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Looking at a Painting: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis †

Rachel A. Starr* and Jonathan A. Smith

University of Birkbeck, Malet Street, London, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author: e-mail: r.starr@bbk.ac.uk

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Abstract

This research explores the experience of looking at art, specifically that of viewing a single painting. Five participants each selected a previously unseen painting from a selection provided and were interviewed about their experiences as they viewed it. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the idiographic detail of the resulting interviews. Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) were developed independently for each participant and these individual cases were subsequently compared to form a structure of Group Experiential Themes (GETs). Three GETs, Elements of Engagement, Deeper Exploration and Vulnerability and Intimacy resulted. These themes represented in turn, early interactions, subsequent more considered imaginative and interpretative engagements, and the feelings evoked by encountering emotive content or questioning the voracity of one's reactions. The first GET is reported in detail here and recounts viewers' initial engagements with their chosen painting such as their experiences of first noticing's, their curiosities, and the formation of early impressions. The viewers' accounts of engagement involved senses of dynamism and sometimes physical force shaping the relationship between themselves and the painting. Three subthemes, Groping Out, Attracting Attention and Drawing In, detail the different experiential qualities of these engagements.

Keywords

Interpretative phenomenological analysis; art-viewing; paintings; attention

1. Introduction

The appreciation of art is often described as a uniquely human experience (Leder *et al.*, 2012; Pelowski *et al.*, 2017a) and so understandably has long been the subject of psychological investigation (Augustin *et al.*, 2008; Crozier and Chapman, 1983; Nader and Moosa, 2012). It is also an area of psychology commonly associated with complexity and challenge (Leder *et al.*, 2004), where cognitive, affective, perceptual, neural and sensate facets have all been recognised as impactful. Speaking to this complexity, Roald *et al.*, (2023, p. 1472) suggest that there is a tendency in psychological research to privilege investigation of component aspects of art experience and that consideration of an encounter with an artwork as “an experiential totality” would be beneficial.

This study belongs to a body of work (e.g., Starr and Smith, 2021, 2023) which aims to further our understanding of art-viewing by exploring the experience of looking at a painting without attempts to single out any specific aspect of the experiencing. The accounts in Starr and Smith (2021, 2023) involved participants viewing the same image and invited the understandable query, to what extent were the findings unique to the particular painting? The research reported here maintains the focus on experiences of viewing a single image, however, in this case five participants individually viewed an image of their choosing and so the findings incorporate viewings of five different images.

As intimated by this variation, there are many ways to approach the study of art-viewing, long considered a “large and widely scattered subject” (Munro, 1963, p. 1). One can consider how art affects us emotionally (Schindler *et al.*, 2017), what makes art likeable (Dijkstra and van Dongen, 2017), how personality might influence responses to artworks (Barford *et al.*, 2018; Cleridou and Furnham, 2014) or what viewing art does to the body (Castellotti *et al.*, 2020; Kuchinke *et al.*, 2009). This small selection of examples represents a perhaps inevitable diversity of queries concerning what is a wondrous and complex activity. Indeed, Carbon’s (2019) summation of art-viewing as a multistep, highly personal process that is socially and culturally embedded, is well evidenced. Individual differences (Barford *et al.*, 2018; Cleridou and Furnham, 2014; Marin and Leder, 2018), culture (Bao *et al.*, 2016; Jacobsen, 2010), whether the viewer is an expert or novice (Bimler *et al.*, 2019), context (Brieber *et al.*, 2014; Krauss *et al.*, 2021; Swami, 2013) and of course the viewed image itself (Graham *et al.*, 2010; Hayn-Leichsenring *et al.*, 2017; Nascimento *et al.*, 2017) have all been implicated in shaping experiences of artworks. The impact of such factors has been investigated using a similarly diverse range of measures such as ratings of beauty and liking (Sidhu *et al.*, 2018), appreciation (Bailey-Ross *et al.*, 2019) or impressiveness (Verhavert *et al.*, 2018) and measurements of recall (Dijkstra and van Dongen, 2017) gaze (Marin and Leder, 2022) and neurological activity (Maglione *et al.*, 2017). The challenge of untangling all these elements in order to operationalise particular aspects for study is not to be underestimated. This issue was usefully flagged by DiPaola *et*

al. (2013), in their work investigating the effect of detail on viewer gaze. The authors described the difficulty of isolating this variable, noting detail in paintings is often bound up not only with other physical features of artworks such as centrality in the composition, but also with inferred characteristics such as greater meaning.

What is to be measured and how when considering art-viewing remains a challenge and assertions such as that of Specker *et al.* (2020), that despite the preponderance of studies exploring art-interest and art-knowledge, prior to their own work there existed “no reliable and validated measure of these dimensions” (p. 1), emphasise the far-reaching implications of such issues for art-viewing research.

Much of the criticism regarding lack of cohesion and failure to capture the experience holistically (e.g., Wanzer *et al.*, 2020) is arguably bound up in the requirement of experimentation to delineate and operationalise variables which capture aspects of subjective experience. Even a frequently employed measure such as gaze behaviour which, intuitively, lends itself to objective measurement, is dependent on a series of (human) determinants. Researchers must decide how much eye movement, at what speed, from what starting point and over what period of time is to be considered meaningful (see Rosenberg and Groner, 2020 for a detailed overview). The task of standardisation is more obviously demanding when researchers need to adequately define constructs such as depicted beauty (e.g., Kawabata and Zeki, 2004), or a strong versus a weak sense of motion (e.g., Kim and Blake, 2007), but this is not altogether alien from deciding what kind of shift in gaze is considered a saccade or how long a pause represents a fixation (or agreeing that our attention can be measured vis-à-vis where our pupils orient — you mind may be elsewhere whilst looking at this paper, although we hope this is not the case). If we are to compare affective to cognitive viewing fashions (e.g., Ishizu and Zeki, 2013), or subjective to pragmatic viewing styles (Cupchik *et al.*, 2009), all concerned, researcher, participant, reader, must share an understanding of what these categories mean. When we contrast viewings of abstract and representational artworks, can we assume the distinction is universal or does it depend on who is viewing (the latter according to Bimler *et al.*, 2019)? Do distinctions between liking, preference, and appreciation exist meaningfully outside the measures we choose to capture them? Ultimately these issues point to the difficulty, described by Carbon (2019), in “making the mental and often implicit processes decipherable, explicit, and measurable — and this without changing, biasing or even halting the mental process, i.e., the experiencing, while doing so” (p. 2).

So where does this all leave us, beyond the notion of art-viewing as an indecipherable experience of infinite diversity in infinite combinations? Whilst not purporting to directly capture mental processes, there are qualitative approaches to empirical psychology which embrace ‘the experiencing’, and so have potential to compliment the work of deconstructing and measuring our engagements with artworks. Qualitative explorations of art-viewing such as those undertaken by

Csikszentmihaly and Robinson (1990) and Roald (2007) are beholden to the demands of categorisation and definition of variables. Instead, such research aims to explore the substance of subjective engagement, in terms of what it means to, or is like, for participants. In Roald (2007) positive and negative emotional responses to artworks were associated with similar bodily sensations, a force in the solar plexus for example. And bodily sensations were also felt to echo the characteristics of the exhibits viewed, heavy or light, which elicited further responses, nausea, relief. We can see the different kind of information generated when preconceptions, such as that scenes may be either dynamic or static (is *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* turning her head to look at you or still, in a pose?) or what we mean by an art expert or novice (is that expertise of Magritte or Manga?), are resisted in favour of attempts to understand aesthetic encountering from the perspective of the encounterer.

Within the range of qualitative research methodologies (Osborne, 1994; for discussion see Biggerstaff, 2012) phenomenological approaches, though not uniform, generally converge on the aim to situate understanding within a shared human life-world and commitment to the exploration of human experience in an open and unassuming manner. This stance lends itself to psychological investigation of the viewing of paintings where, as discussed, it may be difficult, or even detrimental, to attempt the untangling of individual subjectivity from the worldly contexts and particularities of viewer, painting-as-object, artist, and depiction. The study presented here aims to continue this ambition by adopting the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith *et al.*, 2022). IPA is an inductive approach with a commitment to the idiographic exploration of human experience. The aims in IPA, to exploring the convergence and divergence in participants' meaning-making, and foreground individual sense-making without divorcing individuals from their wider contexts, seems befitting in the case of art-viewing where a single image may prompt very different reactions in the same person (Barford *et al.*, 2018), or where people may respond similarly to apparently quite different images (Vessel *et al.*, 2013).

To explore the question 'What is it like to look at a painting?' participants were invited to select an unfamiliar image (to prevent preparation of responses) and were then interviewed during their real-time looking. Where other studies (e.g., Csikszentmihaly and Robinson, 1990; On Tam, 2008) used viewers' retrospective accounts of viewing multiple paintings and other types of artwork, this study aimed to provide a fine-grained investigation of a single viewing.

2. Method

This study was conducted as part of a PhD thesis. Ethical approval was granted by Birkbeck University Research Ethics Committee and informed consent was obtained before data collection.

2.1. Recruitment/Participants

Non-expert ‘art enthusiasts’ were purposively recruited in the hope that they would be comfortable and able (from their perspectives) to discuss a painting (and possibly find it enjoyable). Professional artists or those with formal art-related education were excluded. The rationale was that such experience (be it education or occupation) could provide different or additional discourses upon which a person might draw during the discussion. Such cases are of legitimate interest, but a different study. Participants were aged between 35 and 65, three male and two female, educated to at least degree level and referred to by pseudonyms throughout.

IPA requires a sample with a certain degree of homogeneity in order to focus on the phenomena under investigation, while recognising that determining this homogeneity is itself an interpretative issue (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Typically, participants who are similar across areas which might shape the experience are sought (in a study about family life one might opt for a sample of adults with children living at home, in a study about ultramarathons whether participants had children or not might not be a concern). As this was an exploratory study which aimed to privilege idiography, and the use of multiple paintings placed a demand on homogeneity, a small sample was recruited. Similarly, participants were asked to look at a single painting rather than multiple images as accounts of viewing multiple artworks already existed. This particular sample was not intended to be exhaustive, rather the hope was to offer a first indication of how this kind of study might work (or not).

2.2. Data-Collection — Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed from a range of influences. Observations made during preliminary gallery visits, such as comments made by viewers were drawn upon. A visitor, for example, noted the fabric of a dress in an image making detailed comments about texture and use of

light. Another had a strong overall response to a painting. Open-ended questions (Can you tell me about what it is like to look at this image? How would you describe the painting to someone who hadn't seen it?) which would not inhibit such diversities were developed. The schedule was used as a lite guide only meaning there was no standard list of questions asked to each participant and each discussion was unique. Each interview began by asking the participant about their choice of painting and at some point each person was asked 'What is it like to look at this painting?' and 'What is it like now we have been looking at it for some time?'

2.3. Interview Procedure

Following consent taking and the opportunity to ask questions, participants were shown the coffee table style art book *Art* (Belton, 2002). This book was chosen as it collects paintings ranging in date, style, and culture. Participants were asked to, in their own time, select an image which they had not seen before and would be comfortable to look at for the duration of the interview. The interview began once the painting was chosen and involved organically evolving discussion as participant and researcher looked at the image. The aim was to get "experience close" (Smith, 2011, p. 10) to encountering the image in the moment. During the interview, as it was their own viewing experience, participants were free to look at information about the painting present in the book such as its title and the name of the artist if they wished.

2.4. Analysis

Interviews were transcribed following Poland (1995) and analysis followed the steps laid out in Smith *et al.* (2022). Each transcript was analysed independently before moving on to the next to maintain the idiographic focus key to IPA. Each individual analysis proceeded according to the following steps. (1) *Reading and Exploratory Notes*. After several readings for familiarisation, notes on interesting aspects of the transcript such as use of language, recurring motifs and researcher impressions were made. (2) *Formulating Experiential Statements*. Using the exploratory notes, statements which captured meaningful elements of the text were developed. These statements retained a fine-grained focus on the transcript and remained grounded in small segments of data whilst being abstracted enough to reflect psychologically substantive content. (3) *Clustering Experiential Statements*. The statements were then explored for connections and grouped thematically according to underlying meanings. (4) *Compiling a Table of Personal Experiential Themes*. The resultant clusters were finally each given a name

reflecting the underlying collection of experiential statements and each became a Personal Experiential Theme (PET). The PETs were compiled into a table including theme names and quotes evidencing them. For each quote, the page and line number was included to allow it to be traced back to the original transcript. By way of an example, a subtheme developed during Marian's analysis was named 'Provocative Elements' and included extracts from the interview such as "*the thing I'm most attracted by is I kind of want to know who the tall chap is with the shiny forehead*" (p. 9, ln. 18) which was associated with the experiential statement "Wanting to know generates interest". This, along with two other subthemes "An instinctive pull towards the subject" and "Human elements" made up the PET "What Draws Me to It" which became part of the Group Experiential Theme (GET) to be discussed here.

All five transcripts were analysed in this way generating five tables of PETs. Next these tables were compared to look for patterns across the cases. This process involved collecting the PETs for all the participants and clustering them into GETs. Not every PET was included in the final series of GETs. When deciding if a theme was evidenced at group level, guidelines in Smith and Osborn (2008) were followed. GETs were present for at least two-thirds of participants and, due to the relatively small sample, it was aimed to allow only a minimal number of themes which did not occur for all participants. Table 1 details the number of experiential statements for each participant and the resulting number of PETs, along with prevalence of each participant in the thematic structure for the group.

3. Findings

3.1. The Paintings

Before presenting the results of the analysis, here are the paintings selected by each of the participants, along with the participant's name and a short quotation from them by way of an introduction to their initial perception of the piece. While reading the following analytic account, the reader may find it helpful, occasionally, to look back to the paintings. The analysis revealed three GETs (Table 2).

[Figures 1-5 inserted here]

Here we present details of GET One *Elements of Engagement* singly to facilitate detailed interpretative exploration. This GET is chosen as it involves aspects of the experience which pre-empt those captured in the other two themes and does not exclude their reporting elsewhere. This theme describes how the viewers experienced arresting aspects of the paintings. Often these were encountered at the inceptive moments of viewing; however, elements of the paintings which in some

way affected the viewer's sense of engagement could be experienced at any point during their looking, for example as different details were noticed. The three subthemes: *Groping Out*, *Attracting Attention* and *Drawing In* are not suggested to be categorically absolute nor necessarily reflect experiences that occur sequentially or discretely. They describe *types* of experience that may happen simultaneously or in an overlapping fashion. These subthemes concern the breeching and bridging of the area between image and viewer. They are distinguished by differences in movements within this space, such as their direction or origin, as sensed by the participants.

3.2. *Groping Out*

The experience described in *Groping Out* is of elements of the painting reaching out from the page. These elements have a sense of physicality, may have a direction, and in some cases also may also have a motivation. Charles is a 'fifty-something' male who spent some time examining the contents of the art book before he chose *Expulsion* to look at. He explained that the image was unusual to him and that this contributed to his decision to discuss the contorted figure in an orange fiery landscape.

Charles began his discussion of *Expulsion* by considering the central figure:

The articulation of this very sort of erm... striking pose with the, the woman it must be, crouching down er you couldn't have your arms in those positions, so the hand that is groping out at us it is actually, you probably couldn't do that, well maybe you could maybe you could maybe it's... it's palm out and it seems as if almost the shoulder is dislocated

Charles described the pose of the figure in *Expulsion* as 'striking'. The word has two relevant meanings: something conspicuous, unusual, perhaps extreme, and also the action of striking and impacting something. Both give the impression of a force emanating from the image.

The physicality, of 'striking' in this context, is echoed in Charles' sense of the bodily contortion of the figure. The shoulder is seen as almost dislocated into an unnatural position by the hands effort to reach out of the page. There is an inescapably tangible nature to Charles' description of the hand groping out. His reaction suggests a strong sense of physical presence about the image, and this physicality has forces of movement or action attached to it. He notes that the woman is posed crouching down giving the impression that she may be ready to spring forth, as he later describes:

The background is providing mood you have to look at it quite hard before you discern anything else but the central figure leaps out at you.

Here the central figure leaps out *at* you, (rather than toward you for example), as was the case with the hand groped out 'at' us, lending a perhaps threatening tone to the experience. The

manifestation of 'striking' assumes a slightly different character as there are intimations that aspects of the picture may have desires towards you the viewer. Be this 'striking', a metaphorical description of how a painted element is visually impactful or felt more literally, there is still the sense of a pushing, from the image towards Charles.

Jean begins her description of *Ship and Red Sun* by explaining her choice of image:

Yeah so I think this [indicates the other picture] the colours of this don't leap out and grab you... [...] but this one definitely you know, it's mostly black and red and those are real... danger colours I suppose.

Jean compares *Ship and Red Sun* to the image on the opposite page of the book to emphasise the intensity of what she experiences as discharging from her chosen picture. The colours of the other image "don't leap out and grab you ... but this one definitely".

The term 'leap out' reoccurs, and again this is a specifically directed movement. The colours leap out and grab *you* rather than just forming a mindless eruption. There is a definite sense of movement from the image towards the viewer. In this case, it is not a figure or specifically depicted aspect, but the colours which leave the sanctity of the painting and rise out at the viewer.

This impregnation of the gap between painting and viewer is, as was for Charles, associated with a sense of unease. The viewer is grabbed, the specific colours involved are associated with danger. This form of engagement feels abrupt and perhaps involuntary. Is this the shock of being alerted or warned like the peel of an alarm bell or the discomfort at being suddenly grasped by something unsafe?

The hand groping out of *Expulsion* and the sense of danger leaping out of *Ship and Red Sun* are quite combative descriptions. Not every participant intimated such forceful experiences. Marian, a working professional woman, selected *The Gross Clinic* because it intrigued her and because she (felt she) didn't have specific knowledge of what it depicted:

Obviously the more you look at it you see detail like this, the, for me, the lead the lead er character, I don't know if you call someone in a painting a character, the lead character's hand suddenly bloodied with a very pronounced scalpel

It's, it's his slightly blooded fingers with the scalpel just seem very prominent

Marian's account has a somewhat different feel to it. There is an impression of Marian coming upon or apprehending some matter protruding from the painting. Rather than the sort of total momentum suggested by Charles and Jean, a more confined discrete aspect perforates Marian's looking. Her description of visually noticing parts of the image brings forth notions of running one's hand over a flat surface and suddenly meeting a sharp object, like a rogue nail in a plane of wood. The disturbance to her looking then makes what was before unnoticed a focal point. The scalpel very

prominent and pronounced, there for her to find rather than finding her. However, like Charles and Jean, the element extruding from the image is similarly associated with a dynamic, perhaps assaultive quality. The hand is *suddenly* bloodied, as though this might have just occurred in the image or has just broken into her viewing.

Katherine picked the image *Nymphéas* because though she had not seen this particular image before, she had a fondness for other paintings by the artist Monet. Katherine's experience of elements coming out of the image takes a different turn again

Yeah the... and the contact with nature I haven't had that a lot in my life so I think that's another thing that is important..... yeah.... Don't see that many animals in it, I can just hear some birds but I don't see that many animals which is a good thing because I'm not a big fan of animals

Katherine hears the sound of birds coming from the painting. Her description can be taken to mean I can *only* hear some birds or I can *only just* hear some birds as though the sound is quiet and distant. Either way, the effect is very different from the more determined presences experienced by the other three viewers.

Seemingly the 'groping out' of the artwork may take diverse natures, gentle and beautiful, or alien and unnerving, depending on the painting, the viewer, and the combination thereof. Though the descriptions appear very personal to both artwork and viewer, what is common is the sense of unfurling, emergence, protuberances, force. How this might be perceived, or indeed created by the viewer, is evidently diverse: where the dislocated arm pushing out of *Expulsion*, or the scalpel in *The Gross Clinic* seem capable of creating holes, in *Nymphéas*, the elements floating from the painting appear to fill them. Katherine describes a lack of contact with nature in her life and the sound of birds warbles out in response.

3.3. *Attracting Attention*

In Groping Out, elements of the painting projected out from the artwork. Here, in Attracting Attention, the locus of the activity experienced by the viewer changes. Talking about *The Gross Clinic* Marian says:

Er well I suppose I was attracted to this... this limb whatever it is, I still can't see what it is, I can't tell if it's a person or a bit of a person, it is very weird. Um there's amputation going on there as well by the looks of them yeah,

Marian is now attracted to 'this limb or whatever it is' the ambiguous body part being operated on in the picture. Unlike in *Groping Out*, where the emphasis was on an element of the painting apprehending the viewer, now the emphasis is more concerned with the viewer and their own apprehending. Marian experiences *her* attention as being captured by something in the artwork.

There is a second element in *The Gross Clinic* which Marian describes as attracting her attention later in the viewing.

I spose the more I think about the the thing I'm most attracted by, is I kind of want to know who the tall chap is with the shiny forehead cos he seems to be the central point in this and actually but what but the stuff that's actually happening is not him that's the interesting thing he's very still here it's all happening round him um but he seems very much the thing of importance in the picture but I could be wrong....

The attraction here is somewhere different; it is more inquisitive, whilst in the first instance it was more visceral. The central character stands out as a point of interest, a thing of importance in the picture. Marian describes this character as tall with a 'shiny forehead'. We can follow her initial gaze to the focal point of light on his head, take in his height and centrality and then allow our imagination to follow Marian's gaze outward, acknowledging 'it's all happening round him', a blur of busy but apparently unimportant activity.

Whatever form the attention takes, the elements in the image which the viewer becomes attracted to, are experienced as foci for it. The shiny forehead amidst a sea of activity attracting intellectual curiosity, the free-floating limb initiating a visceral pull.

Jean had quickly opted to look at *Ship and Red Sun* because of its bright colours and contrasts. Compared to specificity described by Marian, a wider compositional sense of the artwork attracted her attention,

Well definitely the colours but also as I say the erm composition with this big red circle [laughs] and so that that attracted my attention then when I looked at it it looked very unusual because it has this the the circle and the the sort of fainter circle that's round it are very erm un-mathematical but then down here there is this incredibly precise mathematical almost diagram also in red that is a real contrast with the hazy, and um free form kind of shapes.

Echoing Marian's gravitation towards, and subsequent attempts to contextualise, the partial limb in the *Gross Clinic*, Jean described the large red circle in the Kandinsky image as attracting her attention and provoking further focus for exploration.

Jean appears to have been more successful in perceiving aspects of the surroundings and why they contributed to her interest. Initially, there was an attraction to shape and colour, the 'big red

circle', followed by a 'then when I looked at it' awareness of compositional gestalt — the contrast between a hazy, free, organic, and mathematical and precise, elements of the artwork.

What is interesting in the passage is that 'attention' takes different forms. Jean says the colour attracted her attention, giving the impression of catching something from the corner of one's eye, instinctive, a reflex. She then explains 'when I looked at it' and an attention which feels more controlled, directed and cognisant.

Just as elements which extend and *Grope Out* from the painting may be experienced more abstractly or physically, so, experiences of one's attention being attracted may apparently also diverge. Jean's instinctive and reflex like attention followed by a slower broadening of noticing echoes Marian's turn to the shiny headed central character in *The Gross Clinic* which prompts a flourishing intellectual curiosity,

Like the latter parts of Jean's experience, Katherine's attentional engagement was more suggestive of a gestalt, rather than being related to any specific detail or details.

When you like, speak from a point of view of like er you know people who grew up in the 21st century, we've seen so many um photographs, you kind of become numb in a way, you don't take them seriously, so I think that paintings like this.... They they really capture attention because you still know what it is but it's kind of shown in a different way.

Here Katherine discusses the impressionistic, rather than realistic, style of the painting *Nymphéas* and how this attracts her attention. It is a holistic impression of the image which captures her focus. Contrasting aspects are described again. Unlike Jean who related the precise to the organic aspects of *Ship and Red Sun*, Katherine's comparisons were not within the painting, but between the painting and other paintings and images. Photographs, the most realistic representations of real-life, become numbing and trivial. This abstract painting becomes arresting because it depicts reality in an alternate fashion. "You still know what it is but it's kind of shown in a different way".

The first two subthemes describe aspects which may protrude from the image, apprehending the viewer (Groping Out), and (Attracting Attention) the viewer apprehending the image, their attention orienting towards some aspect of it.

3.4. *Drawing In*

The subtheme Drawing In describes instances where viewers feel beguiled, harnessed or pulled in by the paintings. In the previous subtheme, it was the viewer's attention which moved, a feeler originating from them and orienting towards the image. Here the momentum originates from the

image, a force residing in the painting which draws the viewer towards it. Whilst to attend to something suggests some volition or at least awareness, something can pull you towards it even when you have not willed it, or when your back is turned.

Unlike the first subtheme where aspects reached out of the painting, now some force works to pull in. These differently directed and located energies may be associated by the viewers with the same depicted elements. The themes here are not diversified by what the viewers are looking at, so much as how they experience the looking. A colour or expression may feel striking at first, later looking at it may feel very different. As Jean describes:

I think definitely what draws you in is this this contrast between the darkness and the the very vivid orangy-red colour um... and again I s'pose you know, when I said the word danger... black and red are the colours of danger erm and, and so that's maybe why I think it's ominous...

Here, elements which initially leapt out at Jean and then subsequently captured her attention, now go on to draw her in. The contrasts, the colours, the dangerous feel, elements experienced separately in the first two themes, have become entwined in her perception. As time passes, seemingly they mesh or net “*and so that's maybe why I think it's ominous*” becoming something more specific and tangible, a developed idea of ominousness drawing her into the painting. Marian similarly explained:

I'm drawn to it being cut but I'm particularly taken by this guy's hand just how blo... I spose just how bloody and brutal that looks, it's not, it's a hand with a scalpel with bloody fingers but it just seems very brutal in the context

The scalpel was an element of the image which originally stood out to Marian (*very prominent*) and the ‘guy’ one who captured her attention. Now these elements re-surface, entwined to guide her into the painting. The act of cutting draws her to the image and, in a more literal reading “*I'm particularly taken by this guy's hand*”. Marian describes being 'taken' by the central character's hand into the painting, the double meaning reminiscent of some macabre union guiding her into the world of the image, its blood and brutality.

Henry, a mature man educated far beyond degree level and with many interests, picked *Viewing the Cherry Blossom at Asukayama* because of his particular fascination with Japanese culture, he described an experience of the artist guiding his focus through the position of a figure depicted:

So he's heading out of shot, um he's not part of this, erm he's not with them in a in a sort of communal sense um whether he's whether his attention is being caught by something but that's irrelevant what's the artist is trying to do there? it's like again in western art

sometimes when a hand or something goes across a frame or outside it almost to remind you that this is a picture um or draw us to an interesting thing and what's the artist doing there I don't know what the artists doing there! I do not know!

Reading this extract, particularly if one does so aloud, we can almost re-experience Henry being pulled into the image. The cadence of his speech increases and becomes more rhythmic like a train gathering steam. Animated in his looking, he moves from one part of the image to another, one element to the next, becoming excited at the prospect of what he might discover “*I don't know what the artists doing there! I don't know!*”.

There is an additional element alluded to in Henry's account. A sense of reward. Henry describes being drawn in towards; an “interesting thing”. So, as he is drawn into the painting, both by gaze and by curiosity there is this experience of being potentially rewarded with something pleasing to ponder and explore, as though a whole new world has been opened before him.

Indeed, the rewarding element of being drawn in is present in Jean's account of *Ship and Red Sun*:

And then there's something about the the contrasts that make it quite pleasant and because it's like I said, it's got these danger colours, it's, it's not as if you're having to work really hard at trying to work up an interest in it, it, it, it draws you in and then gives you a little rewarding task to complete in terms of looking at this spindly thing.

Jean also describes the sense of a reward present upon being drawn into the painting. Here though there is less suggestion of excitement and more an impression of being enticed, perhaps superficially. There is quite a distinct change in the way Jean talks about the elements of the painting now, in comparison to how she perceived them in the earlier subthemes. The ‘mathematical object’ has become a ‘spindly thing’, stripping it of its strength and weakening it. The contrasts are now merely ‘quite pleasant’. You don't have to work hard to work up an interest and you get a ‘little’ rewarding task to complete. It is as though upon feeling she has been some way tricked Jean has turned the process of being drawn into the painting into something childish or insignificant. The need for Jean to undermine the potency of the artwork highlights the powerful nature of the experience of being drawn in. It is one she now feels she needs to return to and subvert, so unsettled is she by the injustice she feels has been done to her.

I felt a little bit um, of a sucker [...] Yeah so I I kind of feel I got sucked in by this one... because it did look very striking and different but I'm not convinced that um that it's the most interesting painting in the book....

Getting drawn into the painting for Jean is quite a different experience than for the other viewers. There is a sense of being conned or tricked or that getting drawn in is a negative thing particularly as the reward isn't convincingly adequate.

However for others, the reward can be more fulfilling, a macabre wedding in *The Gross Clinic*, an exciting prospective archaeological dig into the history of an alien culture in *Viewing the Cherry Blossom at Asukayama*. These experiences appear far more substantive than Jean's encounter with the colourful but ultimately empty sweet wrappers here in *Ship and Red Sun*. The commonality is that once again the energy which was originally released from the painting is now experienced as pulling the viewer back into the image. How this drawing in is experienced may occur differently depending on the nature of the image and of the viewer, just as was the case in the Groping Out and Attracting Attention parts of the GET.

3.5. *The Relationship between Themes*

The themes are not intended to characterise static or isolated occurrences, rather, a separate description is given to aspects which may occur synchronously or asynchronously, being differentiated by type, not time. To provide a description of those moments where elements appear to stand 'out' of the image and those moments when attention is 'attracted to' them, and when viewers experience a 'drawing in' to the image, it is necessary to slightly artificially unbind, what is fluid.

Henry's description here, of his encounter with *Viewing the Cherry Blossom at Asukayama*, captures the moments described by the three themes flowing together.

These ones stand out much more um my attention was also caught by this guy hey here we are again, all over on the right here you know which in a sense is perhaps a lead into the picture um... perhaps yeah it's a speculation that almost that the hand would draw your eye in along the arm, yeah... and and lead you in to the picture and here possibly is the servant figure who leads you up to a main thing so again perhaps... and that again to me is fascinating because I don't know and it's alien...

The extract begins with elements once again standing *out* from the image consistent with the Groping Out theme. Then Henry describes his attention being "caught by this guy hey here we are again". We can feel his gaze moving over the picture and then catching on the hook-like presence of the male figure whom he feels sticks out of the image. There is something niggling and insistent about this character, "here we are again", creating the feeling of an elastic band pulling you back into position.

The attention here has on one level quite a basic visual feel to it, the perceptual attracting of attention happening more instantaneously. Additionally, there is an intellectual attraction occurring more slowly. And again, the attractors of attention in the image are qualitatively different. There is a figure within the painting “this guy”, and there is also an idea, one of an alien culture that Henry doesn’t understand and which creates wonder and intrigue.

Henry also indicates a fascination that is generated, like the curiosity Marian described feeling. The figure is guiding him *in* to “a main thing” he doesn’t understand because of the cultural context of the painting, a piece of Japanese art. This resonates with the idea of being drawn in described in the third theme. He is drawn in by the enigma of a potentially unknown alien story.

We can see in this segment how the experiences described by each theme might interact or overlay to form a continuous whole. Initial interactions between viewer and viewed are dynamic; elements happen continuously, back-and-forthing and building on top one another. These elements of engagement thus represent elements of the painting, of the viewer, and a new generative combining of viewer and viewed which can reshape both.

4. Discussion

The GET reported here, Elements of Engagement, collects accounts of burgeoning curiosities evoked by being alerted to, noticing, and becoming aware of aspects of paintings. The extant literature identifies many factors which may capture and shape our early engagements with art: types of depicted action (Villani *et al.*, 2015), local contrasts in light, colour and orientation (Fuchs *et al.*, 2011), salient areas in an image (Latif *et al.*, 2014) or areas of perceived meaning (Bailey-Ross *et al.*, 2019). Reflecting the sensibility that one’s eye being drawn to a particular colour (Fontoura and Menu, 2021) is different from it being drawn to a feature of narrative (Kapoula *et al.*, 2009), discussion of these factors often invokes a distinction between the observation of some stimulus, and the assemblage or sense-making of that input. This distinction is typically incorporated into models of art-viewing in the form of an initial, sometimes implicit or automatic ‘bottom-up’ perceptual analysis, followed by a higher-level processing (Leder and Nadal, 2014; Leder *et al.*, 2004; Pelowski *et al.*, 2017b). Investigations of low- vs high-level image features or processing, or bottom up vs top down influences and control (Hristova and Grinberg, 2011; Walker *et al.*, 2017) similarly contend with basic inputs which are looked at “without thinking” (Elkins, 1996, p. 1) as distinct from what we see once higher-order processing becomes involved.

In the inceptive moments of viewing reported here, such distinctions would be hard to identify. The elements which excited viewers’ attention had form beyond the materiality of the

painting-as-object: a hand groped out at Charles, a sharp protruding scalpel glistened at Marian. Distinctions between image features and viewers' perceptions of them, or the stuff at the bottom and top of perception, were transcended. This is not to say the painting with observable object properties dissolved or became irrelevant. The aspects which groped out, attracted attention or drew viewers in were tied to the physical thingness of the artwork, they groped out of somewhere and were recognised in relation to the viewer's own spatial position. Yet they were close or near, here or there, as much because what was seen felt affrontive, sharp or compelling as because vantage, shading or angles gave impressions of depth and prominence.

The particular experience captured in Elements of Engagement was further characterised by a sense of dynamism. Depictions of movement (Gori *et al.*, 2008) and the perception of motion (Kim and Blake, 2007) in paintings have been investigated, as has the viewer's own movement in response to what is depicted (Ganczarek *et al.*, 2015). In the GET reported here, not only was movement seen and perceived, seeing and perceiving were experienced as physically dynamic. Engagement with the painting felt like movement, and like it involved movements, all of which shaped the viewing. As aspects groped out, captured attention or drew the viewer in, there was recognition of a physical polarity, an outward and inward flowing, over the conjoined viewer-image space. This speaks to philosopher Merleau-Ponty's comments on the act of painting itself: "There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted" (Merleau-Ponty, 1993 p. 167).

An echo of this inspiration and expiration is suggested by the arc of the three subthemes. Co-constitution of meaning blurring viewer and viewed has a course, a rhythm, and push and pull, a directionality bringing the image to life. Henry described "something goes across a frame or outside it almost to remind you that this is a picture um or draw us to an interesting thing". Here seemingly his seeing recognised the painting as an object with a frame and an interior, but also acknowledged a world continuing beyond these bounds. Furthermore, he saw a slippage between the two as a conscious intentional reminder that he was still looking at a painting. How is it possible that one can see, depicted, the notion that one is looking at a painting? And see this notion as something which can deliberately pull and alter one's seeing? It is because, in the experiencing of art suggested here, paintings are not detached objects or collections of signs that are processed to form a perception and understanding. Rather they are perceived according to what the viewer already understands them to be, colours are of skin, of skies, contours are of swathes of clothing or landscapes. These pre-knowings act upon and react to, aspects of the world portrayed in the painting, forming continuous, reciprocally anticipating whole or the "precession of what is upon what one sees and makes seen, of what one sees and makes seen upon what is", as described by Merleau-Ponty (1993, p. 188).

Despite pointing to dissimilarities, the findings here are not offered in contestation to work which seeks to untangle aspects of art-viewing such as looking acts or lower order processing, from others such as seeing semantic content. Acknowledging the glorious taste of a cold beer on a hot day does not negate the way our bodies break down and process the alcohols and sugars. Nevertheless, something in addition to ‘metabolising ethanol in the liver’ is needed to fully appreciate what is going on. Experimental research has generated considerable insight into art-viewing allowing us to better explain what happens — the hope here is to add experiential understanding and compliment other types of knowledge. Indeed, since its inception, an aim of IPA has been to maintain the possibility to dialogue with other approaches (Shinebourne, 2011). Fruitful dialogue between qualitative and quantitative approaches in art-viewing research is demonstrated in the work of Wanzer et al (2020) who used the experiential work of Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) to develop their aesthetic measure.

Of course, not all aspects of experimental and experiential research are complimentary. Studies using IPA are sometimes judged by the measures of rigour and validity applied to quantitative research. This means small sample sizes and the extent of generalisability are often cited as limitations. Conversely, the idiographic focus in IPA which necessitates smaller samples, allows us to explore the intimacy of human experience, the *what it is like* for participants. In the three subthemes (Groping Out, Attracting Attention, and Drawing In), this intimacy revealed an experiential alleviation of traction between object and subject, or between the physical painting and the thingness of what was painted. Along with this blurring of boundaries there was a sense of motion indicated. Descriptions of outward and inward forces connecting the viewer and image dynamically through space, were associated with form and physicality and also with the meaning of what was seen and indeed the seeing of it.

To what extent does this mean anything beyond these participants and these paintings? In the prior studies (Starr and Smith, 2021, 2023) which involved viewing one image, a similar reciprocal dynamism was suggested. Starr and Smith (2021) described an exchange of gazes between viewer and depicted character. Viewers felt the impact of their gazes upon the figures (generating feelings ranging from warm connection to voyeuristic guilt) and the impact of gazes upon them (as communicative or judgemental for example). Starr and Smith (2023) described the interpretative work which occurred during viewing. Here the activity of sense-making was closely intertwined with a sense of expanding and exploring spatial elements of the image. Of moving within the image as well as movement between image and viewer.

The role of physicality in visual art has been recognised in work such as the aforementioned exploration of body sway (Ganczarek *et al.*, 2015), perceptions of movement within paintings (Brinkmann *et al.*, 2020), or the embodied simulations which are said to occur in response to depicted gestures or even implied creative gestures of artists (Freedberg and Gallese, 2007). The findings

reported also speak to movement, here in not the body or artwork per se but in how looking and seeing themselves seem and how this is bound up in the sense-making of what is looked at and seen – how pull and push, or back and forth, between places and people and understandings blurs boundaries by which looking and seeing is usually understood. Through the details of individual experience in this small body of work, one can begin to peek at a bigger picture. It is hoped that further studies will continue this and involve different types of art and viewers to build upon these beginnings.

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Table 1.

Prevalence: density of evidence across the developing analysis

Participant	Number of experiential statements	Number of PETs (statement clusters)	Contribution to GET? (√/X)		
			Elements of Engagement	Deeper Exploration	Vulnerability and Intimacy
Charles	172	3	(√)	(√)	(√)
Henry	223	4	(√)	(√)	(√)
Jean	201	3	(√)	(√)	(√)
Katherine	159	3	(√)	(√)	(√)
Marian	198	4	(√)	(√)	(√)

Table 2.

Summary of Group Experiential Themes with number of participants evidencing them (in parentheses).

GET One	GET Two	GET Three
Elements of Engagement (5)	Deeper Exploration (5)	Vulnerability and Intimacy (5)
Groping Out (5)	Emerging prominences (5)	Within painting encounters (4)
Attracting Attention (4)	Awareness of tensions and contradictions (4)	Self-reflections (4)
Drawing In (4)		

List of Figures



Figure 1. Charles looking at *Expulsion* [Arthur Boyd, 1960 — Private collection, as published in *Art* (Belton, 2003). Original dimensions 122 × 183 cm; dimensions as viewed 22 × 17 cm].

I don't know whether this is Eve leaving the garden of Eden or what, [...] erm...but what's being flee... er fled from is unclear...so... very dramatic very er and very dynamic though there are very few elements in it



Figure 2. Henry looking at *Viewing the Cherry Blossom at Asukayama* [Torii Kiyonaga, c. 1785 — Triptych of woodblock prints; ink and color on paper. Public domain, retrieved from:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/56044>. Original dimensions (a) 37.1 × 24.6 cm, (b) 37.1 × 24.6 cm, (c) 37.1 × 25.2 cm; dimensions as viewed (a) 10.8 × 7 cm, (b) 10.8 × 7.4 cm, (c) 10.8 × 7.2 cm].

When you first look at it you see a single scene, um you just see this group of figures, in a landscape and the landscape is unified and the whole picture is unified by the line of cherry blossom... it's just held together by that...

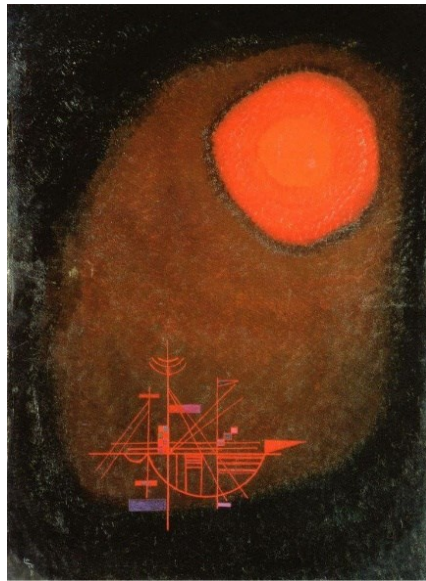


Figure 3. Jean looking at *Ship and Red Sun* (Wassily Kandinsky, 1925 — Oil on canvas. Public domain, retrieved from: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/wassily-kandinsky/red-sun-and-ship>. Original dimensions: information not available; dimensions as viewed 18.2 × 13.4 cm).

It makes me think of a, of a strange sort of ship with a very um ominous sky dominated by a red sun and the red suns hazy glow against this black background um and the ship is very much dwarfed by this big red sun...



Figure 4. Katherine looking at *Nymphéas* (Claude Monet, 1907 — Oil on canvas. Public domain, retrieved from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monet_-_water-lilies-36.jpg. Original dimensions: information not available; dimensions as viewed 18.2 × 15 cm).

I think there is... it's it's playing with an idea erm because this is so-called... like this is an impression but we can still see what the painting is about, the... you know the flowers the pond and stuff like that yeah

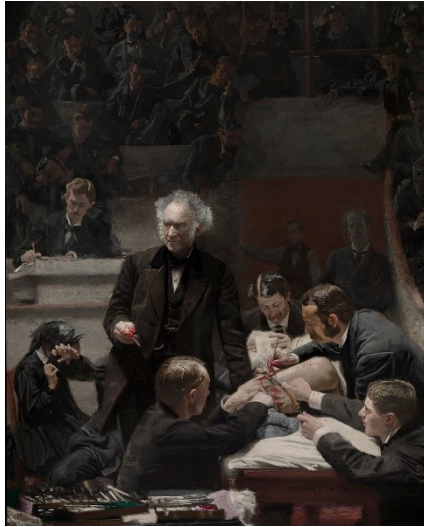


Figure 5. Marian looking at *The Gross Clinic* (Thomas Eakins, 1875 — Oil on canvas. Public domain, retrieved from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gross_Clinic#/media/File:Thomas_Eakins,_American_-_Portrait_of_Dr._Samuel_D._Gross_\(The_Gross_Clinic\)_-Google_Art_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gross_Clinic#/media/File:Thomas_Eakins,_American_-_Portrait_of_Dr._Samuel_D._Gross_(The_Gross_Clinic)_-Google_Art_Project.jpg). Original dimensions: 240 × 200 cm; dimensions as viewed: 18.2 × 15 cm).

It's from the past and it looks slightly barbaric erm... I'm sure modern surgery looks equally barbaric but erm it just looks weird having Victorian gentlemen in erm long coats kind of cutting people up