

Eye of the Beholder

by Francesca Ryan

Luck is a thing that comes in many forms. Who can recognise her? Well, I did on that Wednesday. It was the perfect opportunity.

I was on the second shift at the Beider Kunsthaus. It tends to be quiet on a Wednesday afternoon. I love working there; it's a modern art gallery, but the building itself is old-fashioned. High ceilings with beautiful cornices, dark red flock walls. It smells of lovingly polished floors, gentle humidity control, and something else that I can't describe. Maybe if culture had an actual smell, it would be like that. It makes you slow down inside.

You get to know the pictures, as a gallery watchman. They change every six months. Some of them you can take or leave; some you dislike at first but come to appreciate after a while. Two of the pictures in this exhibition seemed to really draw public attention. Visitors would stop a little longer in front of them. I grew to like the bigger one best: a huge rectangle, in different shades of dark maroon. It was divided into three big strips, with fuzzy pale bands of grey and mustard separating them. It seemed to affect me somehow, that one.

"Bloody rubbish, this lot" said my colleague Wilhelm. He preferred proper pictures. "What the hell does 'Abstract Expressionism' mean anyway? My five-year-old could paint that." But she didn't, did she I wanted to say.

"People pay money to see these; they must be worth something," I said instead. He coughed and spat into his hanky, examined it, and stuffed it back into his pocket. He waved his two fingers at me as if he were holding a cigarette. It was our secret signal. "Alright by you, Tomas?" We often used to let each other bunk off for a crafty one if it was quiet. And it was. I grinned and gave him the nod. He'd be gone about twenty minutes, so I'd have to be quite surgical about my manoeuvre.

The stuff I paint myself in my spare time, that's more like proper pictures you might say. I did a really good one last year, of a windmill. I made it up from my mind. Doesn't look too bad, bit wonky, but it's hard to get the lines straight. This last weekend though, I fancied trying something different. I had some emulsion left over from painting the bathroom, so I just started slapping it onto a big bit of cardboard. Very satisfying. I felt as if I were a proper modern artist or something. It looked nice, that blue. I painted three coats. It made me feel calm. Put it in the garage, kept going in to look at it.

I added a large square on the bottom right of it. I only had the black metallic stuff from doing the front railings, so I used that. It made the blue seem blue-er if you get my meaning. It meant something to me anyway. It made me feel good. More right in myself, somehow.

I thought I'd take it in to show Wilhelm. We love to have a bit of a laugh, and I knew he'd piss himself when he saw it. Better than what your Anna could do I'd say, just to rile him up. I wrapped it up in a bin bag and took it in to work, hid it in the room where we keep the spare chairs. Maybe I'd invite Wilhelm in for a 'private view' as they call it. I'd give him a bottle of beer and some peanuts and then unveil it. He'd crack up, I knew. A good laugh.

But I didn't show it to him. I like that picture. I didn't want him to laugh at it. I wanted real people to look at it, to stop and look at it. That must be a great feeling. That makes you a real artist, doesn't it. If people like your stuff, when they pay just to look at it.

It didn't take long. Nobody was about. I fetched my own work and put it in the far corner of the gallery with the other paintings, just propped it up against the wall. It looked good there against the red, my picture. A party of Japanese visitors came in, and they stopped in front of it. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I think they were quite interested. One lady in particular did a lot of hand waving, she talked very fast. I think she might have been the tour leader. Everybody listened to her and kept nodding.

I took my picture home with me when I clocked off. I did like it though, people looking at my work. Maybe I'll do it again. I think I might be a bit of an abstract expressionist. This exhibition ends in July, so I better be on the alert for another lucky opportunity. I don't think my windmill is going to cut it in *Visions from Addis Ababa and Beyond; the Ethiopian Diaspora*, which is the exhibition coming next.