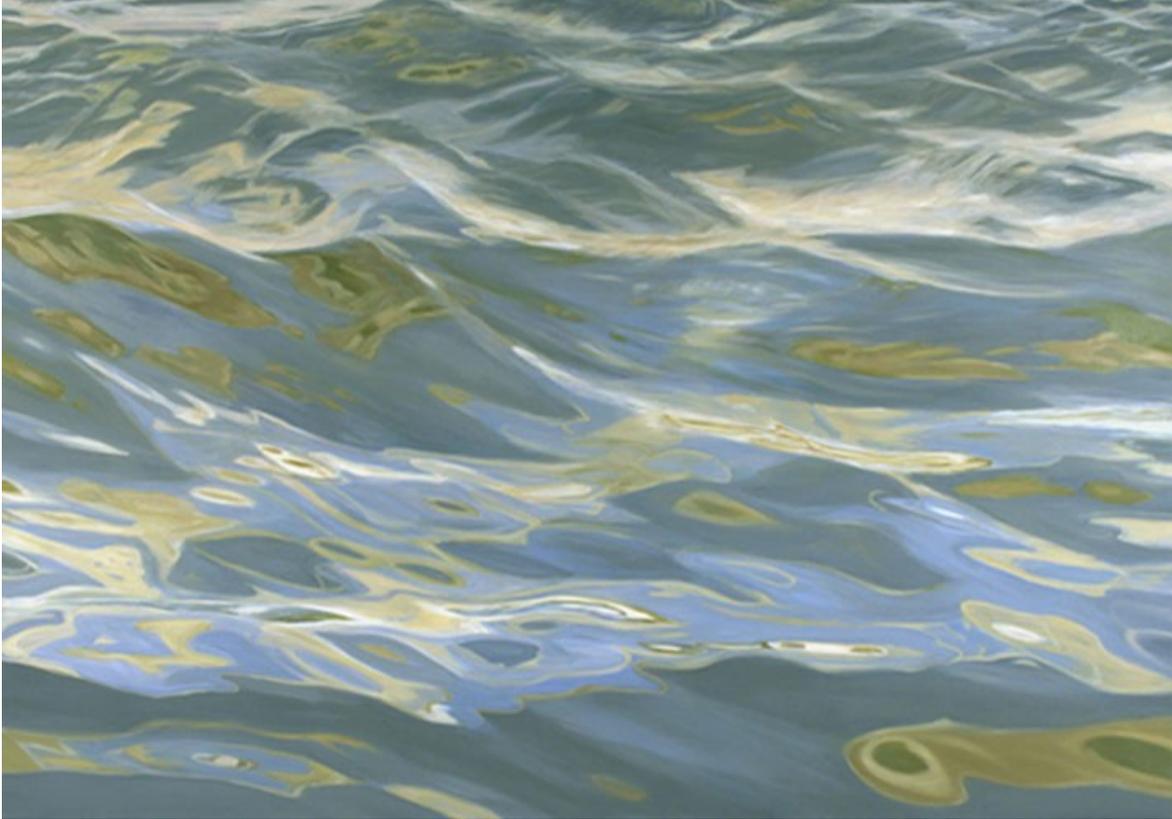


Chapter 8

Finally Seeing Water



Movement is the essence of water

It is rather unusual when you think about it, when we say we see water. If we are really careful in our methods of observation, a glass of clear water has a color that is – well, clear. Clear means that there is no color present. When we describe a clear color we are actually saying that while other variables in the visual field of perception may be discernable, one can see a spatial area with no color associated with the spatial plane where tangible perception would likely be encountered. To see water is not to see a substance or material. When we say we see water, it is to see clearness or a reflection of the surroundings on a still body of water. To really see water, another means of observation is required. I puzzled on this for a number of years and developed the following exercise. I was inspired by a series of drawings of water by Da Vinci. The succession of drawings were done such that only years later were they understood to be sequential views over time. They were so precise; it is normally only possible to

see such detail with high speed photographic methods. I thought if Da Vinci could see this and actually record such an instantaneous series of events, there must be a different mode of perception possible, other than the habitual mode we use everyday. I was also inspired by an exercise in Zen meditation in which one allows the happenings of the world to simply pass by our field of vision, as if watching a river flow, without holding on to any particular feature.

Exercise #7

The following exercise requires a particular set of conditions in order for the observations and resulting concept to be clearly apparent. In some locations, the conditions are near at hand (as I write this from the porch of my house in the Adirondack Mountains, the requisite stream is within view). Other places such as the city of Chicago where I led a course involving perception, the conditions require significant travel. All this said, I hope that the conditions are near at hand.

Find a stream or small river where the water moves quickly. There needs to be a significant change in the elevation of the land, but waterfalls or strong rapids with their subsequent white foaming on the surface will mask the observations that are being sought for. A modest sized mountain stream is best, where the water drops perhaps one foot in height over the course of three to four feet of horizontal distance. Look for a place where the surface of the stream is undulating quickly, so quickly that no discernable pattern is present. The larger the area, say at least two to three feet across, the better. The more movement and activity that is present, again, the better. The key is to choose an area where the water moves very fast, but is just shy of developing white foam.

Stand right at the edge of the stream, and bring your gaze so that it rests on the area where the surface is changing rapidly. The first and most difficult step is to try and let go of the habit of observation of following patterns in water as they move from upstream to downstream. We tend to see a surface feature that we find interesting and then follow it downstream until it disappears. At this point we look for another feature upstream and follow it down. When we observe in this manner, we are focusing on the material or almost object like conception of water.

Now that we know how not to look at the surface, here are the instructions for looking in a new way. Allow your gaze to fall on the surface and try to use a peripheral or open mode of observation. If a specific feature catches your attention, simply note it but do not follow the pattern down stream. What we are trying to do is to hold the eyes still and allow the gaze to simply

allow the patterns of movement to appear rather than following specific patterns downstream. If after doing this for a bit of time you begin to feel like you are losing your balance or that you are being almost drawn into the stream, these are indications that you are nearing the suggested mode of observation.

One final suggestion: if there is a wave that appears to be lifted above the surface of the water undulating rapidly over time, focus on this area. While focusing, hold the imagination that some creature under the water, such as a fish, is rapidly swimming in the stream and trying to keep itself from being swept downstream. Once again, the key to this exercise is to maintain as open a field of vision as possible and to simply allow the patterns as a whole to work on you. Work at this for at least ten minutes, and then reflect on the experience and also your state of being before and after the exercise.

Commentary on Exercise #7

Many people working with this exercise have the following experiences. At first, it is usually difficult to let go of the habitual pattern of seeing water as moving from upstream to downstream. Next, many people experience a bit of a period of 'not getting it,' but this is usually followed by a brief moment of seeing patterns that move in other than up- to downstream ways. In time, patterns appear that move across the stream, some rise from beneath to the surface and others are regularly observed to move from downstream to upstream. Initially, this may seem impossible. How can water move upstream? The key concept here is that we are not seeing particular pieces of water. Recall that water is clear in color. What we see is the change in visual qualities that arise when we observe the boundary between the stream and the air above, and how this boundary creates a unique set of visual qualities that are both reflective and refractive in nature. What we observe is not the water itself, but instead the dynamic expression of a series of visual conditions. These conditions are so dynamic that they are in fact ever changing.

I would suggest that the dynamic patterns themselves are a more characteristic expression of the essence of water than the substance that sits in a glass on a dinner table. What sits in the glass is what I call 'earth-water.' The pattern that we observe in the stream I have named 'water-water.'

What is interesting is that with careful observation, one can begin to notice that water in different streams moves with a different set of qualities. I first noted this when comparing mountain streams in the Alps. The water in the streams I observed in Austria moved with a strong cohesive strength. The essence of this is captured in the classical music from that region: Mozart in Salzburg to Strauss in Vienna. The water in the Swiss mountains had much less form and would

foam easily when it fell over even a modest sized fall. It was as if the water was still half in the sky. The water of the High Peak region of the Adirondacks was strong but not as developed as that which I saw in Austria. The water of the Catskills in Southern New York was more languid and flat. The water of Southern New Hampshire was thick in consistency, while that observed in the Sierra Mountains of California was almost as if it were mostly air.

This is a big step. The essence of water is not a material, but rather the characteristic movement itself. This movement is an expression of the location and conditions of a particular region, and, I have found, is an expression of its purity and health. The more clean and pure the water, the greater the differentiation is in the patterns.

If the essence of water is its movement, then we now understand one of life's riddles. On a hot summer day, we look down a long straight highway and see a characteristic pattern of movement in front of us. It is not that we see an object, but we see a pattern of movement in the visual scene that we would expect to be stationary. We quickly recognize this pattern and form the concept 'water.' We recognize in the visual mirage a pattern of movement associated with a series of reflective and refractive visual qualities that we associate with the experience of moving water.

Movement is the essence of water. Water is essentially a pattern not a substance.