

The Brick and The Shell: Contemplation and Painting The Votive Object

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By Matthew Ballou

Contemplation is a serious business. The object of that contemplation is even more serious.

As a painter, I am obsessed with the practice of contemplation, both in terms of necessary attentions to the development of my work, and in terms of the aim of those attentions. Simply put, that aim is the construction of relational conduits – visual and conceptual passages – in the form of paintings made of metaphors and symbols through which the viewer can glimpse contemplations on this human condition in which we all find ourselves. My paintings are invitations to others to engage in that contemplation.

In as much as they are arenas for the act of contemplation the paintings take on metaphysical significance for viewers who are open to the experience. The objects I paint are a key factor in creating an image to initiate contemplation. I seek objects and structures that reference either the divine or the human. In my small still life paintings, as well as in my larger figurative works, I use shells and bricks toward that referential end.

These bricks and shells serve to place the images I make within a socio-historical context because both of these objects have a strong worldwide base of cultural significance. Traditionally, the spiral forms of shells have referenced harmony, balance, and a divine reconciliation of opposites in that it unites the finite and the infinite. This spiral is seen in the double helix of our DNA structure, in embryos, in the cochlea of our inner ear, and in the form of fluid dynamics, hurricanes, and galaxies. These examples are not merely organic formations; they actually participate in a real mathematical proportion that we can observe.

Bricks, on the other hand, have been used as metaphoric containers for humanity's will to establish itself, often in the form of grand statements about our own grandeur. These monumental constructions – such as the pyramid structures seem around the world – were meant to get humanity closer to the realm of the divine. One could say that the brick represents our desire to build a path to heaven while the shell is a picture of heaven coming down to us, or present in us and in the world. (It is interesting to note, however, that this establishment metaphor is not always present in the brick. In the Vedic “earth brick” ritual, a brick – representing the earth and established physical reality – is burned in a ceremonial fire to depict the fundamental impermanence of all things.)

On a more basic level, however, the shape of bricks and shells as objects reference an archetypal or fundamental form. Many early cultures were concerned with the issue of what the most basic and indivisible element(s) might be. The desire to gain some metaphysical insight into the nature of existence through the study of fundamental forms can be traced directly to the five Platonic Solids, as well as a number of esoteric systems in non-Western cultures. The form of the brick and the proportioned spiral of the shell participate in the long legacy of these studies.

In its singleness as a unit, the brick bears a proportional relationship to the structure that is built from many similar units. That single brick contains within itself the image of the whole structure of which it is a part. It is this inextricable relationship between the part and the whole that has energized the brick with symbolic meaning for humanity. The shell, particularly in the mathematical elegance of its proportional spiraling, is a reflexive icon that sits between the finite

and the infinite, referencing both. The spiral has always functioned as a symbol for both the macroscopic cosmos and the microscopic point of beginning.

The shell in my work is meant to carry the signature of what is before and beyond humankind. It has traditionally been seen as a sign of the divine in the world, whether it is because of its mathematical perfection or its infinitely reducible and infinitely expandable form. I use shell to imply an overarching, fundamental truth that is outside of – yet pervading – humanity.

The brick is a particularly strong symbol for me because of its presence as a signifier of component importance. I use it to refer to the accumulation of human understanding, what we think we know, and our attitudes about that self-awareness of knowledge. The reality is that true understanding is often not as quantifiable or containable as we would like to think. The brick is a picture of that conceit that humans have that we can format, contain, collate, and cross-reference everything knowable or worth knowing. We generally have a bad attitude about not knowing things; we do not like to be confronted with the fact. We often conduct ourselves as if we are the culmination of all things. While the quest for scientific or intellectual understanding is necessary and good, it should not be considered an end in itself. The image of the brick is meant to keep me humble about this truth.

I love the brick as an image because in my painting of it, and in my contemplation of its form and metaphoric intention, it transforms. The prosaic dullness of the object becomes a poetic musing on the human state. It reminds me of the good things we do, the wonderful intentions and desires we aspire to, as well as the more negative proclivities we have. Conversely, I love the shell because the precision of its form, and the meanings implicit in that form, remind me of something that is beyond myself yet is a major part of my experience of being. It represents an invigoration of the spirit to me.

In the end painting is a moral activity for me. This means that I want to be polarized about what I choose to contemplate, what I choose to paint. I don't want to be indifferent about it. This is not a pastime; it is a way of life, a way of thinking, and of acting. I have to be clear about what it is about for me, regardless of what it might mean for others or what the secondary meanings I might build into the works are.

It is a matter of life and death to me, this business of symbology. It is about a careful approach to the world, a considerate, prayerful stance. It is about having faith and wanting faith. It is about loving God and yet having almost no idea what that means. It is about loving what we as humans are, yet struggling with our blatant failures. It is about going beyond the everyday to see the universal in the everyday. This is why the brick and the shell are important. When I use them to contemplate, they can be pivot points where I – and I hope other viewers – can step between the limited and unlimited, the prosaic and the poetic, the temporal and the eternal, to get a sense of awe and wonder at this life.

Note

I identify these works – and the objects they depict – as votive objects. This category of object has a long history and is present in every form of spiritual practice on the planet. It is defined as follows:

Votive: adjective, from the Latin *votivus*, *votum* (This is where we get the word vote and the concept of voting from).

Definitions:

1. A fulfilling vow: given, done, or offered in fulfillment of an oath or vow. "A votive offering."
2. A symbolizing wish: showing or symbolizing a wish or desire. "A votive prayer."

So these works are meant to be an outward expression of an inner faith or hope. They are a "symbolizing wish" made visible in paint. They are points of contemplation where I may focus on that prayerful hoping. They are signs of my faith in the goodness of being, in spite of all the harshness that is experienced in this life.