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Visual Analysis Paper

7 March 2025

*A Visual Analysis of Fleeting Time, Thou Hast Left Me Old*



*Fleeting Time, Thou Hast Left Me Old*, a 1946 lithograph by Ivan Albright, is currently on display at the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill. This piece is a printed replica of a larger oil painting of the same title. *Fleeting Time* is one of twenty lithographs scattered all over the world. The lithographs were in response to the original oil painting, which is unusual since artists typically create their smaller pieces/sketches prior to their larger work. However, the addition of these lithographs made the work available to people all over the world, especially since they were created in a time when art was not as easily accessible.

*Fleeting Time* is a black and white portrait of a man staring off into the distance. Despite being two-dimensional, the artwork utilizes a combination of art elements—texture, color, space, line, shape, and value—to create three-dimensional qualities that enhance its visual and narrative

depth. At first glance, this may appear to be an exaggerated depiction of an old man, however, my eyes are drawn to the fingerless gloves and the pores on the man's nose that suggest he didn't care for his body—whether by choice or circumstance, it is unclear. These subtle signs show that he has weathered time, physically and perhaps emotionally. Portraits often are edited during the artistic process to omit certain imperfections that might not portray the subject in the most flattering light. Albright, however, embraces these quirks because he recognizes that they are essential in understanding the lived experience, giving the viewer a more honest and rawer picture of the man.

The man is covered in layers and wears a knitted hat, suggesting that this scene was captured in winter. His gloves lack covering for his fingers, which could suggest that he has a labor-intensive job that requires the use of his hands. His clothes appear old and worn out. He is holding a pair of spectacles that he had just taken off. He does not seem to need them to see what is ahead of him, unknown to the viewer whether it is a tangible object or a concept in his mind. His ability to see without his spectacles conveys a sense of accountability and enlightenment. I interpret the scenes as the subject coming to terms with his aging and inevitable death. This is his moment of reflection.

Albright uses his brush to evoke feelings of despair, aging, and decay. The wrinkles on the man's body suggest that he is well into his life and has had a life that did not prioritize physical appearance. The soft, organic lines throughout the piece exude a sense of warmth and comfort. This directly contrasts with the cold atmosphere created by the shading, and these conflicting elements provoke an emotional response from the viewer. The man's jacket stands out at first glance. Even though there seems to be significant wear and tear, it is dark with blurry details and texture, which makes it hard to tell what is wrong with the jacket. To me, the jacket,

like the man's life, has been through significant trauma and it is a culmination of events throughout time that has led to their current state. Similar to how I perceive clouds, I found myself making out shapes or figures in the jacket—though perhaps this is my mind trying to impose meaning on something that is simply abstract. Still, there is an almost animalistic feeling evoked within the jacket, which adds a layer of intrigue and tension to the piece.

An important facet of this piece is the cohesive use of texture. While there are lines that indicate where objects end and new ones begin, the overall texture of all the elements is the same. The man's skin, jacket, and gloves share a similar texture, which at first glance makes the piece feel abstract. This encourages the viewer to spend more time with the image as they identify the outlines of the objects. Through this technique, the man feels both vulnerable and raw, despite being fully clothed. It's another tool Albright uses to set the theme of the fear of aging. Albright is known for his raw depiction of people, a tool he uses to capture the unique identity of a person rather than fabricating a story created for the sake of the artwork. In *Fleeting Time*, Albright wants his viewers to feel the same emotions as the subject at the time of creation. Even in the abstractness, he makes intentional choices to highlight certain details. For example, the gloves show three woven strands running along the knuckles, adding a skeletal look to the man's hands. This not only adds to the overall eerie tone but also provides context to the man's narrative.

Albright's use of color—or rather, the lack of it—in this piece is another interesting detail worth noting. Most of Albright's color pieces feature a darker palette with pops of vibrant color. His relationship with color is always intentional, particularly when depicting the aging of human flesh. In *Fleeting Time*, however, both the lithograph and the painting are rendered in black and white. Instead of relying on color, Albright uses other artistic qualities to portray the man's age.

This could partly be because using a monochromatic palette is easier to work with when creating lithographs. In this case, however, the simple palette enhances the overall tone of gloom and haunting melancholy. It also shifts the focus away from the materials themselves and places the emphasis on the human subject. Black and white images evoke a sense of nostalgia, and Albright strategically utilizes this to amplify the emotional depth of the piece. This parallels Frans Masereel's *The Idealist, from Expiations*, another monochromatic print displayed in the same bay as *Fleeting Time*. While *The Idealist* does not have themes of aging and decay, both works share the narrative of a burdened man. Additionally, they depict space differently but both evoke a similar sense of isolation within their primary subjects. *The Idealist* presents a broader scale image of a man with a city in the background, whereas *Fleeting Time* is framed intimately with only the man surrounded by darkness. Albright effectively immerses the viewer in the space of his piece. Using value and color to create an intimate atmosphere that evokes thought and emotion, *Fleeting Time* shifts the viewer's role from a passive observer to an active participant.

Albright's title choice, *Fleeting Time, Thou Hast Left Me Old*, is another significant detail in understanding the narrative of this artwork. Its long, descriptive nature clarifies the narrative and gives the viewer insight into the protagonist's qualities. Moreover, placing 'Time' as the subject of the sentence emphasizes the power structure between Man and Time. While Man may have agency and power in life, Time ultimately outlives him. Time is constantly moving, carrying everything with it, yet it shows no care for how it changes or affects those it encounters. It serves as an objective force, affecting everything and everyone similarly, ultimately leading its subjects to their inescapable death. The title insinuates that Time is to blame for the subject's current state. While it may seem foolish to blame an inanimate force for something inevitable, this reflects the delusion and lack of accountability from the subject. Aging is a complex subject

that has been explored in many visual narratives throughout history. It makes viewers uncomfortable because it reminds them of something inevitable, yet often unprepared for. To live is to age; however, with aging comes the subconscious awareness that we are one step closer to death. Aging is also seen as a sign of weakness rather than what it actually is—maturity and experience. This is especially true when it comes to physical aging, which can be nuanced depending on various factors such as gender, race, and wealth. In *Fleeting Time*, the subject is a visibly aged white man who may not be wealthy. These characteristics are important to consider when understanding his narrative. It prompts the viewer to question whether Albright specifically chose this subject for these qualities or if he simply depicted a random man. The answer to this question influences how we interpret the main narrative: is it a story of a man affected by Time, or is it about how Time affected this particular man? And are we meant to focus more on the man, on Time, or on both?

I believe Albright intentionally includes the 'grotesque' details in *Fleeting Time* to critique the human reaction to aging. It prompts viewers to reflect on why something so natural and human is often labeled as 'grotesque,' evoking discomfort in the process. Ultimately, different narratives can be drawn from this piece, depending on where the analysis stops. The title and other visual clues provide a basic understanding of the man's story, but Albright's deeper critique can only be recognized when viewers question their emotional reactions. My best guess is that this reaction is a consequence of societal conditioning. And that is not to say that it is wrong to feel uneasy when confronted with a piece like *Fleeting Time*, but it is also important to be critical and examine why such feelings arise in the first place. Ultimately, *Fleeting Time* is not just a visual story of aging, but an invitation for the viewer to confront their own feelings towards time, aging, and death.