Caroline Coughlin

Spring 2018

Art History 302

*Swans Reflecting Elephants*

The painting is titled, *Swans Reflecting Elephants,* by artist Salvador Dali. Dali is a Spanish painter who was prominently known for his contributions to the surrealist movement. The surrealist movement was influenced from the Dada period and was best known for bringing the subconscious to the forefront. The artworks that Dali created during the early 1930’s were known by a technique he developed called paranoiac-critical method, which often had optical illusions within them. The painting, *Swans Reflecting Elephants,* is one of Dali’s paintings that I think can represent different things for everyone because of the double image. Art can be anything you want it to be, especially in surrealism, and I find that this piece reflects that idea by saying you can be anything you want to be.

When you first glance at this painting it can be hard to interpret. The color palette is subdued mostly natural browns, blues and yellows but not bright, muted. The central image is brought to your attention immediately because it has almost a halo-like effect. There are only light yellow/ white colors behind the dark brown leafless tree branches. The branches themselves are not neat and sprawling, instead they are sharp, angled and some are even gnarled. The branches lead your eye down to the swans sitting at their base. There are three swans and each is elegantly showing their long necks. The bottom of the swans is highlighted with white to draw your attention to the image that is being reflected by the swans from the water they are sitting on. The reflected image is not just a swan upside down but an elephant formed from the shape of the swans. The long necks become the elephant trunks, the bodies become the elephant’s ears and the legs come from the tree trunks. The reflection is emphasized by the darkening of the bottom half of the painting, which in reality would be the water and there is not one ripple in it. The glassiness of the water is in perfect contrast to the elements that surround the central image. Framing the trees, swans and pond, are rock features. These mountainous rocks are painted with what looks like a swirling technique. The swirling added a texture to the otherwise smooth focus of the pond. Directly behind the branches, where I described a halo-like effect is where the landscape melds with the sky from a sandy yellow color to a pale sky blue. The left side of the painting versus the right is more crowded. In the upper left portion of the sky, there are milky, soft clouds that look swirled and puffy, yet painted soft and smooth, unlike the swirls in the rocks. Also, blending into the rocks on the left is a man standing with only his left side facing us, his back is to the swans in the central image. He wears pants the same color brown as the rocks but a lighter colored shirt and a slight shadow painted onto the rocks to the right of him. His stance looks as if he has given up, shoulders down, hand on hip or in pocket and it looks as if he has his weight in his left leg.

When looking at his painting technique, everything looks very deliberately placed. Which, to me is surprising for someone who is known to be eccentric and clearly interested in the dream realm. However, he is clearly an excellent artist, the quality of the lines is incredibly crisp. For example, the swans’ necks pop forward in the composition with the clean white edges and then are effortlessly blended into the shadows of their necks. The same goes for the bottom of the swans’ bodies, the way Dali was able to achieve such gorgeous contrast between a very small space, from the swan to the water line, into the elephant, is one of my favorite elements of this whole piece. I think it is the clearest part of the painting and my eye always get stuck looking there. Another thing that I find interesting is how easily I felt I understood what the man’s posture was saying. He is not very detailed and you could absolutely miss him if you weren’t paying attention but he is so clearly, distraught or discouraged.

Digging deeper into this painting, I read about some of the things others have interpreted from *Swans Reflecting Elephants.* Some have said that Dali had painted himself as the man in the left of the painting, I never found anything that said that is accurate. However, they say that it is Dali and he has his back to the focus of the painting because he was unhappy with where the surrealist movement was going. I’m fine with that explanation but when I first saw the person and studied the painting, I saw the man as someone who wasn’t able to see past his exterior. He is stuck not being able to accept who he is but he is not able to see who he wants to be. Or perhaps he doesn’t like what he sees when he sees his reflection. And then the reason he is not the focus of the painting is because the purpose of the painting is to not be stubborn or bogged down in a rut, but to be able to dream. To be able to recognize that perhaps there is an inner strength inside of you that you can’t see from the physical point of view. I think you can read it as a way to say don’t judge a book by a cover and never stop believing in yourself. My original conclusion states that this painting can evoke to the viewer a feeling of being able to be whoever they want to be. I still believe this is a way to interpret the painting, however, I also enjoy the idea that the swans, not unlike Dali, are painted as if they are sleeping and the reflection is what they are dreaming. Although, this still coexists with my thesis allowing the viewers to dream and become anything they want to be. It’s possible I have taken this analysis of the reflection a bit too far, but I think it is because every time I come back to the painting I find something else I can take from it.

*Swans Reflecting Elephants*, is a painting with a double image and multiple meanings. When I find pieces of art that make me think one thing and then another or pieces that have me analyzing every detail, I know it is going to become a favorite. This piece has done exactly that, I have felt a certain way from the moment I began admiring it and still feel the same pull to this painting I did initially. The fact that surrealism and this piece specifically lend themselves to multiple interpretations is what I think is great about art. Everyone has an opportunity to study this piece and take from it what they want, art is subjective and these are the kinds of pieces that I love to expose to my family and friends and examine their reactions. This class has exposed me to many artists and works that have done this and getting a chance to learn about them and write about them is a way to keep extending their legacy, even if this paper only stays between myself and my professor.