

# Wes Hempel's New Male Gaze in *Fatherhood*

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When wandering through the Modern and Contemporary Art exhibit at the Denver Art Museum, one will undoubtedly stumble upon, and be perplexed by, a particular painting entitled *Fatherhood*. A young man, muscular and dressed in a toga-like outfit, is surrounded by five naked children climbing upon him as if he was a tree. Surrounding the group is as the balcony of a palace or mansion with huge stone pillars on each side and a breathtaking view of the neighboring countryside, a place to just stand and gaze at the scenery for hours upon hours. The attraction in the painting is not, however, to the scenic balcony view. It is to the man's facial expression: one of shock, awe, and confusion. His blank stare with his look of astonishment captivates the viewer and raises multiple questions. As Devon Jackson argues in *Personal Mythologies*, Hempel's art "exist[s] on a plane between the very personal and the very historical....His paintings are like a memory....One can feel it, one knows it, but the exactness of what it is stands just outside one's mental reach."<sup>[1]</sup> It is, in fact, self-reflection that makes Hempel's paintings both interesting and compelling to a wide range of audiences.

An accomplished artist who started his career in Colorado as a writer, Wes Hempel is a man who borrows much of his style and perspective from traditional artists, yet adds obvious variations to his work to create an alternative view on art and common reality. In his work *Fatherhood*, for example, he borrowed from the traditional idea of

maternity in William Bouguereau's *La Charite*, and transformed a well-known idealistic portrait by forcing the audience to re-consider a not-so-ideal paternal head, namely that of a single male parent.<sup>[2]</sup> One who gazes upon this overwhelmed man is compelled to re-think the "subversion of gender," to re-consider how "subtle shifts [in] traditional stereotypes currently take place," and to ask how the responsibility of parenthood exists regardless of gender.<sup>[3]</sup> The father is clothed in a Roman-era red robe and surrounded by marble pillars, forming a setting of structure, order, and strength, but the setting is contrasted with the man's look of confusion, shock, and seclusion. By incorporating Bouguereau into his own work, Hempel accents the contrast between the classical and the contemporary, "conflating the ancient and the new," as he offers up a new male gaze.<sup>[4]</sup>

To start, Wes Hempel juxtaposes a female Charity figure in the ideal form against a male caretaker in real form, a direct association to reality in a modern society. The Madonna figure in *La Charite* symbolizes the "Christian virtue of charity" with the children in need of protection, as well as the representation of them being "human souls needing spiritual sustenance."<sup>[5]</sup> *Fatherhood*, however, symbolizes, if not indirectly, the own artist's dismay as he realized at age 40 that he would never have children<sup>[3]</sup>. Convention of a mother caring for young babies has been mastered again and again by countless artists, but few have attempted to place the father within

the woman's stereotypical and sacred role. The ideal social structure of the family and of commonality is skewed as a new kind of parenthood, becoming more and more popular in recent years, is introduced. Here is the father as the homemaker, or the contemporary Mr. Mom, a figure who has become more and more common in an ever-changing world as mothers find their place within the workforce.

Hempel has revised gender roles within mainstream society, while also conjoining very separate periods of art, and has formed his own artistic style in the process. Critics note that the majority of Hempel's images are either replicas of classic paintings or are inspired by famous techniques. A self-taught artist who learned his artistic style from influential art images, Hempel repeatedly gives honor to the old masters, respecting their style and own motivations. As Michael Paglia describes in his article *Go Figure*, "On one level, Hempel's work is traditional and conventional, his painterly techniques right out of the nineteenth century. But on another, his work delivers ironic and contradictory messages, making it crisp, cogent and relevant—relentlessly addressing the concept of the alienation of the individual." This fusion of Hempel's style with that of the Master Painters does build Hempel's credibility and acceptance within the art world, for he is able to take the works of Turner, Van Ruisdael, Hals, Parrish, and Bouguereau to "create his own brand of contemporary realism, reconciling all of it in the same painting."<sup>[6]</sup>

On the surface, *Fatherhood* introduces a distressed persona of the male figure, who is alone and in shock because of the five dependents looking to him for protection. The man's face, the focus of the painting, creates an uncomfortable and distraught tone to the entire piece. Here the realism of parenthood comes to a climax. Other than the bright red toga that drapes the man, the natural grays and dull tones throughout the painting suggest the man's strength and power despite the dreary setting. The stone pillars and elevated position of the portrait against the vast background landscape further alludes to order and prosperity. Yet, the man's resounding expression of dismay thwarts any emotion of victory and success. Even the sky, lacking a sun or normal bright blue color, presents the flat situation of fatherhood not as a sunrise or a sunset, but just as a daily order of being as a paternal figure.

A viewer sees that the children hold much greater importance to the overall appeal of the painting than was originally perceived. To begin, all the children represent different personalities, reflecting human nature and a variety of social characters. Whereas the three children directly in contact with the father are content, hopeful, even sleeping within his arms, the two children at his feet are independent and autonomous. The one on the lower left leans upon stacks of books and writes on pieces of paper, symbolic to his interest and curiosity of scholarly endeavors. He does not, however, look to the father for any type of support, acknowledgement, or encouragement. The young baby to the left is also self-sufficient, even using his own body heat, compared to his father's, to keep himself warm. It is striking that as one continues to gaze at the portrait of the family, the young face of the child in the fetal position becomes more

and more piercing and expressive than the man's. Not the light, but rather the shadow, that surrounds the young child in the lower right of the painting possibly suggests that he lacks a sense of being able to create his own light, and it as if he is calling out to the audience for support.

Hempel utilizes intriguing tactics to engage the viewer, both in his character's stares and in the interpretation of his pieces of art. Ironically, Hempel imposes a sense of detachment from the actual subject of the painting upon the viewer, a distance very prevalent in *Fatherhood*. The father's line of sight moves out toward the audience, but he does not look directly at his audience. Rather, it is as if the man is looking behind or even through the spectator, questioning the rights of the people to gaze upon him, for "Hempel creates an icy, palpable distance between the subject and the viewer....Even as they appear to be looking out, they are actually looking right past you."<sup>[7]</sup> In addition, Hempel stresses that there are countless numbers of possible interpretations of his artwork by his audiences. He believes that "a painting succeeds if viewers are able to attach their own stories to it."<sup>[7]</sup> Even in his own correspondence, he commends and encourages the questioning and interpretation of his art; and, further, he states that his true intentions are beside the point, that he is pleased that viewers react both with laughter and with uncertainty to this particular painting.<sup>[3]</sup>

The gender of the two subjects within *Fatherhood* and *La Charite* is not the sole feature that differentiates the paintings from each other, as one can notice other details that are thoughtfully changed to transform the interpretation. One glaring difference between the two parental paintings is the soccer ball that rests under the man's left

foot. Bouguereau's Madonna figure pours out a jar full of coins down the marble steps. Hempel defines the differences between the old and the contemporary, with a soccer ball in the same position. Whereas the woman pours out money freely and selflessly, possibly to the poor or needy, the soccer ball references a contemporary notion of parenting as the Soccer Mom, or more precisely put the Soccer Dad, shuttling kids to practice after practice after practice. Whereas Hempel's canvas alludes to an ever-so-common parent with unnecessary competitive endeavors to keep his family up with the Jones's, Bouguereau's painting reflects servitude, humility, and compassion from an iconic woman who apparently is more capable of caring for the young ones who surround her.

Wes Hempel, unlike Bouguereau, chose to use the male figure as a center point of his paintings; in nearly all of his works of art, muscular and visually appealing men take center stage. In doing so, Hempel goes against the widely used trend of attracting male audiences into gazing at art via the female figure. Instead he replaces the "iconographic female nude in art history with that of the male."<sup>[4]</sup> Bouguereau has painted pieces of art that specifically appeal to the male audience, for the naked women, poised and exposed, truly attracts the male gaze. Although Bouguereau did not decide to pursue this sort of male gaze in *La Charite*, John Berger does provide a poignant example from Bouguereau's often times excessive use of feminine beauty to draw in certain spectators in *Ways of Seeing*. The painting consists of dozens of naked women, floating into the sky, and three male creatures captivated as they watch this clearly heavenly event. The painter's personal vision was to "seize upon [the nakedness] – sometimes quite regardless of whether it is the first time or

the hundredth.”<sup>[8]</sup> It is interesting, then, to see that Wes Hempel has chosen to walk down a very different path, transforming the common male gaze into the emerging “new male gaze.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The new male gaze, a phrase that Rafael Risemberg coins in his article, is about the up-and-coming homosexual gaze within contemporary art. On the basis of Wes Hempel’s own statements, he offers testimony that his paintings correlate to his own homosexuality. Within nearly all of Wes Hempel’s paintings, he expresses his own individuality as a gay man, and further extenuates “men in the physical prime of their lives, and simultaneously, as a metaphor for the modern gay man, who feels vulnerable and thwarted even as he makes advance in society.”<sup>[4]</sup> Wes Hempel has done something extraordinary with this masterpiece: he successfully created a piece of art that transformed the idea of the male gaze with a female center point into the new male gaze. He connected both the heterosexuals and the homosexuals within one painting, and within one glare of a man’s face. Perhaps the most profound inspiration of the painting *Fatherhood* is equally saddening, as Hempel realizes that, due to his homosexuality, he will not have the joy and opportunity to have children of his own.<sup>[3]</sup> Whereas *La Charite* is forever able to gaze upon her own children, nurturing them tenderly and lovingly, Hempel will live the remainder of his life pondering what that would feel like. The face of the father in *Fatherhood* is, in real terms, the face of Hempel.

#### References

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