

State of the Arts

A Novel by Art Shimamura

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“It’s art, but so what?” mumbles Professor Shearing to his semi-conscious class of art historian wanna-bes. The title of today’s lecture is “The Dissolution of Paint in Minimalism” and even Trudy Jenkins, self-proclaimed star of the class, mindlessly doodles curlicues on her wrist (five years later, Trudy was to abandon graduate school at NYU, shack up with Boh Ho, a Chinese artist, and collaborate with him on a piece entitled “Self-Representation,” in which Trudy stood naked in front of Boh’s art class reading her unfinished dissertation thesis, which Boh penned over her entire body. “A fine piece of conceptual art,” announced Ben Hera, Boh’s effusive instructor). But at this moment, Ted Shearing—known to students as “Ted the Dead”—lectures as absently as his students listen.

After class, Ted grabs his notes and shuffles down the hall to his office. Head bent, he unlocks the door, sits, and stares intently at his computer monitor. He checks his email—no new messages—then jerks the mouse nervously through his internet auctions. In truth, the only excitement that finds Ted these days arrives in the form of anonymous bidders with names like “freakydude” and “hangloose,” who are enamored by the same obscure objects d’art as he.

“Damn!” he blurts, louder than intended, after losing an auction at the last minute to “slipnslide.” With the glumness of failure, Ted slinks from his desk, steps out his office, and readies himself for his daily afternoon routine—lunch with Clare and a ride on the exercise bicycle.

Outside, Ted strolls across the grassy quad of Napa State College. He offers a mere glance at the two coeds in tank tops and skimpy shorts frolicking in the sun, a Frisbee floating between them. The scene is bucolic, though after a decade as a California resident, the state still seems foreign to him.

Ted nears the cafeteria. He ponders—I’m 35 years old, a tenured professor, and have reached the pinnacle of my existence. If only it were true. Yet Ted Shearing, recently tenured professor of Art History, seems to have gone as far as one can in the minor leagues of academia. He asks himself: Why am I so unhappy? Where’s my life going?

Ted pulls the heavy glass door and confronts the hustle and blare of the cafeteria. He finds Clare sitting at a booth tapping on her laptop. She looks up, smiles, and says, “Hi!”—then quickly utters, “Hey, what’s wrong?” Although Clare Singer is an Associate Professor of Psychology, she didn’t need those credentials to appreciate Ted’s glumness.

“Nothing really. I’m not sure if it’s boredom with my life or my failed attempt to own a Brett Weston in an auction this morning.”

“Who’s Brett Weston?”

“He’s the son of that famous photographer, Edward Weston. You know, nautilus shells, the nude kneeling with her head down. I almost owned a cool black and white photograph of a cracked windshield.”

“Oh,” says Clare, sounding less enthusiastic by the photograph’s description than she should have. She continues, “Say, I need your opinion, I’m working on an outline for my writing workshop.” Clare—author of numerous research papers and scholarly reviews—fantasizes about life as a famous mystery writer. “I need to put down a profile of a protagonist. I’ve chosen an academic murder mystery, but I can’t decide on a ‘Miss Marple’ type or ‘Kinsey Milhone’ type. What do you think?”

“How about a Raymond Chandler type with boobs,” Ted says, trying unsuccessfully to keep his disposition from seeping into the conversation. “How about ‘Samantha Marlowe,’ her day job is Professor of Slavic Studies but at night she drinks a half bottle of vodka, scratches her crotch, and solves murders.”

Clare smiles, rises up to give Ted a passively aggressive smooch, and accepts the fact that he won’t be of any help. As they walk toward the food counter, she pipes, “Oh, I have some great gossip for you, I found out the reason why Jim Armstrong—you know that crusty prof in my department—why he’s been so human lately. It turns out he’s having an affair with Cathy, our personnel manager! They were seen necking in his car out at the park yesterday during lunch!”

Somehow this bit of gossip depresses Ted even more. Despite his relationship with Clare, a pert, intelligent, and attractive woman, he wonders why crusty old Jim seems more full of life than he.

“Well,” Ted replies, “I guess that’s one big step for Jim Armstrong...one small step for mankind.”

Ted and Clare have been together for almost three years. Clare, a divorced mother with a 16-year old son, studies animal behavior. Her academic interest helps in parenting, as her son, Kevin, is a beast. Last week, Kevin broke his arm trying to break the local record in a skateboard jump. Ted tolerates Kevin, but admittedly finds the boy much too feral for his liking. Kevin tolerates Ted and considers him the dullard professor that he is. Ted thinks Clare likes him because he’s so unlike Kevin. Actually, Clare enjoys Ted’s wry sense of humor, intellectual acumen, and adeptness in satisfying her carnal needs.

While standing in the grill line, Clare asks, “What do you want to do this weekend? John has Kevin.”

“I dunno, I guess we could hit a museum or check out some galleries in SF or maybe we can just hang out at my place and relax” (‘relax’ being Ted’s private euphemism for engaging in torrid sex).

“Either way is fine with me, we can rent a movie for Saturday night, and I’ll fix something, maybe fish?”

“Sure, that sounds great. Say, do you ever feel like you’ve gone as far in your life as you ever will? I mean, do you sometimes feel like there isn’t anything more to do?”

“Whoa, that’s heavy, I guess it wasn’t just the loss of that Weston thing that’s bumming you out.” Unfortunately, Clare now realizes that the reminding of that Weston thing, which was snugly out of Ted’s consciousness, puts a deeper crease on his brow. “Hey, cheer up, you just got tenure, now you can spend some quality time working on all

those projects you've been wanting to do." Trying further to make amends, Clare continues, "You know, I'm up for a sabbatical too, maybe we could spend a month or two doing research in New York or London?"

"Naw, I dunno." Ted grabs his plate of hamburger and fries from the grill cook. "After writing those two articles in such a rushed way, primarily to get tenure, I'm feeling burnt out."

"Well, then let's take a fun trip and go up north somewhere, maybe hit Mendocino again and just kick back for a few days."

At the table, Ted wonders how he came to meet someone like Clare—she's concerned, witty, and likes to relax. Lifting a bun and pouring ketchup over his burger, Ted answers, "Maybe, I dunno...you know, I feel I'm losing direction, work seems dull, without life."

"Come on. At least we have fun together, don't we?"

"Yeah, you're very sweet, I'm lucky," admits Ted.

Clare managed to bolster Ted's spirits enough for him to make it to the gym. Standing naked in front of his locker, Ted sucks up his paunch and tries unsuccessfully to stifle a belch, which fills the area with a rush of meat, fries, and ketchup. For his age, Ted looks reasonably fit—achieved primarily from a good set of genes. His pale complexion, unkempt hair, and slightly graying temples mark him clearly in the category of 'non-student'—though in his mind, he identifies more with the "kids" than the faculty.

Adorned in trunks, t-shirt, and gym shoes, Ted saunters off toward the exercise room. As he enters the gym, his pupils constrict in response to the harsh ceiling lights, which nearly blind him from the row of bright spandex, naked midriffs, and nodding breasts that acknowledge him as he passes by the treadmills. Ted mounts an open bicycle, pushes a few buttons, and sets up his virtual exercise. His routine offers some aerobics, but more importantly prevention from glum thoughts. He's transfixed on pedaling at a constant 80 rpm, making sure he beats his virtual opponent—a little guy on a bike racing next to his bike, both of which depicted on a small LCD screen attached to the handlebars. Ted always wins, as he sets his opponent to be so slow that there is no real competition.

In the shower, Ted contemplates his afternoon itinerary. Typically, he would return to his office, check his email, and work on his next lecture (while surfing the web for new art). Today looks to be a typical day. Savoring the warmth of the shower, he wonders if a bid on another auction will be successful. Less interested in this one than the Brett Weston, Ted hums with excitement, as he considers the possibility of owning a new work of art. The piece, by an unknown digital video artist, is entitled, "Rainbird in Motion." It depicts one those sprinkler heads commonly used on golf courses—the kind that makes that shick, shick, shick sound as it shoots a long spray out its nozzle. "Rainbird in Motion" won a prize and was displayed at a New York gallery (but presumably never sold). The winning bidder receives a DVD disk with a close-up view of a Rainbird as it travels through its rhythmic cycle spraying a semicircle of water then rapidly reversing itself to its starting position. The video includes a continuous loop of the same Rainbird in motion replete with its "shick, shick, shick..." soundtrack. As Ted towels himself, he grins at the concept of "Rainbird" and wonders if he could justify the piece as a tax write-off, as he could use it in his graduate course on art criticism.

The thought of owing Rainbird truly lifts Ted's mood as he leaves the gym. Smiling, he strolls into the administrative offices of the Department of Art and Art History and checks his mail. He finds only book catalogues and the recent issue of *Representations*, which he promptly tosses aside as he enters his office. Correspondences have thinned over the years. In those heady days of graduate school and just after he received his Ph.D., everyone seemed interested in his work. He would receive invitations to conferences and offers from publishers to write scholarly treatises. Now, as a professor in a remote college, no one seems to care. Ted attributes the paucity of mail to the internet, though it occurs to him that even his email correspondences have thinned over the years. Nevertheless, Ted grins, almost giddy with anticipation.

Hunkered down in front of his computer, Ted opens his file of lecture notes. As he opens next week's lecture, he spies a glimpse of his internet program in the background. He's itching to surf the web and hang ten on that electronic equivalent of Malibu. While he grapples with this intellectual dilemma, Dave Connerly raps on his door, so forcefully that the door swings wide and bangs against the wall.

"Hi Teddy boy, how's it hanging?"

"Rather flaccidly, Davey boy."

Dave is the newest member of the department, having just received his Ph.D. from Yale. He studies prehistoric art and is in his pre-jaded period of academic nowhere (i.e., he still receives email). Dave would like nothing more than to be on the faculty at Stanford or NYU, but somehow circumstances, which Dave felt were beyond his control, plunked him down at Napa State. In fact, Napa State was the only place that offered him a position, even though he was interviewed at dozens of universities.

"I thought tenure meant spending the afternoons sipping fine wine with intellectuals in little cafes," quips Dave.

"Well, tenure's not all that its cracked up to be. We all gotta teach."

"Except for the Chair, hell, we never see Franklin."

Ted considers the remark and wonders what Chairman Franklin, one of the senior members of the department, does during the day. In the past, Franklin spent his afternoons trying get students to 'relax' with him. However, after a young coed threatened a sexual harassment lawsuit, he cleaned up his act and devoted himself to academic affairs.

Ted replies, "Well, would you want to be Chair and hassle with complaints by faculty and students and have to go to inane meetings with the Dean?"

"Well, at least I wouldn't have to teach to these halfwits. Neanderthals used rocks that were sharper than the students here."

"Speaking of which, I've gotta work on my lecture or else I'll be history."

Taking the hint, Dave saunters off to find someone else to bother.

Ted finds Dave irritating and diametrically opposite to his own demeanor, but nevertheless, he sympathizes. Upon accepting his own position at Napa State, Ted felt slighted, but at least he landed a job. Dave confided similar feelings when he first arrived last year. During their respective first years, they both entertained fantasies about leaving Napa State for bigger and better environs. Yet Ted's attempt to relocate after a year was met with utter disappointment. Not a single interview. It was as if assistant professorship at

Napa State was tantamount to leprosy—no one wanted to touch him. Ted figures Dave will experience the same disappointment later this year when he attempts his escape.

Returning to his computer screen, Ted notices that the end of auction is nearing. He suddenly panics, worrying that he might be overbid and lose "Rainbird." Although he currently is the highest bidder, he feels his maximum bid is not high enough. He's afraid of being "sniped" as he was with the Weston piece—that is, someone winning the auction by bidding higher than his maximum bid during the last seconds before the end of auction. With this morning's disappointment and one minute to go, Ted frantically ups his maximum bid, which means he basically snipes himself—thus raising the selling price. Even after this quick maneuver, Ted worries that someone will bid higher. He madly clicks and re-clicks his refresh button and watches the seconds creep down—23 seconds, 14 seconds, 9 seconds... Finally, the screen displays "Auction has ended" and his code name, "napart," appears as the winning bidder of "Rainbird in Motion"! Ted blushes with excitement. In truth, Ted wasn't sniped. Indeed, no other person in the entire world wide web was interested in "Rainbird in Motion."