

# SKARSTEDT

## *Losing Time Again*

Here's a book, a great slab of pages. You open it, you enter it like a door. If you're lucky, time stops. You're swept up within its internal timeframe. You lose consciousness of the outside world. Your body, maybe even your sense of self, ceases to exist. The book removes you from your own time, so that when you set it down you might be shocked by the hands on the clock, the revelation that the minutes have been passing while you were elsewhere, floating freely. I lost myself in that book, you could say.

A book, like a painting, creates a weird threefold pleat in time. There is the time taken to make it, the compacted time of any creative venture. Time to type, to paint, the hours, weeks, years required to assemble any art object. Then there is the time housed inside the work. In the novel, this might be centuries of war and peace or a single Mrs Dalloway day. In the stopped clock of a painting, it is almost invariably a single moment, even if a series of paintings or regions of a painting might attempt to describe time's passage, frame by frame. Finally there is the time spent by the observer in engaging with the work, entering the experience of time that it contains.

The paintings that comprise *The Dog's Birthday* are concerned with time, especially lost time and the possibilities of time's recovery that art presents. As the bathetic title suggests, they are focused on ordinary domestic activities – ironing, reading, washing, eating – and small festivities, a plethora of ways of passing and marking time. Time has been spent on logging what would otherwise be casual moments, haphazard and unstaged. People loiter about or play with their phones, take baths, gather around a cake, cuddle a dog. It's exactly the cargo contained in almost anybody's iPhone library, a log of days.

There is a particularly French precedent to art that focuses so intensely on the domestic and the quotidian, from Bonnard's baths to Vuillard's densely patterned *intimiste* interiors. "I made this show," Joffe says, "thinking about Paris – about Vuillard in particular and how he painted in apartments his family lived in, and how the family dramas play out against the changing wallpaper and the newspaper reading of the everyday – and how for him colour is tone and tone is everything."

Within the compendium of activities is a subset specifically concerned with reading. Joffe depicts herself in bed, glasses on, covers up, nose stuck in a book. These are portraits in which the subject is oddly absent, seemingly unaware of being watched, absorbed in the alternate time-signature of the page.

You don't need a magnifying glass to identify the book she's reading. The words 'In Search' and 'Lost' are plainly legible, though I have so far failed in my search to find 'Time'. It's the Penguin Proust, volumes one and two, translated by Lydia Davis and James Grieve. *In Search of Lost Time* is longer and takes more time from its readers than any other novel in existence. Equally, it is more attentive *to* time, gives more time to time, forming a slow, exquisite map of its folds and fibrillations.

To read Proust is inevitably to enter into a new experience of one's own relationship with time, and especially with memory, our happy knack for resisting time's inexorable flow. Time is not totally lost when it has passed into the past, so long as it can be recalled. Any event, any moment can be summoned back. But the potentially recoverable nature of past time has to be set against its

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plasticity, the way it is redrawn and recoloured by the changes in perspective, context, awareness that occur as the individual is drawn inexorably along the tracks of chronological time. Speaking for myself, these shifting panoramas on what once seemed done and dusted, if not lost and gone for good, is one of the most interesting and unexpected aspects of getting older.

Logging small domestic situations could be seen as a way of expediting this process. The painting as external hard-drive, accumulating data for a longer later look, capturing and immobilising what is by nature mutable and transient. The way that Joffe tends to work is from photographs snapped semi-spontaneously at the scene. This means that what is recorded in paint is both casual and formal, haphazard and precise – and, crucially, a memory of a memory, twice divorced from the event. Lost time is returned, made available for contemplation.

Why, though? What's in danger of being swept away? Why the intense scrutiny of such minor moments? Who are all these people grouped around a cake? And who celebrates a dog's birthday, anyway?

The answer would not have surprised Proust, anxious custodian of loss. The paintings in *The Dog's Birthday* were made in the aftermath of the death of both Chantal's parents and her brother-in-law, in the period when shock had been replaced by the ongoingness, the long endurance of bereavement. What looks at first glance like documentation of the stable rites of everyday existence has on closer inspection a strangely unsteady quality. People stand a bit too close, they huddle and mill. The little dog is passed back and forth like a teddy bear, his orange curls resplendent, his pink tongue clamped between his teeth. One might think again of Vuillard, and a painting like *At Table*, with its cast of mourning sisters at a cluttered table.

That's the foreground, anyway. Something different is going on at the back of the picture plane. These paintings are full of portals. Mirrors give back miniatures, witty little Bonnard paintings-within-paintings. There are windows, often at night, and shelf after shelf of books. Lots of ways out, lots of ways to lose yourself. Figuration keeps giving in to abstraction. Slabs of black. Uncertain grey regions (look at that bathwater, look at the stairwell).

This process reaches a kind of ecstatic zenith in the reading portraits. Joffe's concentrated, abstracted face emerges from a patterned miscellany of pillow cases, duvet covers, counterpanes, a delectable nest that Proust would immediately identify as the nub of creation, the place where the body rests while the mind travels, the zone from out of which ideas, memories, thinking itself emerges.

In the strangest of all these paintings, Joffe's body is curled away from the viewer, dressed in plaid pyjamas, sandwiched between yellow sheets and a stippled envelope of counterpane. No face is visible, only glasses and hair. The book has swallowed its reader. It's figuration on the brink, an accommodation with the many ways we can experiment imaginatively with loss and leaving, before we in turn are swallowed up. Run out of time, we say.

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