

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Late Bloomer: Philip Hanson's Recent Paintings

John Yau

April 13, 2014



Philip Hanson, "There's a certain slant of light (Dickinson)" (2013)

Initially I was skeptical, but Philip Hanson's three paintings on the fourth floor of the Whitney Biennial got me to look and think again. The twelve paintings in his exhibition,

I am a child of the Light, student of the Dark, at Corbett vs. Dempsey (March 21–April 19, 2014) convinced me.

I was skeptical because a painter incorporating texts from William Shakespeare, William Blake, and Emily Dickinson — three extraordinary poets who invented his or her own language — didn't sound particularly promising. It is one thing to use lines of a poet in a work of art, but actually doing something with them is another matter altogether, especially in a society where difficult poetry is routinely dismissed on one hand, and everyone thinks they can write a poem on the other, and few ever take the time to read poems.

And those who do write poems because they believe anyone can do it aren't likely to be heeding Ezra Pound, who liked to pontificate that poems should be at least as well written as prose, and he was thinking of the prose of Henry James. All these misgivings about contemporary attitudes toward the reading and writing of poems were on my mind when I went to see Hanson's show, enhanced in part by the drivel the publisher of *The Brooklyn Rail* has recently been passing off as poetry in lieu of writing actual exhibition reviews.



Philip Hanson, "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers (Dickinson) (Zurbarán)" (2013)

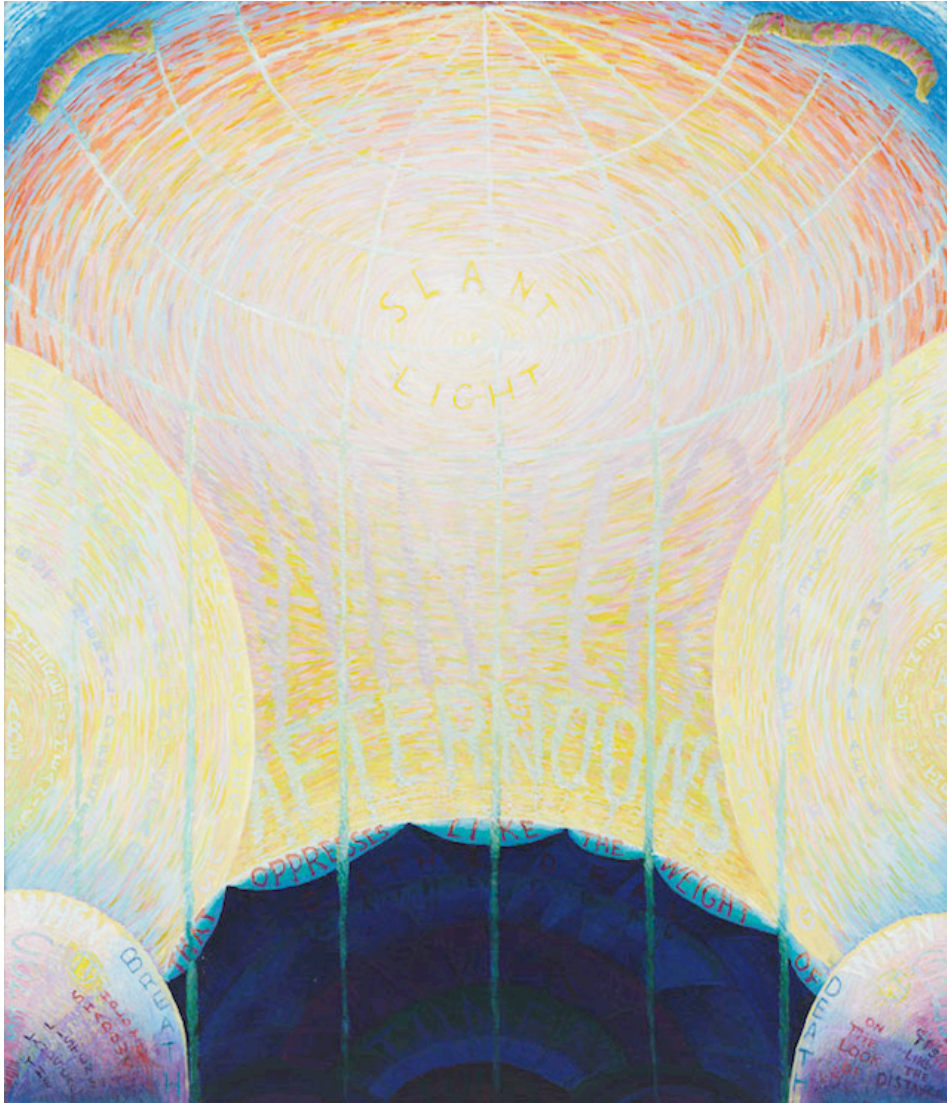
I am happy to say that I was wrong. I wouldn't have come to this conclusion twenty years ago. It seems to me that Hanson, who was included in the legendary False Image exhibit at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, in 1968, along with his then wife, Christina Ramberg (1946–1995) and Roger Brown (1941–1997), didn't come into his own until the mid '90s. While Brown and Ramberg achieved a signature look and dark edge early in their careers, which they were able to expand upon until their premature deaths, Hanson's work from the 1960s through the '80s is neither as strong nor as commanding. It didn't have a comparable visual oomph. To make matters worse, he was rather flat-footed as a painter.

All this began changing in the mid '90s, when Hanson started focusing on poems in his work. At first, he incorporated entire poems, but by the beginning of this century he was

working in series, which required that he break a poem down, with one line per painting. This is when things start opening up and the artist began gaining traction. Here it should be noted that Hanson studied poetry at the University of Chicago when New Criticism was dominant. New Criticism believed in close-reading, a line by line analysis of a poem. This explains why the early paintings are diagrammatic. It is when he absorbs the poem's diagrammatic possibilities into a pictorial possibility that he attains another level, and becomes in effect a visionary painter.

This visionary state is apparent in his current exhibition at Corbett vs. Dempsey. Often beginning at the top of the painting, Hanson writes out the words on a variety of faux-supports, including what looks like unfurling strips of ribbon and architectural latticework, at times bending the letters, as if they are flexible objects. All this he situates in a light-flooded space, which is appropriate for the visionary texts he cites in his work. As we read down and across (or up and across, or from surface layer to what's behind it), shifts in scale and color slow down the reading as well as break the text into different groupings. Hanson employs a palette that includes pale yellows, deep blues, a wide range of greens, a variety of violets and reds, and warm pinks.

When we are reading down and across, we are apt to encounter a decorative linear structure — which seems to be an imaginative amalgamation of 19th-century American folk art, neon signs, the painted glass fronts of pinball machines and Hector Guimard's Art Nouveau ironwork signs for the Paris Metro — rising from the painting's bottom edge. This collision between the downward moving ribbons and the upward rising architectonic structure adds another torque to our understanding: reading isn't simply linear and in one direction. Rather, as Hanson's paintings propose, it is an active engagement, not a passive one.



Philip Hanson, "There's a certain slant of light (Dickinson)" (2013–14)

I would like to cite “There’s a certain Slant of light,” a poem by Dickinson that Hanson has returned to a number of times.

*There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –*

*Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –*

*None may teach it – Any –
‘Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –*

*When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, ’tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –*

It seems to me that each time Hanson incorporates this poem into a painting, he is in effect offering a different reading through his placement of the words, his shifts in scale and color, his investigation of the figure-ground relationship, and the light with which he chooses to flood the space. In effect, he is using formal pictorial means to both diagram and represent the poem. I found myself shifting between reading and looking with neither one overwhelming the other, an experience that one does not have while looking at the work of other artists who use text in their work.



Philip Hanson, "There's a certain slant of light (Dickinson)" (2013-14)

Hanson has achieved something few artists who incorporate literature in their work have done. He has entwined the separate experiences of looking and reading in a way that requires us to untangle them, which opens up the space of reading. In doing so, we are likely to muse on what Dickinson is getting at, which is death and mortality. Returning to this poem, Hanson meditates on his own mortality, even as he celebrates the poem's evocative power, the vacillations and declarations that Dickinson is able to register with supreme, breathtaking economy. Although there are still clunky passages to be found, these visionary paintings called to mind something that Richard Artschwager said he wanted in his work, that they be both a "thing and an event." It is this merger that places Hanson's paintings in a class all their own.

Philip Hanson: *I am a child of the Light, student of the Dark* continues at Corbett vs. Dempsey (1120 N Ashland Avenue, Chicago) through to April 19.