

See Here, Before You

A lyric essay for Scenes and Sequences
Olivia Boudreau

By Penelope Smart

It's a simple question for a sombre show, but I'll ask it anyway: *what's behind these scenes?*

During set up, the show's hidden details are ineloquent: buckets of paint, granola bars, sock feet. Remote controls. The sequence of our work is—lights on, lights off. Up the ladder, and down.

On the third day of install, Olivia and I check to see if the video projection for L'Obscurite is bright enough on the freshly painted wall. I say it's too dark. Olivia reminds me that our eyes adjust to a lack of light in time. The longer you wait in darkness, she says, the more you see.

Our pupils grow wider. A young man in a blindfold moves through a curtain of leaves. The forest rustles. Outside the gallery, autumn turns the trees into bright red and yellow flares. Bravely, they signal fading daylight.

Somewhere in the growing darkness is Caravaggio. Le Retrait / The Withdrawl is a candlelit universe where flesh and cloth have been poured into blackness like cream into coffee.

The 16th century painter's Magdalena penitente (Repentant Magdalene) is a slouching and dissolute female figure. Compositionally, at least, Olivia transforms Caravaggio's Magdalene into a woman with enviable posture and force of presence. Instead of her hands folded gently in her lap she now wields an oboe with breathtaking self-possession.

On her small music sheet, instructions say that the musician interpreting the music determines the duration of silence in between recitations. A deep breathing apparatus, she's in complete control. If this is a fallen woman repenting, she atones on own terms. Ecstatically, note by note. Her passion fills the air.

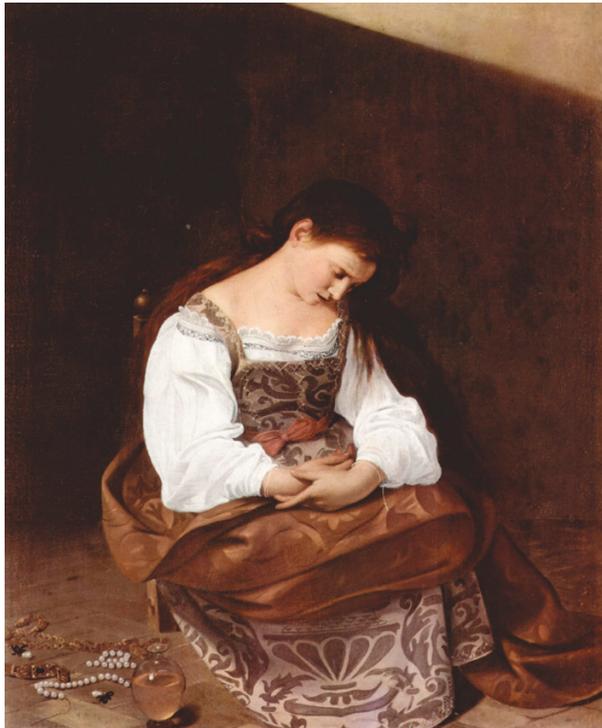
The words behind this music are fitting of Biblical drama, I looked them up online:

*Have mercy, my God,
for the sake of my tears!
See here, before you
heart and eyes weep bitterly.
Have mercy, my God.*

See here, before you. A woman lying on the ground is telling you something. Children whisper in her ear and words come out her mouth. Not full sentences but utterances, fierce sensation, slits of time. She offers vivid snapshots, heavy and hot, of an earthly existence. She transmits sights, smells and sounds of pain and pleasure. She was once in a beautiful forest, now her blood is pooling, a broken hip. The kids are in jodhpurs. Has she fallen from a horse? Through the torn membranes of memory, language courses easily through the body.

Two days before the show opens, Olivia explains to the performers about taking turns wearing a blindfold and guiding the blind. "*You'll go somewhere you don't go in real life*" and "*you're just being. But being slowly.*" Being, slowly. These instructions sound like something the great cinematographer Robert Bresson would say. "*Make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen.*"

Opening day, I watch Olivia write on the gallery wall. This is the final piece added to the arrangement. Her delicate letters tell a personal history, information not evident on the label. You're up so close but you can't read her script. Illuminated, you listen, and follow a feeling.



Caravaggio, Oil on canvas, 48.2" x 38.8", c.1594–1595. Doria Pamphilij Gallery, Rome.