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Wednesday 1:30-4:10 (CRN 21898)

RELI 335: Medicine and the Museum: Clinical Aesthetics and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

“The meaning of life is to build life as if it were a work of art. You’re not a machine. When you are young, start working on this great work of art called your own existence.”—Abraham Heschel, 1972

Course Description, Objectives, and Outcomes:

At Rice University, we are ideally situated in close proximity to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, an internationally distinguished institution whose permanent collection includes important holdings in Classical, Old Master, Modern, and Contemporary artworks. Each week, this class will focus on featured artworks in the museum collection as we build key skills relating to humanity, medicine, and caregiving. Topics to be addressed include the visualization of embodiment and motion, eros and pain, grief and loss, mortality and transition, spirituality and transcendence. We will also examine issues relating to vulnerable populations, particularly children and the elderly. Emphasis will be placed on cultivating core skills relating to visual acuity, including observation and description, the ability to distinguish subtle and ambiguous presences, and the capacity to reconcile multiple—sometimes conflicting—points of view. Notably, this class has been developed with the input and insights of the Rice undergraduate community. The course focuses on significant issues that are applicable to everyone, and which are particularly appropriate for students planning to enter healthcare professions or who, one day, will serve as caregivers. Thus, the goal of the course is to familiarize students with key themes and skills relating to medicine and the museum. Assessment will be undertaken through evaluation of students’ written work.

Requirements, Policies, and Course Grades:

Course readings and class participation are central components of this course. All readings are required. Over the course of the semester, students will write two papers. The specific topics will vary depending on the interests of the student. The first paper, which will be approximately five pages in length, will consist of a close formal, narrative, and thematic analysis of a work of art that we have not previously studied in class. In the second essay, which should be ten pages in length, students will focus on two artworks and present a comparative analysis. Both essays are designed to cultivate skills relating to the observation and description of complex works of art, along with the ability to link the physical characteristics of objects with narratives that convey affective and conceptual themes relating to human presence. In both essays, students will also reflect on the ways in which artistic themes and humanistic approaches can be productively brought to bear on subjects outside of the Humanities.

The essays will be due in class on March 17 and April 28. **These deadlines are firm. No late papers will be accepted without a documented medical excuse or family emergency;** if one of these situations arises, please email me and I will advise you regarding makeup work. Class preparation and participation will count for one-third of the final grade; the two essays will each count for the remaining two-thirds.

Office Hours:

My office hours are Monday and Wednesday from 11-12, but please email first to confirm the appointment time: mbrennan@rice.edu. All office hours will be held remotely on Zoom.

Technology and Course Requirements:

This class is offered as a remote synchronous seminar and all students are expected to participate fully, including being actively engaged in the classroom discussions. All students must have a working computer with a video camera, speaker and microphone, and a working internet connection that allows them to be on video. Students should test their equipment before joining class. Undergraduate students should contact the Dean of Undergraduates if they have concerns about meeting this requirement. In keeping with FERPA requirements, recorded classroom discussions involving students will be available only to students officially registered and enrolled in the class. If you have concerns about appearing on these recordings, please contact the instructor ahead of time. Because we will all be joining the class remotely, all students are expected to keep their video camera on and microphone muted except when they are speaking. Please raise your hand and unmute when you would like to participate. Students needing an accommodation for using their camera or microphone should contact the instructor at the beginning of the semester to discuss needed adjustments.

Institutional Assessments:

The exams, projects, and papers you submit for a grade in this course may be randomly reviewed to assess the success of the department program as a whole. Your name will be removed from these materials before they are placed in the department's assessment file. Thus prior to the first page of your essay, please include a cover sheet listing your name only. From the second page onward, please include a header with the course name, number, semester, year, and professor's name. Page numbers should appear at the bottom of each page. You must submit an electronic copy in Microsoft Word, which must be emailed to me: mbrennan@rice.edu.

Policies Regarding the Honor Code, Title IX, and Accommodations:

Students must follow the Rice Honor Code. If you directly quote or paraphrase a source, so indicate it with full citation. Please consult with me should any questions arise. Regarding Title IX, Rice encourages any student who has experienced an incident of sexual, relationship, or other interpersonal violence, harassment, or gender discrimination to seek support. There are options available on campus, regardless of whether the perpetrator was a fellow student, a staff or faculty member, or someone not affiliated with the university. Students should be aware when seeking support on campus that most employees are required by Title IX to disclose all incidents of non-consensual interpersonal behaviors to Title IX professionals on campus who can act to support the student and meet their needs. The therapists at the Rice Counseling Center and the doctors at Student Health Services are confidential, meaning that Rice will not be informed about the incident if a student discloses to one of these Rice staff members. Rice prioritizes student privacy and safety, and only shares disclosed information on a need-to-know basis. If you are in need of assistance, please call the Rice Wellbeing and Counseling Center, which includes Title IX Support: 713-348-3311. Policies, including the Sexual Misconduct Policy and Student Code of Conduct, and more information regarding Title IX, can be found at safe.rice.edu.

The Department of Religion is committed to providing reasonable accommodations for students with physical, sensory, cognitive, learning, and psychological disabilities. Students in need of special consideration are encouraged to visit Rice Disability Support Services (www.dss.rice.edu) and provide documentation in order to receive a Reasonable Accommodations Request and Accommodation Letter.

Text For Purchase

C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins, 1961). BV4905.2 .L4

Syllabus

January 27: Course Introduction: The Ambiguities of Human Presences

Featured Artworks: Paul Cézanne, *Madame Cézanne in Blue*, 1888-90, oil on canvas
Constantin Brancusi, *A Muse*, 1917, polished bronze and limestone

Reading: We will read aloud from Rita Charon's "Preface" in *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. xii, in which Charon discusses the place and value of language, intuition, difference, presence, subtle knowledge, communication, identity, and mystery in internal medicine. In particular, we will reflect on how "we all participate in the shared creation of meaning". We will also note the etymological relations between the words "cure", "curator", and "curate", all of which derive from the Latin *curatus*, sharing a common root that designates "care". Thus a curator is "one who has the care or charge of a person or thing," including "the officer in charge of a museum, gallery of art, library, or the like", while a curate is "one entrusted with the cure of souls; a spiritual pastor". These terms also relate to "cure", which is a substance associated with the relief of symptoms or recovery from disease. Regarding definitions, see J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), vol. 4, pp. 136-137.

Key Themes and Rationale: Cézanne's *Madame Cézanne in Blue* provides an opportunity to analyze key issues of hybridity and ambiguity within human figuration. In particular, how do we begin to find language to approach complex conceptions of subjective presence? While the image depicts the artist's wife, this enigmatic work also raises important questions concerning figural distortion, intimacy, and distance. In turn, Brancusi's *A Muse* is a semi-abstract sculpture that also raises intriguing questions regarding conceptions of human figuration. The near lack of detailed facial features creates a sense of absent presence within modernist figural sculpture, a paradox that raises questions regarding the type of visual acuity that is necessary when engaging with ambiguous presences. The sculpture's polished bronze surface also provides an opportunity to question the extent to which our perceptions of others are, in a sense, reflections of our own perspectives and identities.

In light of the need to hold class remotely, we will also consider issues relating to presence and absence, namely: What is at stake in conceptions of material presence, including the physical presence of human beings, and the aesthetic presence of original artworks, such as oil paintings or bronze sculptures? What do these categories have in common, and how are they different? How might these themes relate, not only to the practicalities of online learning, but to issues concerning telehealth and telepresence in contemporary medicine? What are the advantages, and what are the trade-offs and drawbacks, when engaging various modalities of presence?

February 3: How Worlds Connect to Worlds: A Reflection on Palliative Care, Literary Aesthetics, and Psychosocial Oncology

During this session I will be participating in a public conversation on "Art, Health, and Healing" as part of the annual Goldfarb Speaker Series in the Department of Visual Art and Art History at York University, Toronto. I will be discussing my work as a literary Artist In Residence in the Department of Palliative Care and Rehabilitation Medicine at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. The event will be held online; details and the Zoom link are forthcoming.

February 10: Observation and Description I: Non-Human Subjects

Featured Artworks: Willem Claesz, Heda, *Banquet Piece with Ham*, 1656, oil on canvas
 Willem Claesz, Heda, *Still Life With Glasses and Tobacco*, 1633, oil on wood
 Juan van der Hamen y León, *Still Life with Fruit and Glassware*, 1626, oil on canvas

Readings: E. B. White, “A Guide for the Systematic Analysis of a Work of Art,” excerpt from *Suggestions for a Visual Analysis*, Canvas

Casey Lesser, “Why Med Schools are Requiring Art Classes” *Artsy* (Aug. 21, 2017), accessible online at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-med-schools-requiring-art-classes> Canvas

Salvatore Mangione et al., “Medical Students’ Exposure to the Humanities Correlates with Positive Personal Qualities and Reduced Burnout: A Multi-Institutional U.S. Survey,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 33 (vol. 5, January 2018), pp. 628-34. Canvas

Key Themes and Rationale: Still life subjects from the Dutch and Spanish Baroque traditions provide a compelling means to engage in the observation and description of minutely detailed, naturalistic surfaces. While *prima fascia* the still life images display familiar subjects that are clearly recognizable, these paintings also contain subtle embedded narratives whose meanings students will deduce through sustained critical reflection. By engaging these subjects, Baroque still lifes present an opportunity for reflecting on the relationships between surfaces and depths, while honing skills of visual acuity, deep looking, and the cultivation of a precise technical vocabulary.

February 17: “Sprinkle Day”: No Scheduled Classes

February 24: Observation and Description II: Human Subjects

Featured Artworks: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, 1633, oil on wood
 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh*, 1632, oil on wood
 Anthony van Dyck, *Charles Louis, Elector Palatine*, 1637, oil on canvas

Reading: Georg Simmel, “The Aesthetic Significance of the Face” (1901) in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *Georg Simmel, 1858-1918* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), pp. 276-81. B3329 .S64 W6 1959

Key Themes and Rationale: The skills of observation and description introduced during the initial two sessions will be applied to recognizable human presences as depicted in Old Master portraiture. Delving more deeply into the representation of human forms, emphasis will be placed on the hands and the face as unique locations of personal identity. We will also consider the ways in which subtle cues are conveyed through a subject’s poses, gestures, facial and bodily expressions, props, and related accoutrements.

March 3: The Classical Nude: Ideal Bodies, Eros, and Sublimation

Featured Artworks: *Torso of Aphrodite*, 1st century BCE to 1st century CE, marble, Roman
Portrait Figure of a Ruler, 200-225 CE, bronze, Roman

Readings: Kenneth Clark, “The Naked and the Nude”, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 23-54. N7570 .C55 1956b

Lawrence T.O. Bell and Darrell J.R. Evans, “Art, Anatomy, and Medicine: Is There a Place for Art in Medical Education?” *Anatomical Sciences Education* 7 (Sept/Oct 2014), pp. 370-78. Canvas

Key Themes and Rationale: From classical antiquity through the postmodern era, the human body represents a perennial subject of fascination. The body is associated not only with abstract conceptions of perfected form, but with culturally-inflected archetypes of desire, beauty, and pleasure. Images of the nude body have also been characterized as sources of oppression for subjects who do not conform—or seek to conform—to such idealized norms, standards, and patterns. In our contemporary world, the fields of plastic, aesthetic, cosmetic, and reconstructive surgery all represent locations where these cultural tensions and desires play out. This class considers what is at stake within these charged subjects.

March 10: Fragmentation and Contortion: The Body in Pain

Featured Artworks: Auguste Rodin, *Crouching Woman* (Cast #5), 1882, bronze
 Auguste Rodin, *Half-Length Figure of a Woman*, 1910, cast bronze
 Auguste Rodin, *Flying Figure #1*, 1890, bronze

Reading: Elaine Scarry, “Introduction”, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 3-23. BJ1409 .S35 1985

Key Themes and Rationale: Extending our previous discussion of the human form in classical sculpture, this class will consider the ways in which the nude can appear, not only as a source of aesthetic pleasure, but as a locus of pain and a site of contortion, fragmentation, and implicit suffering within modernist sculpture. Rodin’s *Crouching Woman* is recognized as a study for the multi-figure composition *The Gates of Hell*. The female figure’s squat pose and interlaced limbs can be seen as stylized expressions of the body in pain. By engaging these themes, the class presents an opportunity to consider the relations between pain, suffering, and the attendant destruction *and* creation of language.

March 17: Vulnerable Populations I: Women, Children, and Caregivers

Featured Artworks: Mary Cassatt, *Susan Comforting the Baby*, 1881, oil on canvas
 Mary Cassatt, *Children in a Garden (The Nurse)*, 1878, oil on canvas

Readings: Griselda Pollock, “Mary Cassatt: Painter of Women and Children” in Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy, eds., *Reading American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 280-301. N6505 .R4 1998

William Carlos Williams, “The Use of Force” (1938) in *The Doctor Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1984), pp. 56-60. PS3545 .I544 A6 1984

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Key Themes and Rationale: This class examines themes of privilege and power in relation to vulnerable subjects. Mary Cassatt's Impressionist paintings present an opportunity for sustained, thoughtful reflection on key themes concerning childhood, maternity, and the gendered divisions of labor associated with traditional caregiver roles. Williams's classic text presents a complementary perspective on issues of power as related from the perspective of the medical professional, particularly concerning the violation of boundaries, pediatric subjects, and public health threats.

First Paper Due in Class

March 24: Vulnerable Populations II: Geriatrics, the Elderly, and Life at the Edges of Life

Featured Artworks: Frans Hals, *Portrait of an Elderly Woman*, 1650, oil on canvas
Gustave Caillebotte, *Mlle. Boissière Knitting*, 1877, oil on canvas

Screening and discussion of Jessica Nutik Zitter's Academy Award-nominated film, *Extremis*, Directed by Dan Krauss. 2017, 24 minutes, a Netflix Original Short Documentary

Key Themes and Rationale: This class examines three historically distinct representations of the elderly, including in Old Master portraiture, in modernist painting, and in our own contemporary culture. While Hals's painting displays a generic figure with a level of detail and sensitivity that is characteristic of traditional portraiture, Caillebotte presents an actual portrait of his elderly maiden aunt in an Impressionist image that closely resembles a genre scene. When approached collectively, the paintings provide an apt comparative model for analyzing the specifics and the generalities associated with the construction of personhood. Today these issues can be pressing in relation to vulnerable, geriatric populations—as seen from another perspective in the Academy Award-nominated film *Extremis*, a short documentary that examines life-and-death decision making in the ICU.

March 31: Vulnerable Populations III: Bodies at Risk in Labor and Toil

Featured Artwork: Edouard Manet, *The Toilers of the Sea*, 1873, oil on canvas

Readings: Rita Charon et al., *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-2, 110-111, 128-30. RC65 .C48 2017

Pietro di Donato, *Christ in Concrete* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1937), pp. 64-68. PS3507 .I37 C5

Key Themes and Rationale: This class considers the effects of occupational hazards associated with physical labor, as individuals perform dangerous jobs that put their bodies at risk. Some people have few options when providing for themselves and their families, and they work in unsafe conditions or dangerous environments. Manet's Impressionist painting depicts three fishermen in a boat that pitches and rolls on a rough sea. Through perspectival effects, the artist appears to take the viewer directly into this dangerous, unbalanced scene. This class will consider the process of formulating narratives when engaging unequal power dynamics. We will examine how the processes of listening, witnessing, and storytelling can cultivate the elements of humility that are integral to ethical forms of care.

April 7: The Interwovenness of the Mind, the Body, and the World

Featured Artworks: Paul Cézanne, *Bottom of the Ravine*, c. 1879, oil on canvas
 Vincent van Gogh, *The Rocks*, 1888, oil on canvas

Reading: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Synthesis of One’s Own Body” in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), pp. 148-53. B2430.M3763 P4713 2012

Key Themes and Rationale: This class will consider the relations between the haptic and the optic registers—the domains of touch and vision, respectively—as approached through the complementary lenses of Post-Impressionist landscape painting and existential phenomenologist philosophy. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical account considers the ways in which complex psychic states can be seen as being mapped onto pictorial surfaces through creative spatial deformations. More generally, we will draw on Merleau-Ponty’s writings in order to consider the ways in which bodies in motion can be seen as interacting with—and even, as being interwoven with—the worlds that they inhabit.

April 14: Expressing Loss and Envisioning Grief

Featured Artwork: Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld*, 1861, oil on canvas

Reading: C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper Collins, 1961). BV4905.2 .L4

Key Themes and Rationale: In Corot’s mythologically-inspired painting, the legendary musician Orpheus enters the underworld in order to lead his beloved wife Eurydice back from the dead to the realm of the living. Just as this task ultimately proves to be unsuccessful, the painting presents a moving study in heartbreak, grief, and loss. When coupled with C. S. Lewis’s classic memoir of mourning, *A Grief Observed*, this class provides students with an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which people confront the pain of grief and loss, and how they envision what it can mean to be with someone in spirit. These themes present an opportunity to reflect on issues of grief and resilience, how people cope with adversity, and how individuals adapt to changing environments.

April 21: Reflections on Mortality and Transition: The Postmodern *Memento Mori*

Featured Artwork: Damien Hirst, *End Game*, 2000-2004, glass, stainless steel, human skeletons, medical equipment

Readings: Damien Hirst, Interview with Hans Ulrich, 2007; Hirst’s statement on *For the Love of God*, in conjunction with the Tate Modern exhibition, April 2012; and Arthur Martin, “Damien Hirst unveils his jewels in the crown, a £50m diamond-studded skull,” *Mail Online* (UK), June 2007. Canvas

Key Themes and Rationale: Damien Hirst’s *End Game* represents a contemporary take on the classic theme of the *memento mori*, the “reminder of death” or *vani tas* subject. This monumental installation displays an array of medical equipment flanking two human skeletons, one male and one female. Taken together, these subjects can be seen as presenting an extended meditation on themes of transience, transition, and mortality. This provocative artwork thus provides a compelling means to view subjects that often remain hidden in our contemporary culture, while allowing students to reflect on what it means to confront these themes in a fine arts museum versus in a health science context.

April 28: Spirituality, Transcendence, and the Etheric Body

Featured Artwork: James Turrell, *The Light Inside*, 1999, neon light, projected light, gypsum board, plaster, glass, and oak

Reading: Julia Brown, ed., "Interview with James Turrell" in *Occluded Front: James Turrell* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), pp. 13-46. N6537 T78 A4 1985

Key Themes and Rationale: Turrell's light tunnel is a commissioned, site-specific installation that provides a functional walkway between the two primary wings of the MFAH. The piece occupies a key transitional position in the museum, just as it presents viewers with an opportunity to reflect on inner versus outer light, and the ways in which moving bodies can inhabit spaces that evoke the etheric and the transcendent domains. In this final class we will discuss these issues, and we will reflect on the ways in which the museum can serve as a resource for further learning and for self-care.

Second Paper Due In Class