an answer: ‘We have things!’ Things to eat, things to wear, things to look at ... Every object has its nature—hard, sweet, old, funny, green, smooth. I guess I have a nature too, and the trick is to match the nature of the thing with the nature of me.”

At one point Peterson muses: “People say that dog owners look like their dogs. Sometimes I entertain myself during these visits [to artists] with a related question (unspoken, of course): do the artists look like their work? Often I have a hard time believing that *this* person made *those* pictures. The most energetic, noisy canvases are sometimes made by painters who mumble and avoid eye contact. I’ve seen artists with a highly developed sense of balance and rhythm in their work who regularly stumble over their own feet.”

When his soul mate, painter Helen Mirkil, wants to introduce a canine companion into their home, Peterson initially balks. But after living with Sparky, Peterson admits how much they have in common, and adds: "If I have this much in common with a dog, I wonder what I also have in common with a mollusk, or an amoeba, or a pine tree. I've spent a fair amount of time with pine trees, and no one could ever convince me that the seed isn't feeling something akin to excitement when it sends that little shoot into the air and senses light for the first time, or that the three-hundred-year-old Ponderosa doesn't know it's going to die."

In the last chapter, Peterson sums up: "So find your hunger, listen to what it tells you, follow it where it leads. Then you'll be born into this world, and even though there's plenty of terror and horror and pain, the universe is still beautiful, and being alive is a miracle, and it's not just a smile at the heart of things, it's a big fat grin that says, YES! YES! I'm part of it all, present and accounted for, one more insignificant lump of conscious matter, living, playing, working, growing, loving, hurting, dying."

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