Witness Me

Mark C. Grant

I enjoy making things in all sorts of ways, but I keep returning to watercolour because there is nowhere to hide. It feels like jamming on stage. You practise, you prepare, and then you have to meet whatever happens. A note goes astray; the next one makes something of it. We appreciate that in a performance—the risk, the recovery, the person finding their way while we watch. Perfection is not the whole attraction. Someone being there is.

With acrylic, you can keep working the surface, covering one decision with another. A painting can bury a long conversation beneath its final appearance. The watercolour I love leaves that conversation exposed. The washes are transparent, and the water moves the colour beyond the exact instruction of the hand. One mark runs into another; an edge softens; something settles where you did not quite intend. The process remains part of the image.[1]

When I look at a watercolour, I can often follow something of its making. I recognise a loaded brush, a wet edge, a decision to leave well alone. Even without knowing the technique, I think we can feel that exposure. You do not need to play an instrument to recognise someone taking a chance. That is part of what draws me to art: people witnessing people, and people being witnessed.

But the hand is never the whole story. The paper has been made to receive the water. The pigment has its own character. Even that apparently simple meeting between brush and surface depends on materials someone learned to produce. My freedom to improvise begins with possibilities I inherited.[1]

Think of Van Gogh's yellow. We recognise it as part of his vision, but chrome yellow was also a product of chemistry. The colour had to become materially available before he could make those particular decisions with it. Even the raised marks in *Sunflowers* depended on the stiff consistency of the newer oil paints he used. Technology is there in the colour and in the texture we recognise as his hand. It did not merely deliver the painting afterwards. It helped determine what the painting could be.[2]

And there was Theo. Vincent's letters to his brother move between thoughts about paintings, concern for family, and requests for canvas, brushes and tubes of colour. Affection and practical provision occupy the same pages. The postal service belongs to that relationship, just as the materials belong to the work. A brother's attention and a means of reaching him: neither makes the other incidental.[3]

The sunflowers themselves were painted in anticipation of Gauguin's arrival, to decorate the house they would share. Behind an image we encounter as a masterpiece was someone preparing a place for another person. Their companionship, their arguments and their separation belong to its story too.[2] I find that more moving than the idea of a solitary hand producing something from nowhere. The work gathers a world around it.

A train changes whom we can meet. A postal service changes which conversations we can sustain. A manufactured pigment changes what we can put before another person's eyes. These are not simply conveniences surrounding an untouched human experience. They enter the experience and change its possibilities. The journey, the correspondence, the colour: all can become part of what we eventually call the art.

When I encounter an old painting, I am looking at what someone made possible with the world available to them. Their materials have become familiar; their life is beyond my reach. Yet something of their attention remains available. I can stand before what they noticed and bring my own life to it. That is how I understand the heart or soul of a work: something we continue to find between their experience and ours.

I do not believe data, digital media or AI have a settled meaning within art. Nor do I think they arrive without a history. Their meanings are still being made, through what people do with them and what others discover there. The interesting question is not only what a system can produce. It is what someone is trying to share, what the technology changes, and whether another person finds a reason to stay.

An email saying "I miss you" depends on computing, networks and electricity. Those things are essential to that particular encounter. So is the person who misses you. Knowing how the message travelled need not make it less intimate; feeling its intimacy need not require us to forget the machinery.

That is why painting in watercolour and appreciating technology do not pull me in opposite directions. I am drawn to the exposed moment on the paper, but also to the extraordinary distance a human gesture can travel. Across a room, through a network, beyond the life of the person who made it. Someone leaves something of their attention where another person might find it. The materials change. The possibilities change. And somewhere in the work is that familiar invitation: I am here. Witness me.

SOURCES

1. V&A — What is watercolour?
2. The National Gallery — Vincent van Gogh, Sunflowers
3. Van Gogh Letters — Letter 800