



View from the Other Side of the Mountain Roger Brown, 1985, oil on canvas

The piece I selected is *View from the Other Side of the Mountain* by Roger Brown. There were many pieces in the Seattle Art Museum's collection that were compelling to me, but Brown's painting held my attention for a variety of reasons. The mood of the piece is captivating, and it's hard to tell at first glance what idea or purpose, if any at all, Brown was trying to convey. *View from the Other Side of the Mountain* almost demands that the viewer looks closer, investigates, and extracts the full story. I believe that Brown has created a mythology through which to understand the modern world. In particular, I think that Brown addresses the underlying emotion behind pertinent issues at the time this piece was created, namely the AIDS epidemic and class

disparity. At the same time, Brown may have been attempting to communicate the universal qualities of his own personal experiences. Either way, Brown has developed a language with which he can communicate complicated and specific feelings to the viewers.

View from the Other Side of the Mountain compelled me as a piece because of the sense of mystery it carries with it. It lacks a didactic text, and stands separate from the more organized and themed sections of the collection. The title itself implies a context the viewer is unaware of, looking at “the other side” of something without being familiar with the first side to begin with. The mystery unravels the longer the piece is viewed. What originally looks abstract is given reality with small details, like the stones on the horizon and the silhouettes scattered across the piece. The piece almost has a mythical quality to it, with “the mountain” as a familiar landmark and the story told by the tiny figures. It’s mentioned in his biography that Roger Brown utilized weather intentionally in his pieces, having it represent the large, uncontrollable forces in our world. This is more than evident in this piece, with the dark, stormy backdrop creating a dark, apprehensive mood. Brown has experience with these uncontrollable forces, allowing him to represent the vast chaos of them evocatively and honestly. It’s possible to glean a sense of pessimism from the piece. Brown represents this idea of something being so unstoppable and all consuming that it cloaks a whole mountain in darkness before it even arrives. The title’s reference to “view from the other side” could even be a reference to the perspective of someone who has lived through one of these experiences. Alternatively, an argument could be made for a representation of acceptance and realism. The figure on the mountain’s neutral pose indicates some amount of acknowledgement that the coming storm is inevitable. Perhaps the view from

atop the mountain gives a clearer view of the impending disaster than that of the alarmed figures below it.

This piece was created in 1985, most likely in La Conchita, California. Brown spent over two decades making art in Chicago, but moved to southern California in 1984. Brown was heavily influenced both by the art movement of Chicago Imagism, and by his Alabama religious upbringing. Both of these influences contributed to Brown's interest in representing social and cultural topics and issues in his art. An important piece of context to this painting is that it was created at the height of the AIDS epidemic. There isn't any direct link made between this painting and the epidemic; there aren't any writings about this piece in particular, by Brown or otherwise. However, given that Brown was a gay man, and given his tendency towards socially aware subject matter, it makes sense for *View from the Other Side of the Mountain* to have been influenced by this. Another relevant piece of context is that Brown's partner, George Veronda, passed away in 1984. This is supposedly the reason Brown moved from Chicago to California. Veronda was an architect, and the two often worked together and inspired each other. Just glancing at his collection of work, Brown's art heavily features architectural elements. Inspiration is likely attributed both to Veronda and to the cityscape of Chicago. In 1985, neither of these sources of inspiration were in Brown's life anymore, at least not physically. *View from the Other Side of the Mountain* is organic, absent of these architectural elements. Combined with the dreary, dark tone of the piece, it would make sense that this massive transition in Brown's life would have a bearing on the piece.

View from the Other Side of the Mountain induces a feeling of dreadful awe. The looming plateau in the center of the piece nearly blends in with the geometric storm clouds in the background. This so-called mountain is the only landmark on an otherwise flat scene, giving the painting a surreal, uncanny quality. The framing of the sky and the ground seems to imply an impossible landscape, completely flat and featureless aside from the enormous mountain in the middle. The piece utilizes heavy contrast between light and dark, with the dark occupying far more space on the canvas. The sky in the background is composed of dark blue-grays and bright white, reminiscent of lightning in a thunderstorm. However, instead of familiar, organic clouds, the sky is made up of large, curved strokes of gray and white, gradually getting lighter closer to the horizon. The ground itself is completely flat and level, aside from stones or lumps scattered across it. When I first viewed this piece, it took at least a minute to notice that there were also the distinct silhouettes of comparatively tiny people. The scale of the figures is extreme, as they take up such little space on the canvas that they nearly disappear. There are two figures on either side of the mountain, both with arms thrown up in the air. It appears that the figures on the ground are looking up at the third figure, which is perched on the top of the mountain. The two on the ground appear bewildered, or even panicked, while the one atop the mountain is simply leaning over slightly, perhaps looking down from their high vantage point. With its smooth outline and grooves in the side that appear to glow, the mountain itself appears impossible to climb. The mood of the piece is fascinating; there is no sense of triumph or superiority from the figure on top of the mountain. Instead, it doesn't matter if you're on top of the world - you'll still be washed away by the approaching storm.

The theme of an oncoming storm strengthens my belief that this piece ties into the AIDS epidemic. An approaching, inescapable storm threatening to sweep away an already desolate landscape aligns with the feelings and fears of the queer community during the epidemic. Brown uses scale to communicate the true magnitude of emotion, to the extent that the viewer doesn't even realize the true vastness of the landscape until observing the piece more closely. The sheer amount of wide open space communicates a quality of loneliness, a feeling that nobody is coming to help. This lines up with the attitude of Reagan-era Americans, who are more than willing to turn a blind eye to the struggles and suffering of the queer community when it needs the most compassion and assistance. The hopelessness and inevitability of the piece are particularly impactful when viewed through the lens of the AIDS epidemic, because it wasn't truly inevitable at all. The willful ignorance of Reagan and the US Government allowed AIDS to take a huge toll on so many already vulnerable communities. If the epidemic had been treated seriously from the beginning, a great deal of its impact would have been avoided. This understanding is exemplified by the emptiness and inescapability of the piece.

On another hand, *View from the Other Side of the Mountain* fits well into themes of class and wealth. The American ideal of self-determination and the belief that anyone can overcome poverty with enough effort is exemplified by the figure atop the mountain. Regardless of the hard work it took to scale the mountain, a storm threatens to sweep everything, regardless of how high you can climb. The storm could be a disaster of any proportion, from losing a job to experiencing an earthquake to being burdened with ludicrous medical bills. A great number of uncontrollable

forces threaten to counteract any and all personal progress at any moment. Poverty factored heavily into the AIDS epidemic, both for those who already couldn't afford prevention tactics, and those who were shouldered with excessive hospital costs and the inability to work. The aforementioned loneliness factors into this interpretation as well. Each figure in the painting is far separated from the other two. The ideal of independence and a lack of assistance from those more privileged leaves people unable to weather the metaphorical storm. Even the figure on top of the mountain is without support.

Along with these specific topics as lenses for understanding this piece, I think that grief is also an important idea to consider. Death and loss are prime examples of the sort of uncontrollable force that Brown is trying to represent, as they're both devastating to a person's life and inevitably a part of it. Whether the point of view is pessimistic or realistic, the dread in the painting is comparable to the knowledge of an impending loss. Brown's partner died of lung cancer, which he was diagnosed with well over a year before his death. The difficulty that comes with this awareness of imminent disaster is represented in two ways by the piece. Either you panic, bargain, and hide, or you face it all and accept what's coming. Perhaps acceptance is as hard as scaling a mountain.

I believe that *View from the Other Side of the Mountain* represents the inevitability of destructive experiences and the emotions that come with them. While history serves to contextualize the source of these feelings, the piece isn't "about" one isolated event or occurrence. Brown manages to communicate with the viewer in the isolated, vague space of the painting. There is a careful balance of the piece's nearly representational nature and the abstract qualities of it.

Without a clear, real world subject matter, the viewer isn't scrambling to identify the source or location of the painting. On the other hand, the landscape is clearly recognizable, and the human brain translates the light and dark into universally identifiable patterns of weather and topography. With this balance, Brown evokes the feeling of a thunderstorm without the precision required to represent one accurately. His use of scale, contrast, and patterns allows Brown to remove distracting details and focus on the impact that the visuals have. *View from the Other Side of the Mountain* invites the viewer to sit with the difficult, uncomfortable, and unavoidable realities of human experience.

Word count: 1,803 (not including title and works cited)

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