

Barbara Taff's Lenticular Art: Creating New Truths from Mundane Visual Cues

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I'm trying to make art into an activity, into an action. Am I making art? No, I'm art-ing. I'm getting into the art-ing of life. We all need to slow down enough so that our own art-ing can emerge; the greatest joy in life is finding your own art.

— Barbara Taff

In an article on the work of Olafur Eliasson, Madeleine Grynsztejn writes: “What role [will] art play in an arena in which culture and the marketplace are moving ever closer? What kinds of practices are required to address this condition? What do those practices look like in the face of advanced capitalism’s aesthetic saturation? In response to these open and pressing questions, tasks for [the artist] must include the preservation of criticality and self-reflexivity and the creation of an oppositional space, however partial and provisional, for analysis, discussion, disturbance, transgression, and potential dissent... Artists [ought to] propose possibilities outside of the identities, forms, and functions given to us elsewhere in the culture, [as they] work toward a strengthened experience of self that, while it cannot be entirely autonomous or external to the imperatives of capital, touches back on whatever touches the individual [viewer].”<sup>1</sup>

With humor, sincerity, and genius attention to the viscosity of surprise, Barbara Taff’s lenticular work has taken on these essential imperatives, as it addresses the commercial saturation, expedited processes, and questionable standards for “facts,” “truth,” and “news” in our contemporary era. Taff’s lenticulars generally embrace Op Art’s basic tenet: experience is an essential form of knowledge. As they do so, they specifically build upon the ideas of artists such as Olafur Eliasson, who embraces a certain faith in a subject’s ability — both perceptual and ideological — to recognize constructed natures of prescribed meaning systems and respond to them by producing constructions of his/ her/ their own devising. Responding with its own questions to Annie Dillard’s classic observation “I couldn’t unpeach the peaches,”<sup>2</sup> Taff’s work asks its viewer to wonder: “What stories and unspoken forms influence the ways in which I understand what is real and see what’s *really* there, when I look at something? Which of those stories and forms, if any, were created by me? And what resilient treasures might I find — both in the world and in my own art of seeing — if I took the time to pause; look; and witness something seemingly insignificant from all different angles?”

These questions came to Taff, an award-winning pioneer in the field of print media and design, during the winter of 2018. At that time, just as she was conceptually reimagining theoretical “lines” between “fine art” and “commercial art” through the artistry of her work as design director at

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<sup>1</sup> Grynsztejn, M., Bal, M., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, & P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, (2007), *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Thames & Hudson, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Dillard, A., *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, New York: Harper Collins, 32.

IIE, International Institute of Education, Taff was left mostly immobilized by an accident that resulted in a broken right hand and fractured left wrist. “My body was healing everywhere,” she recalls, “I couldn’t walk very fast. And so I was walking very slowly and walking in parks in the city and up in the country in the nature of the Catskills; and because I think I really had to slow down, I was starting to see things *as they are*. Things became things to me. Things took form, shape.” The slowing down of things in order to perceive the beauty of form is not a new tenet of Taff’s work or inspiration; trained as a sculptor in the early years of her career at State University College of Buffalo, Taff found inspiration in the forms of Henry Moore and David Smith, for whom taking one’s time was a key ingredient in the production of a work’s beauty, precision, and found symmetry. For David Smith, a method he called “toeing in” – the delicate touch of boot toe onto metal – privileged slowness, as slight and subtle shifts of materials allowed the “foundness” of a geometric form to be revealed, *not* created, by the artist.<sup>3</sup> Henry Moore, too, understood slow, care-filled revelation essential to the emergence of a sculpture’s innate vitality, which bursted forth, like a springtime flower, from inside the piece itself: form was intrinsic to the material’s nature, rather than shaped from the outside.<sup>4</sup>

The idea that an art form emerges from the artist’s material, rather than superimposed by the artist herself, is a guiding principle of Taff’s artistic process. She names Michaelangelo and Constantin Brâncuși as her inspirations for this way of thinking about creation, but she considers her own process to be a sort of “inversion” of Brâncuși’s: rather than capturing an imagining, like “flight,” in a sculpted form, Taff pulls from a form an imagining that already lives there *inside* that form, as she expands the possibilities of what that form *could be*. As she walked slowly around Manhattan and her home in the Catskills, while her hands and wrists were healing, she saw images *emerging* from the smallest details – from things the casual walker might consider nothing or never bother to consider at all. Cracks in the sidewalk, stains in the street, uneven stumps and jumbled stones on the forest’s edge – all of these things stirred with a developing *something*: “Something in those things is coming alive – something new is bursting into the surface. The artist needs to carefully pull those things *out*. In my process [I am] pulling out something that is really strongly there. I am turning the lights on for someone in a cave, and once you see it it is like: “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe that was there, but oh my gosh *yes!*”

To capture these “developing somethings” – a guitarist in a stain in the road; a dress in a crack in the sidewalk; a smiling turtle in a curious pile of rocks – Taff photographed the details she observed and then, in a separate image, overlaid a digital drawing of what she saw in these details.

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<sup>3</sup> Breslin, David, et al, *Raw Color: the Circles of David Smith*, Clark Art Institute, 2014, 33; Smith, David, et al. *David Smith, Sculpture and Drawings*. Prestel, 1986,131.

<sup>4</sup> Moore, Henry, and Philip Brutton James, *Henry Moore on Sculpture: a Collection of the Sculptor's Writings and Spoken Words*. Macdonald, 1966, 93.

But “before” and “after” depictions did not satisfy her desire to “tell the whole story” of the ways in which beautiful possibilities could be pulled from the most mundane things she sees in the world around her. She needed a material that could convey the feelings produced by inspiration and change that were inherent in her process, so she turned to the lenticular: “I started to explore the lenticular material because I could get both ‘before’ and ‘after’ both images on it; then I could see them together. If you look at [the lenticular image] one way you see something and if you look at it another way you see it shift. A lenticular material is basically all these lines with these grooves that are like little tents, so they will hold images in those different sides that, when you move, will come together. So, when you look at an image of a crack in the sidewalk, and then you move and see the green dress, you get something of the shock of my experience and the change in my own self. When you move, the piece moves with you. And as the piece changes, you also change.”

For me, lenticular material has always been associated with both childlike wonder and commercial advertising; I remember searching for lenticular images in Cracker Jack boxes at baseball games when I was a child, hoping for an image to add to a sacred collection of moving pictures. This relationship between nostalgic playfulness, consumer culture, and lenticular material was developed intentionally, in fact, by mid-twentieth-century advertising companies, who capitalized upon the ways in which the material’s attractive frivolity appealed to younger audiences. Because it was a material that was not sold directly to the public, and because it could be produced cheaply enough to be “given away” as premiums with customer purchases, lenticular imagery reached the general public dispossessed of any notion of cost; it became one of the “free” amusements of consumer culture that elicited notions of intrinsic playfulness, whimsical magic, and kitschy, inexpensiveness.<sup>5</sup>

These notions associated with lenticular material appear as central themes and critiques of Taff’s work. As a sidewalk stain becomes a dog dancing with a frog, the viewer laughs with surprise, touching, perhaps, something childlike within themselves. Whimsy and magic come alive in the observer’s body, as she witnesses tarnished pavement turn into a dancing acrobat, smiling as he flip-flops cross a barren, broken road. And questions concerning *freedom* and *freeness* — both with regards to the art of self-expression and with regards to the ways in which the contemporary marketplace of ideas can limit an individual’s access to that very sense of self-expression — arise from the “bits of nothing,” as Taff calls them, in every image. They ask us: “What does ‘free art’ — or art that enacts a sense of personal freedom — look like? And what contemporary modalities thinking and being limit my ability to access my own ‘free’ art, always and everywhere available to me?”

The latter question evokes a philosophical conversation about apperception in the age of AI, “fake news,” and selfie-saturated social media. By allowing the observer to experience the process of

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<sup>5</sup> Timby, Kim, *3D and Animated Lenticular Photography: Between Utopia and Entertainment*, Walter De Gruyter GmbH, 2015, 165.

how a “before” image becomes an “after” image in one single work, Taff remarkably invites the viewer into her own experience of apperception: the process of absorbing information from perceived stimuli and relating it to information gathered in the past. In doing so, her images become devices for questioning the experience of a reality that lies at living edges between a haptic self, a dreaming self, and a constantly changing universe. Taff explains that she is most interested in the ways in which her own apperceptive process can’t be “unseen” by the viewer, once the viewer engages in taking on her experience: “What I have discovered through my work is that if I show someone something like a tree, before I do anything to it, and say, ‘What do you see?’ They may see something different than what I see. But as soon as I introduce what I see in the tree (like a bear, for example), then they see the bear, and they can’t unsee the bear. My visual story has convinced them.”

In this way, Taff offers a critique of the ways in which narratives forged by AI, social media, news broadcasting networks, advertising companies, and politicians present both explicit and implicit narratives that shape communal modes of thinking, as they dampen individuals’ abilities to critically reflect upon stories that are offered through these mediums. This critique candidly acknowledges a hidden history of the lenticular: in the early 1940s, before the material was used for free premiums and commercialized advertising, the lenticular was a high art for producing the first real-life portraiture.<sup>6</sup> Taff brings the lenticular material back to its original mode as a medium for self-representation, as she offers her own “selfie” of her mind to her consumers. “It’s *my* news!” she says with a laugh. When I ask her what the front-cover byline of her news is, she smiles and says: “You have to see things for yourself. One of the hardest things is learning to think for yourself. We all like to imagine: What does this person think? And that person? There is a lot of that now in the contemporary world; We have a whole career now where someone is an ‘influencer’ — we never would have called it that when I was growing up in the 1960’s. We really need to teach ourselves and our children how to clear our heads and just see — just use our eyes to look at something from all different angles...We can point out what we see as true, but let people come to their own conclusions; stop trying to take away people’s freedom to form their own thoughts simply from what they see in the world. What I hope for people is this — I hope that people continue to find their truth. Their *own* truth.”

Find your own truth: this is Taff’s answer, perhaps, to the first question her work poses about freedom and freeness: “What does ‘free art’ — or art that enacts a sense of personal freedom — look like?” Perhaps “free art” looks like an experience that inherently asks its viewer to find his own path; to carve her own way; to make something beautiful out of nothing. “My art says, ‘Hey, look around you — look around your life. Take what you have and build something. You can create something out

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<sup>6</sup> Timby, Kim, *3D and Animated Lenticular Photography: Between Utopia and Entertainment*, Walter De Gruyter GmbH, 2015, 19.

of nothing. Follow your vision, especially if you have nothing, because art can be made from anything. You have a few pieces of string, a rock, a piece of bark — great! Go! Make. Do.”

The relationship that Taff’s work poses between freedom, creation, and self-determination elicits Taff’s admiration for the work of Jacob Agam, who always associated the notion of play with a person’s development, from her own internal resources, an inner, unknown voice — an “access to the self-consciousness of freedom.”<sup>7</sup> Amazingly, Taff’s work viscerally elicits, in her viewers, the moment of access to this self-conscious freedom when they experience the shock of surprise — the “Oh!” moment — as one image emerges from another. That “Oh!” moment feels differently for every individual who spends time with Taff’s work, but each individual experiences it all the same. Within that experience, each viewer is opening to his own sense of self-conscious freedom, as he encounters, within the blessing of simple revelation that is *was* Taff’s, a revelation that is their own. And, in that revelation, as some old narrative shifts and changes and reinvents itself, an opportunity for self-healing, says Taff, inevitably arises.

I felt consciously a healing opportunity in an “Oh!” moment that I experienced, as I observed Taff’s lenticular “The Kiss.” In this lenticular, Taff presents a picture of a broken, rusty forgotten sidewalk delivery grate she found on a street in upper Manhattan. As I walked around the image, the corroded grate transformed into a couple kissing. The tenderness I felt in my heart, as the images changed, spoke to me of my own pain — of how hard it has been during this era of Covid-19 to hold on to the people I love, and to let go of loved ones I cherish. The image reminded me of a truth I hold dear for myself: love is always there, always present and hidden in the details — in the small things; in the no-things of things. And, then, after a revelation of a truth, a question: What more can we do, as humans, than hold on tightly to the love that is given to us in the darkness, before we have to give it back to the dust?

In my experience, then, Taff’s work leads the viewer through an experience that mimics a healing process: a shock; a shift in narrative; a revelation — a new response. It is no wonder, then, that Taff’s work has been so popular at the recent Palm Beach Modern + Contemporary International Fair and Art Wynwood in Miami; she is speaking deep truth about the nature of healing, as well as about *what* needs to be healed, to the acute grief of our Covid-19 generation: “My work says, ultimately: We can heal ourselves. We have to heal ourselves. We can use our own art-ing... the surprise and joy that comes from our creations, to look inside ourselves for help, rather than always looking for things outside ourselves to heal us. If we allow ourselves to open to be open to change, we can heal — we can forgive ourselves, we can love ourselves, we can heal from loss because the essence of our hearts always knows that it’s going to be okay. It’s going to be alright.”

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<sup>7</sup> Agam, Yaacov, et al, *Yaacov Agam. Fundación Arte y Tecnología*, 1997, 139.