



By JASON KEITH FERNANDES

Fooling the Eye, Eyeing the Fool

The writings of the great Roman savant Pliny the Elder in *Naturalis Historia* present to us an interesting episode from the history of art. In this anecdote Pliny recounts a contest between the two great Greek artists, Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Keen to settle which of them was the greatest artist of the time the two agreed on producing an image that was most realistic. For his part Zeuxis painted an image of fruits that is reported to have been so life like that it deceived the birds that came to peck at it. Parrhasius then invited Zeuxis to view the former's painting that was hidden behind a curtain. Zeuxis attempted to pull back the curtain only to realize that it was in fact the curtains that constituted Parrhasius' image. While Zeuxis may have possibly felt like a fool, Pliny recounts that Zeuxis is supposed to have been gracious in defeat acknowledging Parrhasius as the winner with the acclamation: "I have deceived the birds, but Parrhasius has deceived Zeuxis."

This desire, and the capacity, to fool the eye and imitate reality so completely was not restricted merely to these two great Greeks but has persisted down into our time. In the Baroque period this skill was acclaimed by the French term *Trompe-l'œil*, which means "to fool the eye". This skill was put to use not only to imitate objects, but to transcend space through painting architectural and natural details on walls and make it appear as the wall had given way to the scene painted on the wall. Churches in the Baroque period would, for example, use the knowledge of perspective to depict domes where in fact only a flat ceiling existed, or better still, depict the heavenly hosts bursting through the ceiling.



One does not need visits to Europe to encounter *trompe-l'œil*. The technique is present in two of Charles Correia's creations in Goa; the Kala Academy, and the Cidade de Goa hotel complex. I imagine that Correia's design provided hundreds of children, and perhaps adults, hours of delightful fantasy as they contemplated the world on the other side of the walls of his buildings. This was their effect on my own childhood.

More recently I had fun encounters with *trompe-l'œil*, at the Museu Serralves in the city of Porto, Portugal. Conceived of in 1989 by the Serralves Foundation as a space to host a collection of contemporary art, the museum building project was commissioned to the internationally renowned Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza Vieira, and the building completed in 1999. In his brief, Siza was invited to design a museum building that took into consideration the specific characteristics of the physical setting and the need for integration within the surrounding landscape. Siza fulfilled his task with aplomb given that the museum sits discreetly, an obtrusive presence in its natural settings. It is, however, as one moves

through the fourteen galleries that constitute this museum that one realizes the extent to which Siza took his brief seriously.



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Perhaps playing with the tradition of *trompe-l'œil*, in these galleries Siza has included huge windows that allow for the outside to enter into the building. Given that the museum sits within a marvelously landscaped garden, all too often the vistas that these windows look out onto are stunning. In addition to gazing on art works that are hung on the walls, one can also look out on to the artfully landscaped outside. However, thanks to the insulation of the building one is bereft of the sounds from the outside, one is never quite sure if one is on the inside looking out, or merely looking at another art work that bends our sense of space. In an era where one is often confronted with video installations that may or may not include sound, my sensation when walking through the galleries was like being confronted with the kind of vistas television companies utilise when selling their gigantic television screens. Whether Siza intended it, or not, the visitor to the Museu Serralves is definitely once again in the playing fields of *trompe-l'œil*.

But there was another way in which the ghosts of Zeuxis and Parrhasius haunted me at Serralves. Walking away with delight from another gorgeous vista that Siza had opened up, I came upon a wall that seemed to hold a fine metal mesh. To my embarrassment, however, I realized that it was not a mesh at all. Rather, it was lead pencil drawings on a wall, the artist Sol Lewitt's creation titled *Wall Drawing #133 (Arcs from Four Corners)*. *Wall drawing # 133* is in fact a mobile and variable art work, capable of repetition in any part of the world as long as it follows the artist's instructions.

"The draughtsman in charge of *Wall Drawing #133 (Arcs from Four Corners)* must draw arcs at five-centimetre intervals, coming from the four corners of the wall. Large or small, horizontal or vertical, rectangular or square, the wall must be used fully and the resulting work varies according to those variables."

While still in raptures over my encounter, I peeked into the alcove next to *Wall Drawing*, and found a fire extinguishing assemblage located in the centre of a wall. Given that I was in the section of the Sonnabender Collection devoted to minimalism, I contemplated the

assemblage a while longer, until I realized with some blushing awkwardness that it was no art installation, but exactly what it appeared to be, basic life and property saving infrastructure in the great museum. Somewhere up above, I could hear the artists chuckle at my predicament in the halls of the immortals.

(A version of this post was first published in *The Goan Everyday*, dt: 13 March, 2016)



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