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Ecstatic Caprices

I came across an incredibly stimulating exhibit at the Black Box Theatre at the Iowa Memorial Union recently called *Caprice and Influence*. Prints of great masters like Giambattista Tiepolo and Francisco de Goya were on full display for anyone interested in an art form less glamorous than its paint and palette counterparts. Both explored etchings known as *capricci*, or caprices. *Capricci* were explained as “architectural inventions that placed together archaeological ruins and artifacts, often with figures in fictional, even fantastical narrative combinations.” Tiepolo mastered this with etchings that have been described as “dreamlike, timeless...true caprices sprung from the artist’s imagination.”

By the time the art form happened to Goya some sixty years after Tiepolo, this dreamlike quality gave way to social commentary, often anti-clerical in sentiment. Goya intentionally left his prints vague so as to escape the predatory gaze of the Inquisition.

Some two hundred years later, Salvador Dali happened to the art form, and worked his surrealist, whimsical magic on Goya’s prints. I think this returned the idea of caprice to its original essence—whim, caprice, fancy.

I was inspired by Dali’s rendition of one of Goya’s prints. He colorizes dated and colorless material with his trademark surrealist motifs. Hats turn yellow, plumes turn magenta, and look, a yellow duck! Or what looks like one at least, where there was only pavement in Goya’s original.

I wanted to test the idea of an architectural structure with whimsical subject matter. And so I wrote a villanelle—a strict and rigid form—to contain the idea of true caprice, to see how both played off and against each other. I liked that particular tension, and I think caprice won in the end because the villanelle collapsed into a series of off-rhymes and tangential musings not normally allowed in so strict an art form. I’m hoping you feel the same way, but by all means, let me know of any contradictory feelings you may have over some leftover pizza.

Will You be my Caprice, and not My Lesson?
after Dali after Goya

It takes only a look to stand at attention.
Air unlearns wind. Sky learns degrees of blue.
Will you be my caprice, and not my Lesson?

Let things escape our apprehension.
However counterfeit your eyes, they make me true.
It takes only a look to stand at attention.

But careful now, the courts are in session.
Yellow crones do their looking, and their looking through.
Will you be my caprice, and not my Lesson?

The leap in the blood beats its own red transgression
Contradicts with *don't*. Double contradicts with *do*.
It takes only a look to stand at attention.

Stay a while. Let's take nothing but this guessing.
This young, unsullied air only touch can make untrue.
Will you be my caprice, and not my lesson?

I can't be taught. Old nicks know how to listen.
Whittle at me—a little—but hurt small. Do it new.
It takes only a look to stand at attention.
Will you be my caprice, and not my Lesson?



Attributions:

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828)
Nadie Se Conoce, print 6, from *Los Caprichos*
Etching

Salvador Dalí (1904-1989)
Aparte Las Glándulas Salivares, from *Les Caprices de Goya*
Etching