

# Beyond the Harbor

DAN SPANGLER

**T**he archway has almost crumbled, but not quite. Battered and decrepit, it casts its jagged shadow across the ruined harbor, unkempt weeds and thistle sprouting from the ancient brick and silhouetting themselves against the bitter sky. Together, they sag, as if an unseen weight were burdening their tiny leaves, pressing them downward until they seem to hang, lifelessly and without purpose. It seems that any moment those delicate stems will crack, the rotting wood of the harbor will shatter, and it all will fall apart, collapsing into that black ocean below. And I remember a woman, cloaked in bright red, standing amid the decay and staring at me, as if to speak. But she does not.

This is a dying place, this harbor, but somebody, at some point in time, decided that all of this was worth preserving. Maybe he stood upon the harbor, weeping in awe at the terrible and picturesque beauty of the scene. Maybe it was a fleeting image, traversing his mind for a mere moment, only to vanish.

To me it was just a painting, some flat representation of a world I've never known. I lift my camera and snap a quick photograph. For one seven-hundredth of a second, a blast of light explodes from the bulb, fifteen-hundred lumens of blinding energy searing over the delicate, painted surface and casting across it, for that brief instant, an intricate labyrinth of connected shadows. Had I been fortunate enough to be carrying with me at that moment an electron microscope, I would have been treated to the sight of hundreds of billions of photons, colliding madly in an instantaneous chain reaction, scorching the ancient upper layers of the canvas, indiscriminately dissolving chemical bonds—ionic, hydrogen, and covalent—in an epic shock-wave, and leaving behind only a fragile and decaying latticework of molecules.

Flash.

I lower my camera and, having helped to destroy this painting, move on. Minutes later I've forgotten it all. The harbor and the ocean and the figures, clutching one another in the shadows—they've all vanished.

Werner Heisenberg writes that even on a subatomic level, nothing can be recorded without being altered. “The more precisely the position [of a particle] is determined,” the physicist noted in his pivotal *Uncertainty* paper, “the less precisely the momentum is known.” He thus posits a paradox of perception in which a truth must be distorted before it can be discovered.

And so too is this painting altered—this idea gradually diminished, worn away. Thousands of flashbulbs releasing thousands of gigawatts of energy, bombarding it again and again, will eventually take their toll.

The destruction of a vision comes in two stages—the more immediate annihilation of the corporeal reality, followed by a gradual degradation of those objects that represent it. The first stage finds the artist in a hopeless struggle to represent that which cannot be represented. His quest is but a brutal battle against himself—triumph is impossible—but, foolish and stubborn, he fights on. At the end of the carnage lies pure idea, unadulterated by the practical concerns of his medium. But no such thing is attainable outside the bounds of the artist’s mind—there is no such thing as pure idea manifested as a physical form. No word, image, or piece of music could ever fully and precisely replicate in another form that which the artist feels, but still he fights. The results of such campaigns inevitably share identical fates, for they are products of a fleeting truth, and can exist only as hollow representations—flat, lifeless forgeries of ideas, created with earnest intent, but holding no other ambition than to serve as caricatural impersonations of an extinct reality. And they will be destroyed, as such things tend to be, for their construction is such that they attract those who would destroy them.

And so we’re brought to the second stage—the destruction of the art object, being a lifeless copy of the original whole. Having already become a casualty of the artistic process, it is then subjected to the ravaging hunger of the masses.

Unlike the unspoiled original, this forgery is designed to be consumed and, be it by the blinding flash of a camera or simple exposure to light over hundreds of years, will gradually deteriorate until it ceases to exist. The medium matters nothing, nor does the nature of the idea itself—whether it is a massive historical cataclysm or mere vision contained entirely within the imagination of the artist is irrelevant. It will be devoured regardless, for the closer we look, the more pictures we take, the more copies we produce, the more complete the destruction.

At fault, initially, would seem to be the predators, the unwitting enemies of longevity whose carnivorous hunger drives them to devour the remains of

others—those who, like me, must take a piece of the painting home with them.

But are these rapacious desires not part of humanity's natural temperament? Are they not embedded deep within our nature locked away in places so elusive that we, as a species, could never hope to change them? Perhaps this is nature's way of preventing ideas from enduring across millions of years, for just as the ideas themselves are wiped away by the natural passage of time, so too are the creations they spawn—the only difference is the time frame. It would almost seem that the universe is naturally inclined to ensure the destruction of all its inhabitants and their ideologies. Serving as a small component of that inclination, we are, effectively, designed to eradicate that which would allow us to perpetuate our concepts and interpretations of our world beyond the course of our natural lives.

It is our instinct to consume, yes, but why? This examination, admittedly, seems to suggest a rather bleak world where artistic expression is a fruitless and trivial exercise, incapable of any lasting impact. That we exist only to destroy and to have our creations destroyed is, after all, an overwhelmingly distressing interpretation of mankind's nature.

But we must, still, look further to find our answers. We must delve deeper into the reason for this destructive force and, in doing so, ask two questions. The first: What am I looking for? What is it, exactly, that I seek when I observe the painting? For what purpose do I interrogate the artistic output of others? My objective is, in fact, the very idea which the artist has tried so hard to convey to me. It is the unrepresentable, the unconsumable. It is the idea, the whole of a memory or experience, unfiltered and vivid.

She was there, the woman on the dock. She stood there in that dying harbor, and could see it all—what lies beyond the archway, around the corner where the road curves into the city—and it seems that, perhaps if not for that impermeable and soundless barrier of paint and canvas, she might wish to say something to me about it. But I know she dwells in a world I could never hope to enter, and so she remains silent. My desire to hear the message goes unfulfilled—I consume the object and, leaving it behind, inevitably feel as though I have missed something—as if the original intent of the artist had not been properly conveyed. And so I do the only thing that I can think of: I take a picture. Perhaps, studying it alone and away from the distractions of the museum, creating my own copy which I am free to contemplate, the barriers between my world and the harbor will fall away.

But why do I seek to learn of such places? I seek a pure idea, yes. But why? This is the second question, and to answer it we must realize, with a

degree of relief, that nowhere in the universe can destruction occur without some form of genesis. Just as animals in their natural ecosystems must kill and consume to survive and reproduce, so must we consume what remains of others' ideas to create and preserve our own. We observe these ideas; we consume them, and, facet by facet, particle by particle, the idea is altered by our examination. Is this consumption? Yes, but perhaps it is not destruction. Just as physics dictates that mass will never be annihilated, so too will an idea never be destroyed once it has been brought into the world.

But it will be changed.

This change occurs by means of rebirth through the observer; this leads us to the well-known supposition that there are no new ideas, only retreads and reinterpretations of old ones. Could this adage be exemplified here? Are all "new" creations but amalgams of those creations the creator has himself consumed?

"Leonardo is present in Cezanne, Michelangelo flows through Picasso and on into Hockney. This is not ancestor worship, it is the lineage of art," writes Jeanette Winterson in her essay "Art Objects." It is not unlike the oral traditions of early civilization—stories passed down from generation to generation and unknowingly altered by those who have attempted to preserve them.

How many harbors have come before this? How many echoes of lost cities and oceans linger here in this world? How many times has this place been observed, changed, and recreated? Perhaps she knows, that old woman on the dock, but still she remains silent.

Creation and re-creation are displayed here most prominently as yet another example of the ever-present cycle of rejuvenation that is so integral to the universe's function. It is uncertainty and influence and inspiration. Whatever term is assigned to the process, the mechanism by which ideas can change over boundless lifetimes is the mechanism by which this painting will be reborn. It is our ever-present desire to communicate with ourselves. It is disintegration and disassembly. It is consumption. But it is more:

It is evolution.

Flash.

Light hits the chest as the old closet door swings open.

Thirty, forty, fifty years have passed, and I have found the old photograph locked away. The artist's name, the title of the painting in the photograph, the nature of its subject—all are lost. It has faded, a thin mist drawn across the harbor, the archway obscured, and the sea no longer its lustrous marine blue.

Gone, but not quite. And the woman is still there, staring out at me from beyond the glossy surface.

I place the photo near my canvas and draw a brush from the cabinet. And as I begin to paint, I think, perhaps, that I may have heard a faint whisper.

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