

Manifesting "Nothing"

The round window on the ceiling was dim, the view of the foggy sky above turning deep navy blue. Class was nearly over for the day although the teacher, the speaking stone obelisk which was a fixture on the top floor, didn't seem to be wrapping things up for the class period as it usually did. Janet hooked her heels into the bottom rung of her stool and leaned back, looking up at the window and yawning loudly. The obelisk examined Lyle's canvas, a linear mess of colors which obscured the objects that it blurred past.

"Bring it closer." Said the obelisk. Lyle carefully plucked the canvas off of the easel and brought it in front of the obelisk. Lyle demonstrated the work's dimensionality by stretching the colorful brushstrokes off of the canvas to make the obscured objects more visible.

"See, the objects get more and more rudimentary and lacking in detail as the blur gets faster and faster across the canvas, showing the waning focus and consideration of the person which the piece represents." Explained Lyle, letting go of the brushstroke and letting it snap back onto the canvas like a rubberband.

"Right." Answered the obelisk. "You don't need to interpret it for me, I've told you this already." It continued. Lyle just nodded, before setting the piece back on the easel. The obelisk thought for a moment. "Well. You seem to have carefully considered representing the idea of 'speed' as it plays into a person's life, but I don't think you've gotten as close as you could to manifesting the abstract concept of speed itself, the aim of the assignment." It concluded. Lyle rang his hands and looked over his canvas before turning back to the Obelisk.

"Got it." He said with a nod. Janet smirked at Lyle's eager submission to the teacher.

"If I may add," Began Janet. "When I look at the piece, I don't *feel* speed. You've drawn something blurry, but without the added explanation, I don't think speed is the first thing I'd think of." She said. Lyle began to respond but the obelisk interjected.

"You may not add, Janet. Not until I've evaluated your piece as well." It decided. Janet smiled and lifted her piece, a colorless stone sculpture which floated above its base showing what appeared to be a fireball in the middle of its arc. Its tail coiled through the air to the smooth round head of the projectile. Stone tufts of fire hung in the air around its length, seeming to spin with the object's implied twisting motion. Although the entire sculpture was still and static, it tricked the eyes with the translucent film which floated in front of it, making the sculpture look blurry and constantly in motion. Janet slowly rotated the base to show off all the angles. Lyle was transfixed by the sight.

"Now this is speed, as though it were canned and preserved." She said. The obelisk thought.

"It certainly looks fast." Said the obelisk. Janet smiled. "You've taken great care in manifesting what has the appearance of speed, but there's no conceptual edge to it. Your choice to represent the idea with a missile seems like an arbitrary one, as though it were the first fast thing you could think of." It continued. Janet frowned.

"What about the form?" She said, rotating the sculpture once over for effect.

“It is certainly quite impressive.” Answered the obelisk. “But great form was not the purpose of the assignment, if you recall.” It continued.

“I thought this was a mentorship on manifestation, not interpretive art.” Janet argued.

“It is both, and more than that.” Responded the obelisk. “If I may add, when I look at the piece, speed isn’t the first thing I would think of. It would be ‘fire’” It said. Lyle laughed out loud, but stifled himself when Janet turned to glare at him.

“Sure.” Conceded Janet.

“Good job, both of you.” Said the obelisk. “While we’re on this abstract note, I’d like to move to the next assignment.” It said.

“Isn’t class almost over?” Asked Janet.

“This will be the last activity for the day. Since you seem to be in a competitive mood, I’ve decided the more successful of the both of you will receive a prize.” Said the obelisk. Janet sat up straight.

“What’s the prize?” Asked Lyle.

“You’ll find out once I pick the winner.” Answered the obelisk. “The prompt, just like we did with speed, is to manifest the concept of ‘nothing.’” It said.

“Give me a break.” Janet cut in.

“I expect you to try, Janet.” Responded the obelisk. Janet looked over at Lyle, but he was clearly already deep in thought. “Now take a minute to think and begin gathering materials.” Commanded the obelisk. Lyle stood and held up his hands like a frame to scope out his corner of the room. Janet leaned back in her stool once again and stared at the wall. She fiddled with her hands and manifested a small box with no lid. She looked inside the box. Aha. Nothing’s in the box, she thought to herself. She turned the box over in her hands a few times before looking back at Lyle who was manifesting a stage in the corner of the room. He started with a small brown platform, and then a curtain rod which hung against the wall. He stepped up onto the platform and reached up to the rod, and with one hand on either side, manifested two long red curtains hanging down in front of the stage. Janet’s eyes narrowed when she saw this. She vanished the box at once and crossed her arms, turning back to the wall. She looked up at the ceiling and waved her hands in shapes through the air, as if trying to find the ‘nothing’ in the room. For a moment she toyed with the idea of sucking all of the molecules out of a small section of air in front of her, but she couldn’t keep it up for longer than a second. Too literal, she thought to herself. She looked back at Lyle. He had animated a humanoid golem that he placed on the edge of the platform, and was in the process of manifesting an object which mimicked the shape of a piano, although it had no functional keys. Once he finished manifesting a piano stool, he sat down and drew the curtains shut.

“Is it alright if I go first?” Lyle asked the obelisk.

“Yes.” It responded. Lyle clapped his hands twice and opened the curtains. The golem stood on the edge of the stage behind the curtain, out of view. Lyle leaned forward as if to begin playing on the piano, but just sat in silence. The golem never entered the stage. Janet tightly folded her hands in her lap as she watched. Lyle sat staring intently down at the false keys of the

piano for what felt like at least a minute before drawing the curtains closed. He stood and bowed to the obelisk and then to Janet. Janet began clapping. “Thank you.” Said Lyle with a tight face, suppressing a smile.

“Very good Lyle.” Said Janet, who had already gathered her things. She stood with her bag around her shoulder before turning to the obelisk. “Lyle’s piece is so good, I think I’m just gonna go home.” She said. She turned and began leaving. “Class ended ten minutes ago anyway, I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She added before shutting the door behind her. The obelisk said nothing.

“Well.” Said Lyle. “Anyway, the point of the piece is that I’m playing on the audience’s assumption that something will happen, but instead nothing happens. ‘Nothing’ can only really be demonstrated in contrast with something, or the assumption that there should be something. As an interpretive piece, it invites the audience to try and glean the idea, but it subverts this by offering no idea at all. What do you think?” He finished. The obelisk was silent for a moment.

“It effectively represents nothing because I expected something?” The obelisk asked.

“Precisely!” Said Lyle.

“What did I tell you about interpreting your pieces to me?” It asked.

“Oh right, sorry.” Said Lyle with an embarrassed grin. “Anyway, what’s the prize?” He asked.

“Well, now that you mention it,” Responded the obelisk. “I expected Janet to submit a piece for the assignment, I assumed that there would be something, but instead she submitted nothing.” It said. Lyle just stared. “Wouldn’t you say she’s more effectively represented ‘nothing’ by your own metric?” It asked.

“Well. Maybe?” Said Lyle. “She’s not here to accept any prize though.” He said.

“The prize is getting to go home, the loser has to clean up for the day.” Said the obelisk. This time, Lyle did not laugh. “You may leave when you’re done.” Said the obelisk. “I appreciate your effort, but Janet’s piece was really quite subversive if you ask me.”

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