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# Chestnut Trees and Farm at Jas de Bouffan

RISD Museum

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I'm Deborah Bright. I'm a photographer and for a long time was a professor of photography and history of art at Rhode Island School of Design. Now I am at Pratt Institute in New York and back visiting. I've been asked to make a few comments about Paul Cézanne's *Chestnut Trees and Farm at Jas de Bouffan* which was his country house in Provence

As a photographer, the thing that attracts me to this painting is the light. Photography is all about light and one of the things that I am particularly drawn to is bright midday light. It's a light that I've used in my own work. It's a very unpopular light in the sense that in photography, they always tell you to photograph landscapes in the morning or the afternoon when the light has color and direction. Of course, overhead midday light has almost no shadows and the colors tend to be bled out and de-saturated.

But what you see clearly in midday light are forms and shapes and you can make out detail. It's almost a kind of forensic light is what I'd like to call it. It's interesting how that seems to be the light that Cézanne is using here. I don't see much in the way of shadows and he's left the canvas to show through to give the colors and the forms a kind of shimmering ethereal quality, at the same time of course that he's using line and color to build out cubic forms and shapes.

This was painted in the 1880s so ten years after the breakthrough paintings of the Impressionists. But he didn't like the surface-y quality of Impressionism. He felt that it didn't have that kind of firmness and form that a painting had in the days of the Renaissance and the academic tradition. So he was using the techniques of the Impressionists; one of which was strict observation of light, but to use it in a way that would restore a sense of solidity to the landscape so that it wouldn't be an overall pattern of little flicks and flecks of evanescent light.

My name is Eric Kramer. I teach landscape history to the landscape architecture students here at RISD, and I'm a practicing landscape architect in Boston at the firm of Reed Hilderbrand. I'll be speaking today about *Chestnut Trees and Farm* by Paul Cézanne.

One thing that strikes me as interesting about the piece is the subject matter itself. It is a landscape, but it is not a, say, traditional pastoral, wilderness, or grand landscape in which the scale of the landscape overpowers the viewer. It's not an attempt to create a sublime sort of experience. It's one where the vernacular every-day landscape we live in—in this case for Cézanne, something he would've known incredibly intimately, and painted repeatedly and effectively lived in—is the vernacular landscape that is the centerpiece. Therefore, the actual subject matter is not the things itself, so much as it is the qualities of light, shadow of color, and texture. Almost ironically so, the painting is incredibly flat in depth of field, with almost no definition of traditional perspective or changing of the way you render foreground, middleground, and background, yet because of the texture and light, it is completely occupiable as a viewer. So that technique is an approach of getting you into the landscape.

In a sense, even though you as the viewer are not under those trees, you understand that to be under them, is to offer that sense of refuge with this prospect out over the kind of more expansive landscape on the other extreme of the painting.

One interesting thing in landscape architecture working with students is representation and how you represent the landscape. Particularly, now with computers, with how you represent landscapes using three-dimensional programming, rendering, and etcetera, there's a fascination with photo realism. What we often realize in rendering landscapes, is that it deadens them and makes them unoccupiable because they look completely finished and plastic, whereas sometimes, rendering things in a way that is not photo realistic but evocative is more powerful as a way of understanding a landscape than using Photoshop in a kind of literal way. We do try to talk to students about this particular kind of painting, as a way of understanding that.