Art & Artistry: An Appreciation of Zibby Oneal's *In Summer Light*

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Zibby Oneal's oeuvre addresses topics many people, particularly the young, find most puzzling, troubling or challenging – grief, art, love to name but a few. This brave, confrontational approach is not merely evident in, but central to, *In Summer Light*, which on the surface appears a peaceful, orderly sort of book offering a quiet read. It can, however, be seen to be something quite other – namely, an insightful exploration of artistic creation and an introduction to the elements of art criticism.

Every visual artist works, however purposefully or subconsciously, with five elements: colour, line, shape, form and depth. There are tomes written on the details of each – take colour theory, for instance, which holds that hot colours spring forward while cool ones recede and that, according to Goethe, 9 parts of purple are required to balance 3 yellow. As well, the interplay among these elements in the execution and realization of a work of art lies at the core of transforming a lump of clay into a sculpture or a piece of canvas or board into what Immanuel Kant termed an "object of pure contemplation," that is, an artwork. So, too, these elements are the essence of *In Summer Light* and provide the means of analysing this unusually artistic accomplishment of an outstanding author. In this brief discussion, I will offer an appreciation of the work in these terms.

It bears noting from the outset that Oneal is familiar with visual art and, indeed, conceives of each work as an artist might approach a painting. In the postscript "About the Author," she is quoted as saying:

> I grew up in a house full of books, and from an early age I was determined to be a writer. But I grew up in a house that was full of paintings as well, and, though I am no artist, I think in terms of color and composition. All my books have begun with a picture in mind – a character and a place visualized. When I can see these things clearly – almost as if they were a painting on a wall – then I can begin to write about them.

Living with art can (for those so inclined and who do not ignore their surroundings) be an exercise in looking at it, not to *read* the work as do so many who experience artworks only infrequently in galleries or museums, but actually to *see* it. Looking at art develops the ability to appreciate for its reality the world around and so to counteract the contemporary tendency to perceive merely a "tapestry of virtuality" discussed so eloquently by Thomas de Zengotita in his recent *Harper*'s essay, "The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anesthetic."[1] Familiarity through experience with the properties of art can and does impact on the gaze or *weltanschauung* of the viewer. Clearly that is the case for Oneal, as it can be for her readers.

Her artistry in executing this work commences from the very title: *In Summer Light* bespeaks the way an artist sees light, and the preoccupation of many artists with light and its portrayal in their art. One need only consider Monet's series in various lights – of haystacks or Notre Dame – or the works of the Barbizon painters whose school of painting was defined by their efforts to render the effects of light in nature. To the artist – and to anyone with a trained eye – summer light is distinctive, different from that of other seasons. It lacks the crisp clarity of fall, when trees are etched against the sky. Rather, summer light has a blurry, indefinite edge to it and an intense brightness in which one must often squint to see well. But artists regularly employ squinting as a technique to take in the fullness of colour, see the overall look of a work, to use their scanning vision to comprehend an entirety.

So it happens for Kate, the seventeen-year-old protagonist who gradually, illuminated by a summer, matures from an ill-defined state toward a more global vision of her true self and of reality. Suffering from mononucleosis, she "was home for the summer, and tired and when she was not too tired, bored" (5), not on Long Island with her best friend, Leah, working as they had planned, but isolated on a Massachusetts island at her family home with her artist father, her mother who devotes herself almost entirely to pleasing the famous man, and a much younger sister Amanda, who has a pesky friend, Frances, daughter of the housekeeper. Life revolves around the father, Marcus Brewer, his schedule, his needs. He is portrayed – one could say *drawn* in words – as larger than life. As Kate notes:

> Beside her father, people dwindled. It was her father's energy that did it. He was white-haired and sixty years old – nearly twelve years older than her mother – but, sitting at the end of the table, he seemed no age at all. He was barely contained in his chair. Moving, shifting, his hands describing circles in the air, he made a magnetic field of space around him." (12)

Kate and her father do not, in her mother's words, "get along"; indeed, she harbours a deep-seated anger towards him and resents his dominant presence, his behaviour, his extravagant statements (such as "Painting is like making love"), his attitude towards her and affect on others. Clearly he is the commanding figure in the piece – a dominant form executed in bold strokes, but lacking depth. The effective realization of the composition revolves around interactions with him.

But Kate is in a liminal state – between sickness and health; not where she wants to be; blocked in her writing but refusing to paint as she has in the past; irresistibly attracted to her father's studio while fighting to distance herself from him and what he does. She has nothing to do except write an essay on "The Tempest," but she dislikes the play because its hero, Prospero, reminds her of her father. Into this mix comes the means to its resolution as an artistic creation – Ian Jackson, a graduate student from California who is preparing a catalogue of the Brewer paintings.

Not much takes place in the story – it begins with a highly visual passage that is a description of one of those paintings:

> There were peaches in a blue and white Chinese bowl and a cat almost the color of peaches stretched beneath the table. Morning light fell slantwise across the table's surface, lay like marmalade on the rungs of a ladder-back chair. Beside the table, sitting straight on the straight-backed chair, was a little girl, feet bare, hands folded. . . . (1)

It ends with a similarly visual, and colourful, description of what Kate sees on leaving the island at the close of summer, now with the eyes of the artist she accepts herself to be:

> Kate leaned on the rail, looking back at the island, at the gray shingled houses growing small along the shore, at the pair of lighthouses that marked the island's western points, and at the red clay cliffs just visible in the Indian summer haze.
>
> And then they were too far out from land to mark details. The island floated, drifting in the sunlight, fading into the middle distance. . . .

In between metamorphosis has occurred, a transformation similar to what transpires when a blank canvas changes from a flat surface with four edges into a painting.

Colour figures prominently in the process – repeatedly indicating Kate's vision to the other characters, especially Ian, as well as the reader. Her regular and gentle exchanges with Ian frequently revolve around artistic vision and the creative process:

> "They look like Monets, those fields," Ian said.
> "The light, you mean."
> "It's all light. Light defines everything." (42)

This leads to Kate recalling her father taking her to see Impressionist works, drawing forth memories of him explaining their technique and telling her what he saw in their works. She reconnects emotionally with the experience:

> It had been the most exciting thing she could remember. Like entering into a special club – herself and her father, painters, among all these other painters whose works hung on the walls.

Later she reconnects physically with the creative process when Ian and she paint rocks along the shore. At first reluctant, she soon loses herself in the remembered act:

> She made a series of curves, scooping clay and sweeping it higher on the rock, using the palms of her hands and her fingers like brushes. Water lapped her ankles, red clay ran down her arms, streaking her with red. She scooped and painted, laying down great overlapping strokes, interlocking curves, spiraling patterns. . . . The bulging outcroppings of the rock began to dictate shapes to her, and like a cave painter, she began to use these as part of her design. . . . She left

> her own handprints on the rock, as the ancient painters at Lascaux had done. (89-91)

Her immediate reaction was exhilaration:

> She felt triumphant. She wanted to keep climbing, to keep painting, to go on and on painting her way into the layers of blue above her. . . she felt wonderful.

She is so elated that she expresses a wish to spend her "whole life painting rocks" (92), but then soberly rejects the idea of painting as "That's what my father does" saying to Ian, "I need my own thing" to which he replies "Does painting stop being a person's 'own thing' just because other people are also painting?" and she answers "No, of course."

After this pivotal experience, she can deny her talent no longer and gradually, with tentative strokes at first, her marginalized identity begins to take on a distinctive form with the depth of memory behind it. She is compelled from within to paint, and seeks out her stored materials but can only find "a school child's box of watercolors lying on the floor together with a pad of cheap paper" (97), which she considers adequate since, as she tells Ian, she's "just playing" (97). But Ian, who thinks she's doing something "she's actually been wanting to do all summer," helps her buy fresh, good colours and high quality paper, too, worthy of a true artist. Then, her artistic rediscovery commences as she paints every day.

Conversations with her mother lead Kate to a depth of understanding about love and the self-sacrifice and devotion it entails. Similarly, conversations with Ian about her father and his work help sketch in his true shape, revealing the depth and complexity of an artist and the man. Kate comes to appreciate her father's negative reaction to having a retrospective. And, while she cannot bring herself to follow Ian's suggestion and ask for his help with her own struggles to create, yet she opens herself to rediscover, remember what she has learned from Marcus Brewer, embracing him as an artistic father. Her friend Leah's visit earlier in the summer had cast new perspective on the real father, providing an opportunity for his playfulness, rare genuine interest in others, and overall humanity to emerge.

Another key point in her artistic renaissance occurs when Ian is, at her request, critiquing the painting for which she had once won a prize. He notes her distinctive style and the power of her passion evident in the piece. She needs and receives repeated reassurance that her work is not derivative of her father's, which looses the bounds on her own creative impulses. Now she is able not only to draw Frances but, unlike her father who would never consider painting a portrait of the child, Kate can and does. She has come into her own realized vision and (interestingly) articulates it when challenged by the annoying child, the least artistic person in the book (133).

After testing the relationship with Ian, and thereby enhancing her appreciation for the process and extent of love, she can also finish her essay on "The Tempest," for she

has developed sufficient emotional maturity to appreciate more the whole of her father and find consolation in what is real. In her concluding commentary on Prospero lies the resolution of her conflict with her father and, ultimately, her individuation:

> Prospero has become an old man. His magic powers are nearly gone and then they are gone entirely. In the Epilogue he asks us to set him free. I think Shakespeare means for us to forgive him. I think he means that if we refuse, we will be trapped like Prospero was, on his island. (143)

The deft finishing touches on the composition involve Kate's angrily confronting a young painter whose attitude and comments have suggested that Marcus Brewer's approach to painting is passé. In so doing, she aligns herself with her father in the realization of their joint craft:

> Painting has to do with knocking yourself out day after day trying to get what you want to down on the canvas. Maybe it works and maybe it doesn't, but every day you try. That's what painting is."

Affirmation of her rebirth as an artist and her new relationship with her father comes when Marcus Brewer says, "My daughter is right, you know."

In Summer Light offers young readers an extraordinary opportunity to develop appreciation not only for what painting is, but also for what it is to be a painter and to see the world through the eyes of an artist. Zibby Oneal has offered access to *seeing* in a fine work, which justifiably, like the best of art, has withstood the test of time.

Note

[1] Volume 304.1823 (April 2002): 33-40.