PORCH AS SCREEN OF TREES

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ON SEEING

Paul Cézanne leans forward, brush in hand. It is an extension of his fingers; its angle matches the sloping ground that rises toward Mont Sainte-Victoire. The thick edge of Cézanne's canvas breaks this horizon, and the architecture of the easel supports not just the canvas but the photographic vignette as a whole. We are looking through its structure of unfolded legs and frames and through that charged void between artist and canvas. We feel Cézanne's concentration in the weighting of his body as he steps into the brushstroke, its tip in sharp focus, poised inches from the canvas. His coat is torn where his right arm meets his shoulder, as if the action of painting pulls at the very seams of your clothing and skin. His collar is upturned against the cool air of January. The painter "lends his body to the world".

Leafless trees rise above his shoulder to frame the photograph's left edge, and evergreen trees hold its right side. In the distance, a line of trees hold the middle ground and serve as a background for the white line of the brush. The flowing edge of a rock wall passes behind the artist and structures perspectival depth as it continues into the distance. Cézanne's action of painting and the space he has created for himself in the landscape – in the photograph's immediate foreground – screen our view. His head turned slightly into the scene, Cézanne's view is nearly our view, but the photographer Roussel is not showing us what Cézanne sees (which might be another vision of the mountain or a "screen of trees" painting). Instead, he reveals how and where the painter works, and how that place anchors the process of seeing. At the same time, we are afforded our own view of the landscape, made possible by the space Cézanne and then Roussel have created. I believe that space is a kind of porch.

A PORCH ON A RIVER IN A FOREST

Each day you walk out onto a porch, you are an impressionist painter. Air is your medium, and the screen is your canvas. You return to the same spot, in the open air, to learn the process of seeing. Like Paul Cézanne poised at his easel in front of Mont Sainte-Victoire, the porch screen is your étude canvas, where you study the way air and light touch rocks, leaves, and grass, as well as the screen itself. Even if you're not actually painting, you still test vision and study change.

The porch where I sit looks onto a small lagoon that the cabin's original owner blasted out of limestone rock. From the porch, this lagoon has all the repose and painterly opportunities of Claude Monet's pond at Giverny; and like the cabin's build-

er, Monet dug his pond in a carefully composed location. The lagoon provides the foreground for the porch's view out to the Homosassa River, a spring-fed watercourse on the Gulf coast of Florida. When the tide comes in, the river reverses direction and water rushes from right to left, which is also west to east.

Seven decades old, the porch's floors tilt with tidal surges and sinking ground. The porch and its modest cabin nest in a coastal forest that is also changing. Cedar trees, cabbage palms, and live oaks, some as tall as forty feet, still cling to the limestone island's sparse soil; but with saltwater intrusion, they are declining, and Brazilian pepper trees, an invasive species from southern Florida, are crowding out the native forest, which is becoming a ghost forest. And so one forest is being replaced by another. Awash in warmer water and protected by milder winters, mangroves have colonized the lagoon's shoreline. In the last ten years, they have grown up to my eye level on the porch. Marsh grass adds a bristling texture as the new understory to this coastal forest on the cusp of change.

When I sit here on the porch, I stare trance-like over the lagoon, across the river. Each time, the scene – its river, light, water, color – asks me to see it for the first time. Sometimes I sketch, but often the viewing remains a mental study. It asks for a way of seeing reminiscent of Stéphane Mallarmé's call to impressionism in the late summer of 1876: "Each work should be a new creation of the mind. The hand, it is true, will conserve some of its acquired secrets of manipulation, but the eye should forget all else it has seen, and learn anew from the lesson before it" [L].

SCREENS OF TREES

Eight years ago, I made a three-dimensional laser scan of the writer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' porch in Cross Creek, Florida. Ten feet deep and thirty feet wide, her porch is typical of the region's vernacular architecture, framed in wood with exposed rafters and screened openings. Usually, these digital scans go through a processing phase to sort out the raw data and correct errors. This scan was never processed, so the image I'm looking at has many pieces of information laid one on top of another. It remains raw. I borrowed the scanner from a historic preservationist who uses it to archive buildings to prepare for renovations or to document them ahead of imminent destruction. I have pored over this image like I sometimes look out from the porch, through the screen, with a mix of rapt attention and blank stare. The result here in front of me is not what the preservationist seeks – there are too many anomalies, misalignments, and blurred edges. But

what I see is a near-perfect visual analog for this porch, and the broader experiences of porches, both in the past and now in our present time.

The porch sitter views the world through a deep veil. In the scan's resulting image, the inner and outer edges of the porch mingle. The glass of the porch's back wall, which is the house's front wall, meshes with the porch's screened wall and its lower wooden paneling. A moiré of reflected and filtered light joins colors and forms from the farmyard beyond. It is as if the screen reflects, holds, and filters not just light but also image. Smudges of blue sky, flecks of grass, orange trees, tea olives, and birds all float across the screened image to collapse inside and outside, near and far, reflected and filtered, coming and going.

The digital process has done what Cézanne did, playing with depth and making tangible what would otherwise remain ephemeral, even invisible. In the decade that followed Mallarmé's essay, Cézanne executed a series of paintings that relied on screens of trees for their composition but also for their meaning. The dominant formal scheme of these paintings, also developed by Corot and Pissarro, is a foregrounded row of trees that sets up a dialogue in the depth of the painting with additional layers of trees and other landscape elements. "Screen of tree" paintings exemplify the late 19th-century plein-air painter's intentioned relationship with a setting. In one sense, the trees are a natural architecture of vision; they establish depth and provide stability in their frames, but they also give something else, much more important to Cézanne's intent. The screens of trees afford doubt.

When you look at *Trees and Houses* (1886) at the Orangerie, you have the sense that the painter is practicing sight. The painting is not just about seeing, it is about learning and then knowing how to see. As this process unfolds, the screen promises order, but it raises as many questions as it answers. Leaves are smeared on houses, contours shift as they pass behind tree trunks, mountains evaporate into the sky, windows hang from tree limbs, houses become the color of underbrush, and tree limbs and trunks are suffused with sunlight and infused with the color of houses. [t] These paintings and the digital scan of Rawlings' porch do not offer exact documentations and yet they are wholly accurate. In this way, they are also like porches: they teach us the reflexive nature of perception.

OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

Cézanne said that "nature is on the inside" [*]. Behind the screen of trees – and on a porch, we are neither inside nor outside. The

Water lilies (Agapanthus), Claude Monet, 1915-1926.
© Cleveland Museum of Art, 2019.
https://archive.org/details/clevelandart-1960.81-water-lilies-agapant.

painter instead takes us to a place where we're partway in nature; but most significantly for Cézanne, we become conscious of how we perceive nature. The experience is important: Cézanne ventures into *plein air* just as we go out into a porch's open air. But the process of reflection – of thinking about what we are seeing and feeling – is also critical. We see things and we see ourselves in the world. I have always thought of these paintings as if they were composed from a porch, where the trees are columns and what happens across the canvas is a screen of built-up paint. Cézanne takes us to a place where our vision might live[. This way of seeing includes what we see and what we don't. On a porch, this way of seeing finds a home, as the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty says, in the "texture" of the visible and invisible[.

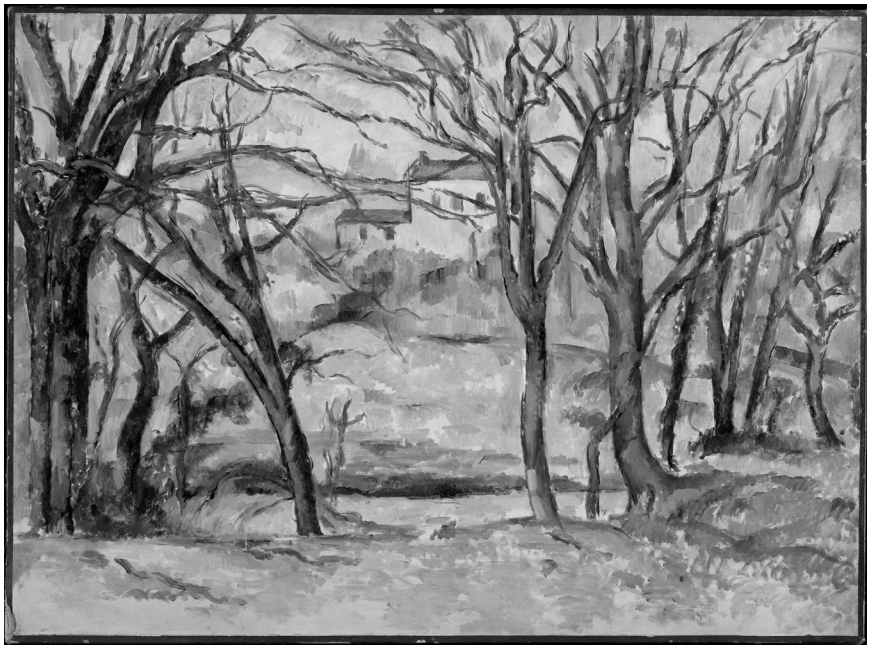
Merleau-Ponty also noted that without a screen there is no vision. A porch's screen extends the threshold our body makes with the world around us. It brings what is distant closer and it allows us to see what might otherwise remain invisible. Just as Cézanne found the thresholds of sight in his painting's trees, the philosopher once marveled at a screen of cypresses "where the web of reflections plays"[. Whether it has a screen or not, the porch is an anchor for this kind of seeing. And right now, when I raise my head from this myopic cradle of writing, there is a play of distance between near and far. A meter away, a lizard leaps from a tree trunk and climbs the porch's woven screen. He looks through the openings between nylon mesh, its apertures about the size of his eye. We see each other for a moment, and there is disdain in his gaze. Beyond, a few juvenile palm fronds finger the breeze, and, further away, water reflects sky, pleated by a crab boat that passed upriver a few minutes ago. Across the river, a line of cordgrass, limestone and trees offers other horizons. Along the porch screen, shadows of limbs dance and flicker.

BUILT GROVE

Architects Alison and Peter Smithson explored the porch as a screen of trees in a series of built and unbuilt projects. Discussing their project for Axel Bruchhäuser's porch at Hexenhaus in Germany, the Smithsons define porch as a method, one that combines tuning and tree-screening: "The porch can be read as an exemplar of a method by which a small physical change – a layering-over of air adhered to an existing fabric – can bring about a delicate tuning of persons with place"[. No more than five square meters, the Hexenhaus porch is ostensibly a modest project for a man (Bruchhäuser) and his cat (Sir Karl), but its construction draws together all the possibilities of porch as method

Trees and Houses Near the Jas de Bouffan, Paul Cézanne, 1885-1886.

https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459092..



as well as the Smithsons' ideas about air, trees, and architecture. For the Smithsons, air is the general medium, and trees are the specific means, for the porch's tuning capabilities, just as plein-air was the effective medium for Cézanne in his screen of tree paintings. Alison Smithson identified "adherent air" as the connective tissue between inside and outside in this "layering-over".

Throughout their career, the Smithsons were fascinated with a dialogue between "grown" and "built" trees. At close range, the Smithsons build a wooden lattice of tree branches across the building envelope's immediate surface; and at a distance, they use lines, or screens, of growing trees to find the outer layers of what they also called "treillage'd space". At Axel's porch, the angled forms of the lattice frame become the "window tree" that works with the grown edges of trees to harmonize near and far. This exploration of the possibilities for the tree to inform architectural enclosure affords a "sense of protection" and defined boundaries along the periphery of Axel's porch. The porch's lattice components that approximate "branches that do not move" also serve as fixed reference points for the viewer-occupant to understand the daily fluctuations of light and air as well as the seasonal transitions of color and leafing cycles.

The Smithsons saw the structure of their porches – whether wood or steel frame – as a "built grove". In a final note appended to the Frances Loeb Library's copy of the manuscript for "Lattice-screens and Paravents," Alison Smithson speaks about porches generally but also references Axel's porch specifically: "So the porch…whose frame supports the all-around glass that is as a built part of the wood; two built-trees whose branches cannot move with the seasons". The porch's fixed-branch lattice, frozen in a leafless wintertime state, ensures a minimally mediated relation between occupant and tree, and the porch's "branches" add to the branched and treed spaces of the Hexenhaus' landscape, contributing to what the Smithsons called "veined air". Picking up on the space between branches, leaves and trunks, screening then becomes a process of veining air, which saturates the porch with the surrounding context, whether it is the landscape's visually pervasive contours, textures, and colors, or whether it also includes additional sensual feedback of smells and sounds that drift through the screen's mesh like those here at my porch on the river.

This explicit concern with "the built grove" and layers of trees extended to the Smithsons' other porch projects. In their proposal for Lucas Headquarters, where tree layers connect the project's built edges to a broader context, the architects could be describing one of Cézanne's screen of tree paintings, just as they

hint at the experience of sitting on a porch:

> The building steps forward, steps back, performs as it were a stately dance with the trees that lace the site on the lines of the old hedgerows; thus, the building form utilises [sic] that sense of connection to place that the interpenetrations of existing trees can transmit. The stepping in and out of the building to receive the penetration, or allow the tree line to pass by, offers to the occupants a variety of serrated edge place.

This interlaced screening in a built grove's "serrated edge" also includes reflection. In the Hexenhaus project, occupants are exceedingly aware of the porch's glazing. The use of glass in Axel's porch maximizes clear views of the outside world, but the thickness of the porch's lattice frame also reduces glare and at the same time supports reflectivity. Reflections of the occupant's body occur simultaneously with those of tree, limb, leaf, and sky.

Resting on the porch, our eye follows contours of receding path, rising hillock, axial trunks, bending limb, or displaced stone. The Smithsons will later note that Axel's decisions about the porch resulted from the effects of context, sight, and climate on "his eye and his body". Within the porch's layers of screen and tree-screen, Merleau-Ponty's "thinking eye" sees and hears the forest's correspondence so that nature finds its way inside, to eye, mind, and body. The flexuous line weaving these linkages must bend as it binds so that inside may also find its way outside.

CLIMATE CODA

Lingering on a site, committed to its environmental situation, Cézanne found a "'new manner of painting' […] capable of keeping the interplay of mass and atmosphere – the visible and the invisible – in a state of engaging, enduring impermanence." Porches are plein-air vehicles that register climate and its fluctuations. The porch where I sit and write and page through images of Cézanne's paintings and the Smithsons' Hexenhaus will soon be inundated by rising seas. Climate change has already deeply transformed its built grove, and the loss of coastal forest is tangible here on the porch – reminders that porches operate on climatic thresholds of time and space.

The trees that create the scene and the trunks that extend like so many porch columns out into the landscape are slowly falling away. Across the river, a storm brought down a greying cluster of cedar trees and the trunk of a palm where the resident osprey liked to perch. Closer to the porch, cedar trunks turn a deeper silver, burnished by wind and salt; and dying limbs mark their

steady decline. Last week one of the dead palm trees just three meters from the porch's front started to lean toward the roof. Its head had been lost seven years ago in the hurricane. I decided to fell the trunk, and I soon realized that saving the porch meant losing part of its context. From my favored position on the porch, its absence was palpable. Not merely because a familiar view had been changed, but something deeper, more visceral. I still felt the presence of the palm tree like a phantom limb. Which is to say that the porch's link between body and landscape, between body and forest, goes beyond vision. It includes the smell of rain on cedar's needles, the remembered texture of that palm tree's coarseness, and the sheen of driftwood smoothed in tide and air.

This photograph is of *Cézanne at the Mont Sainte-Victoire* by Kerr-Xavier Roussel in January 1906.

Eight months later, after being caught in a rainstorm at this site in the hills of Les Lauves, Cézanne will die of pleurisy, having followed his claim that he would die painting.

M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, in G.A. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. C. Dallery, M. Smith, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1993, p. 123.

Here, I am using the term "porch," but I mean to include other porch-like spaces: verandas, balconies, even stoops.

S. Mallarmé, *The Impressionists and Edouard Manet*, in "Art Monthly Review," 1(9), September 1876, pp. 117-122. This article was reprinted in *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886*, exh. cat., San Francisco and Washington, D.C., 1986. In the essay, Mallarmé has borrowed "Each work should be a new creation of the mind" from Édouard Manet.

J. Isaacson, *Constable, Duranty, Mallarmé, Impressionism, Plein Air, and Forgetting*, in "The Art Bulletin," 76(3), September 1994, p. 445. In another version of the *Trees and Houses* painting (in Oslo), the presence of trees perceptually compromises the houses and the hillside; and as a result, the painting's substance, identity, and content are found through the process of visualizing.

Merleau-Ponty quotes Paul Cézanne in his essay *Eye and Mind*, p. 125.

I admit to have looked for evidence that Cézanne painted on porches or verandas. His studio in Aix-en-Provence has the region's typically austere, flat facades without covered indoor-outdoor spaces; but the studio's west side has a raised terrace (graced by a large tree) that holds views down the slope. The north side has a large window that looks in the direction of Mont Sainte-Victoire, and Cezanne worked on paintings in the garden outside his studio by taking the oversized canvases (like *The Large Bathers*) out through a specially constructed door. It is also worth noting that Claude Monet painted from the balconies of the Louvre.

M. Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 127

Ivi, p. 142. See also M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1968, p. 150.

A. Smithson, P. Smithson, *The Charged Void: Architecture*, Monacelli Press, New York 2001, p. 552.

S. Mallarmé, *The Impressionists and Edouard Manet*, in C. S. Moffett (ed.), *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886*, Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco 1986, pp. 27-35. Working toward a definition of "plein air," Mallarmé states: "Open air: that is the beginning and end of the question.... The search after truth, peculiar to modern artists, which enables them to see nature and reproduce her such as she appears to just and pure eyes, must lead them to adopt air almost exclusively as their medium." Ivi, p. 28. The essay first appeared with the same title in *Art Monthly Review*, 1, September 30, 1876, pp. 117-122.

See A. Smithson, *Into the Air*, in "Mass: Journal of the School of Architecture and Planning, University of New Mexico," vol. VII, Fall 1989, p. 10.

For an extended discussion of the Hexenhaus porch and the idea of "treillage'd space," see my article *Treillage'd Space: Tuning Person and Place in the Porches of Alison and Peter Smithson*, in "Environment, Space, Place," 2(2), Fall 2010, pp. 79-119. There, I discuss the origins of the term 'treillage' and its link to trees and screening. Its linguistic root in *treille*, a French term for arbor, underscores the Smithsons' long-held interest in tree screens, whether they are 'grown' or 'built.' Further, treillage was a skilled art in French landscape design; and in the 18th century, the division of carpenters known as Corps de Menuisiers officially recognized the practice as a technical craft that required the same expertise as complex joinery.

The synthesis of tree and window provides another mode of building "into the air," and Alison Smithson cites Robert Frost's poem "Tree at My Window" when she discusses the integration of building and window in the St. Hilda's project: "Tree at my window, window tree, / My sash is lowered when night comes on; / But let there never be curtain drawn / Between you and me." See A. Smithson, *op. cit.* The poem is included on page 180 of R. Frost, *The Road Not Taken: A Selection of Robert Frost's Poems*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 1985.

P. Smithson, *Three Generations*, in "OASE," 51, Spring 2000, pp. 90-91. Also see P. Smithson, *Conversations with Students*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2005.

Retrospective annotations at the introduction to the "Treillage'd Space" section of *The Charged Void* noted "something of a return to our first interest in the steel structure […] the wood structure, the built grove, the grown line of trees." Ivi, p. 377.

The essay closes with the following: "In a sense […], substantial lattice members are like tree branches. Tree branches move and grow, changing what is seen through them without the observer moving." Ivi, p. 2.

Ivi, p. 380. The architects also find traces of memry in this landscape: "[l]ines of trees lace the building into the landscape and are used as 'remembrances'" of historical land patterns. Ivi, p. 382.

Completed in 1949, Case Study House Number 8 includes glazing etched with leaf patterns of the adjacent eucalyptus trees,

effectively drawing near the screening device of the site's treeline. The Smithsons admired Charles and Ray Eames' project.

P. Smithson, "Being at Home," revised August 26, 1997, with Notes "thought and expressed in Copenhagen" in November 13, 1997. Frances Loeb Library, Special Collections, page 5 of unpublished manuscript and lecture.

Commentator Galen Johnson provides a rhetorical framework for these ideas: "Why is it that painters have so often said, in the manner of Klee, that the forest was speaking to them, or the trees were looking at them, or why did Cézanne say that 'nature is on the inside.'" G.A. Johnson, *Ontology and Painting: 'Eye and Mind'*, in Id., *op. cit.*, p. 47.

J. Isaacson, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

For additional discussion of porches and their relation to climate change, see C. Hailey, *The Porch: Meditations on the Edge of Nature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2021.