

'Pareidolia'  
Curator Roy Brand  
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Did you know that we can see a face in a tree trunk? Did you know that on dark nights we can see animal shapes in the constellations of stars? Do these things exist? And when we hallucinate or daydream, once again we see faces, animals, and apparitions of the dead. In days gone by, when consciousness moved freely on the spectrum between wakefulness and dreaming and hallucination, the realm of the visible also contained imaginary sights whose significance was unquestioned. But even today, there is always something that is visible, but not clearly perceived – becoming, the moment of birth or death, life itself. The Greeks had a name for it: pareidolia – “beyond form” or “beside the form” – the human tendency to see a shape, or read a meaning, in amorphous phenomena.

The term is from the Greek παραειδωλια – παρά (pará) meaning “beyond” or “beside,” and εἶδωλον (eídōlon), meaning “image, form, shape.” Like paranoia (seeing intent in everything), pareidolia is a state of seeing a form of some kind in everything, and is part of our miraculous abilities as human beings to see things in things. This cave wall, with this patch on it, and the special shape of its curvature, together produce a living image. I see it, and if I were only to point it out to you – perhaps with the help of a small line or a dot here – it would be here for you too, and for anyone who comes after us. The creative work extends from the world and how it appears to us in our mind’s eye to one’s consciousness, body, hand, or to language. Thus, things are not merely matter – rock, light, or earth – but rather movement and dialogue between us and the world. Thus, this painting is not merely lines and patches of color, but a beauty full of meaning that is difficult to grasp outside the experience itself. Similarly, these marks that you now read, here on the page, are carriers of thoughts and feelings that pass from one person to another, in a very intimate way.

In the past, pareidolia was perceived as a sign of psychosis, but today it is commonly seen as a normal and universal human phenomenon. It is particularly evident in how children think, or in the worldview of primitive tribes, who attribute a will and consciousness to everything. Gods, humans, animals, the dead, plants, the weather, and often inanimate objects, are all seen as having an appetite or will, a viewpoint, and cognitive abilities – all have a soul. But the pareidolia is not about a childish or animistic worldview; it is a fundamental disposition of the human imagination. Even before we know something, we begin to see things: dots form an image, situations look like patterns, and we can take them apart and reassemble them until we have a theory (from the Greek ‘theorien’ – to look at, or by extrapolation, a way of seeing, a worldview). The world comes into view and becomes comprehensible – it is one of the characteristics of this world that it can become visible and comprehensible. So the visual image is but an extension, a capturing of the ways in which the world opens up to human experience. How wonderful it is that the world lends itself to us in this way? And perhaps that is precisely the basic, native, or classic experience of all things beautiful – the experience of being at home in the world.

Anyone who tries their hand at drawing knows that the closer you get to things, the more their contours fall apart and become fluid. There is really no clear boundary line between one thing and another; rather, there is an aura, light and shadow, and a movement of metamorphosis and metabolism in everything. It is a miraculous experience wherein things seem to dissolve of their own accord at the same time that they are captured or rather marked by art. Art shows them as distinct and as part of the world. The works in this exhibition follow this double movement– the shifting nature of the world, its appearance as form and meaning, and dissolution back into material, surface, and color. In other words, the works simultaneously conjure up an image and dissolve it. In

so doing, they reveal the process that requires our imagination to work: the underlying work that brings things together and creates a world. This is an ongoing effort that we get accustomed to. But in particular moments of shifting consciousness – when we wake up, for example, or open our eyes after a long meditation – we notice the coming together of the world once again. If we fail to imagine, facing the work of art, the image breaks down and the painting and drawing once again revert to mere patches of color, the sculpture exposes its rough and meaningless material skin, and the canvases look like sheets of cloth and empty shells, rather than ghosts. Pareidolia – the emergence of a form – is something that goes both ways. In this space between the visible (the world as it appears) and the visual (the image), there is a fertile field of occurrence that is invisible to us. We often do not see how the world is made visible, or how we see it as things, forms, and states. It comes to us naturally, yet is unnatural. It is a mark of human consciousness that can be traced back to prehistoric cave drawings (throughout the Mediterranean) through Plato's famous allegory of the cave.

The caves have a record of the longest human history – evidence of life, spiritual life, imagination, and human creation, dating back over 30,000 years. What they saw, and felt, and thought, is so remote from us – but the art preserved in the dark speaks to us immediately. I understand them and feel them. I have no idea if they spoke, or what they believed, but I know I am like them, that we are one species. They, too, saw shapes in things, and animals potentially sketched on the walls of the cave as the light of the fire flickered and animated the images. All it took was for them to touch what they saw and fix it with a judicious line, etching, a mark or a bit of paint. And so generations of human beings realized that they see the same things; that they share the same dream or vision. That they live in a world that is real, made of matter and energy, just as they live in a virtual world of imaginary forms and meaning. And that they could move between these two worlds, the material and the spiritual, and feel that they are both – both body and mind -- even though an abyss separates the two. Pareidolia marks the human ability to be a creature of both worlds. It is a characteristic of human existence that it is both real and virtual – a capacity that the contemporary economy of images has intensified, exploited, and heightened, to the point where we have lost it. Today, it is technology that does the imagining for us by seeing forms in things, emotions in a face, or financial potential in how we wield a keyboard and mouse, or gestures and motions on social media.

But in art – and perhaps in philosophy, as well – there is still sensitivity, openness, and attentiveness to the ebb and flow of life. Artists preserve that childish, primitive way of looking at things and how they are formed. In particular, they notice the intermediate states that no longer exist, or not yet. Possibilities that have not yet been realized actually exist, and there is life even in those that have faded away. The world once contained many such shadowy creatures: ghosts, apparitions of the dead, phantoms, dreams, hallucinations, and daydreams. We are fixed on either/or – either awake or asleep, existing or not – but what nonsense is this? The Greeks called all shadow creatures *eidola*, a term denoting movement and change in a world eternally coming into being. Pareidolia literally means a world that is all *eidola* – *eidola* in everything – in contrast to *eikon* (icon, likeness) which belongs to a binary world of original and imitation. Thus, the *eikon/icon* is quickly rendered a fake. But in the ancient world there was no single concept for a mimetic visual image, but rather, a multiplicity of such – *eidolon* – a spectrum of visual existence. In particular, there were no images that “look like something else,” imitations in the Platonic sense; rather, there was something that is visible but not perceived – like life itself, like consciousness – not the things in themselves, but the manner in which they appear.

It is in this realm that art is born. And still today, art harbors the human longing for transitions, for playfulness, for a spectrum of states of consciousness and emergence – but it may also shackle it. Within these boundaries of the frame, here in this painting in front of you, you can see a ghost. Here is spirit trapped in matter. Here, in this sculpture, you can see life arrested, fixed, dead. Here you are: look at them; they are yours; you control it. And here is the phenomenon that used to be a

living entity, whose entire essence was becoming, namely life with no form or location. Here this thing is captured and concluded. Art always veers close, too close, to its dissolution.

Translated by Einat Adi