

Paul Moran, "Leave it and go" commissioned article

"Leave it and go, it's time to go, to say so anyway, the moment has come, it's not known why. What matter how you describe yourself, here or elsewhere, fixed or mobile, without form or oblong like man, in the dark or the light of the heavens, I don't know, it seems to matter, it's not going to be easy. And if I went back to where all went out and on from there, no, that would lead nowhere, never led anywhere, the memory of it has gone out too, a great flame and then blackness, a great spasm and then no more weight or traversable space." –Samuel Beckett. *Texts for Nothing*.

Beckett's disembodied voice suspends the reader at a crossroads where memory, place, movement, and identity are briefly noted then lost or cancelled, capturing an epiphany or the instant of death. Paul Moran's minimal black paintings mark the same dogged search into the unknown or an exploration of the limits of what we can know; they are portals into this dramatic moment, precipices above nothingness.

Slightly paler, vertical brushstrokes along each side of the painting are like a stand of blurry trees or curtains framing an ebony void. If I were in nature and peering into this darkness, I could use my peripheral vision or turn my head to bring those dim trees or curtains into focus. But the painting trains my attention straight ahead, one instant I see bottomless space that has time, and the next I see a dusty, textured surface that does not. As in reading Beckett's prose, the experience of looking at Paul Moran's paintings alternates between the imagined and the real; the past is a reconstructed idea vying with a briefly inhabited, then lost, present.

I first encountered Paul's paintings at dusk, the witching hour, when what is recognizable becomes strange: boundaries are erased, reason fades into contemplation, confidence gives way to doubt, and fact succumbs to imagination. In the waning light, brushstrokes dissolve, particles seem to hum and vibrate in the air. I see a black square with brushstrokes but I also see a country field at night. Beckett's words assert and nullify facts; he records thoughts and their antitheses as he maps his experience, leading the reader through a process of dissolution. Paul's paintings sustain this crisis, this co-existence of opposites; my mind persists in a state of uncertainty. Enjoying this minimal work means questioning perception, representation of the void, and myself.

Leo Steinberg described Minimalism as "a determined attempt to reduce a complex structure of an artwork--in which you make a hundred, a thousand, a million decisions--to make it look as if it were the product of a single decision."⁽¹⁾ Beckett's logic creates a mental landscape, highlighting and coloring personal history, stopping only because he wears himself out or "the moment has come." Moran renders a landscape where I experience all my doubtful, painful, exhilarating or surprising thoughts; but it is still first and foremost a surface. The painting captures and compresses this moment, it's the souvenir I retain after visiting so many pressing ideas and emptying the mind.

Paul's study of "Shibusa," the traditional Japanese aesthetic of "the skillful blending of restraint and spontaneity," ⁽²⁾ is the key to the paintings. "Shibusa," is defined by seven attributes: simplicity, implicitness (not being shallow), modesty, tranquility, naturalness

(muddiness), roughness and normalcy (everydayness). (3) Immediately, I connect with "muddiness" since Moran uses a black ground interrupted by a few vertical brushstrokes and accidental lumps and grit. His choice of color does not attract attention and it produces a "silvery" effect. As an adjective, "Shibui" can be traced from meaning "coarse and astringent" through "tastefully astringent" to "quiet and sober refinement." Focusing on the present moment and the physical details of the painting, I investigate what is implied, what is below the surface, and I find modesty and commitment, simplicity and serenity along with a bitterness not unlike Beckett's fears of doing nothing and going nowhere and accomplishing nothing. When I experience refinement, it is well earned.

(1) Achim Hochdörfer, "Leo Steinberg 1920-2011," *Art Forum*, October 2011, pg. 60

(2) <http://japaneseaesthetics.com/gpage3.html>. Michiko and David Young.

(3) *ibid.*

Quote is excerpted from "3," *Texts for Nothing*. Samuel Beckett. *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*. Edited notes & introduction by S.E. Gontarski 1995

—Elizabeth Johnson