

Looking Closely: The Role of Time in Memory and Materiality

Engaging with Doty's and De Waal's reflections on personal connection about Hefferlin's *Alchemy* revealed a profound shift in how I perceive time. I now see time not as a passive backdrop to human action but as an active subject that shapes and governs people, places, and things. Typically, we consider ourselves the subjects, moving through time as a neutral object—something we navigate, organize, and manipulate: morning, afternoon, and evening, each marked by our tasks and routines. The language structure reinforces this view, placing "we" as the active agents. However, through Hefferlin's work, particularly the interplay between the turquoise eggs and the gold-plated vessel, I began to notice how time, rather than merely passing by, exerts its influence, subtly subjecting us as objects within its flow.

As I read Doty, I observed how he experiences the passage of time by linking it to people, places, and things—his memories anchored in the still life with oysters. Doty describes the "overall effect" of his prolonged gaze as a "sense of tenderness toward experience, of being held within an intimacy with the things of the world."¹ In contrast, my experience with Hefferlin's *Alchemy* revealed a different relationship with time—one where time conceals itself unless carefully examined within the context of the artwork. The reflection of the turquoise eggs on the gold-plated vessel, a small detail

¹ Doty, 3

within the more significant still life, became a focal point for me. Upon close observation, I noticed a shift: the luminous turquoise eggs lying on the table to the left appeared more opaque in their reflection on the vessel to the right. This subtle transformation not only indicated the passage of time but also suggested a more profound, qualitative change—a double effect unfolding through time, captured in the stillness of the composition.

The intrigue of this double effect lies in that Hefferlin's painting is still life—a static depiction of objects on a surface. Yet change and further transformation typically require motion through time to be perceived. I wondered how a still life could convey motion, enabling me to see the transition from the luminous turquoise eggs on the left to their opaque reflection on the right. Indeed, Hefferlin's painting does not explicitly depict the passage of time, where, at one moment, the eggs are vibrantly turquoise, and in the next, they lose their luminosity. However, the absence of visible motion does not mean I couldn't perceive the change. Looking closely, I realized that the painting subtly indicated that a transformation had occurred, even if it didn't show the process unfolding in time. It revealed time as the backdrop in which change occurred—a context where time acted as a subject, with the change as its object. This understanding of time was not immediately perceptible but became evident upon careful observation. Some may argue that the reflection of the eggs on the gold-plated vessel is merely a mirror image of the turquoise eggs on the left,

suggesting no real change. But this misses the point: a change has indeed occurred, and with it, a transformation occurs within time.

This notion of our indirect, non-perceptive grasp of time resonates with De Waal's reflection on his family's netsuke collection, which has endured across generations. He marvels at how the collection has survived when, as he puts it, "so many... people did not."² The netsuke are material objects that have, in a sense, moved through time, outlasting De Waal's family. It is not that the family, as subjects, passed by the netsuke as mere objects in time. Instead, the netsuke collection has passed through time, surviving generations of the family and remaining intact. Much like the opaque reflection of the turquoise eggs in Hefferlin's **Alchemy**, what remains in De Waal's narrative is only the faint reflection of his ancestors, while the netsuke—the physical objects expected to decay—persist, much like the luminous turquoise eggs in Hefferlin's painting. In Doty's case, the memory of people, places, and things outlived his connection to a still-life painting, such that even when the painting was moved, his emotional connection persisted. De Waal's experience contrasts starkly. In his case, the unmoving netsuke collection, the still life of objects, outlived the memory of the people, places, and events once attached to them.

In both Doty and De Waal's reflections, time emerges not as a passive backdrop but as an active subject that shapes our lives, with ourselves as its

² De Waal, 282

objects. Doty's meditation on a still life prompts him to recall the "things of the world" that have passed by, while De Waal's reflection on the Netsuke collection underscores the destruction, over time, of people, places, and things that have not endured. In both cases, time asserts its dominance, urging us to glance and observe closely. Otherwise, we risk being blind to the subjugating role of time, even as we move through it—as the famous song reminds us, "as time goes by."

Works Cited

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