

Maybe it just all seemed so good in comparison to the florescent lights overhead and the way they made my eyes burn by the end of the day. There is no use in comparing sources of light though. They come and they go. Some remain in our minds, illuminating dark passageways long after they are gone.

While watching his feet as they took the stairs, I was touched by the look of his shoes, which were made of soft suede, probably second hand with rubber soles. They reminded me of an old friend and by mistake I began to be familiar with him. I had followed him from the auditorium where his introductory talk had me smitten. We walked from the auditorium up the stairs, which were painted grey, white and aqua blue. He walked in front and I followed behind, looking at the shoes and then the hem of his pants, which were flannel grey and probably came from an older brother. Later, I found out that they came from a younger brother who made his money in statistics and frequently had hand-me-downs. I tentatively invited him over for a cup of tea and to talk shop. Three weeks later, he came.

I was still looking at his shoes, when 45 minutes into the conversation we decided to make the trip down the hall to his studio. It was like crossing into another world. My room was still hesitant. Scraps of paper barely clung to the surface of the walls. Mostly, I had spent the first three months of school trying to dedication myself to artistry. A slow desperation was creeping in. It alternated with the kind of panic that comes from having too many choices and no focus for your own motivation. I thought that this place would become like my old studio - cluttered with painstaking attention to detail, plants, postcards and hand made, clay teacups from the flea market evenly distributed along the shelves. Already my impression of what the studio would/could be was disappearing but so far nothing had come to take its place.

Walking down the hallway from one studio to the other we made jokes. I don't remember what they were about. The drooping surface of the hallway walls never bothered me that much. Sagging under the weight of warped stretcher bars, sheets of moldy plywood and lined with the subtle odor of abandoned tuna sandwiches, the under-heated corridor was regardless, an inviting place. There were still people in the studios even this late at night and from the bridge between the two hallways you could see them through the windows, which were backlit by the fluorescent bulbs.

I find it almost impossible now to remember all of the details of my first encounter with Francis Alÿs' artwork. I remember being excited by it. I remember how my gaze shifted from the boy's shoes and pant cuffs to the book, which he pulled off of the shelf while making small talk. He handed it over to me and I noticed that his hands were shaking slightly. I think it was because he drank too much coffee. The book had a beige cover. I cannot remember anymore if it was hard or soft. I do remember that it was chilly in the studios and that I was shy and nervous to be talking about art.

I sat myself down in an old armchair in the corner of his room. I was cross-legged, in wool slacks and worn out sneakers. While the boy and I waxed philosophical, I nervously contributed to the casual etchings on the wooden armrest and began to flip

through the book.

There were two artworks that captured my eye that night and they continued to haunt me for years. Although I can't remember any of the specifics, my memory is totally dominated by them. The exact title of the first work fails me. All I have is a recollection of a clear blue sea. It's aqua blue with a hint of turquoise and the horizon is so long and wide that you can see the earth bend to meet it. In my mind's eye there is a line of rowboats that reach out towards the horizon. In my original memory there are no bodies. There were just the rowboats and the horizon and the clear blue sea. And there was the story that the boy told me, about how people came together to build a bridge between Miami and Havana. Although, at the time of the telling, it was more about Alÿs then it was about people coming together. I remember distinctly the feeling it brought out in me, an unmistakably gentle sadness.

I can recall turning over the pages of the book while the boy enthusiastically talked me through some of the work. He described a piece where the artist moved a mountain in Peru. The title was something along the lines of, *Faith Can Move Mountains*. In my recollection it was captured by a beautiful image, bathed in high altitude sunlight. The photograph was of a high mountainous desert, with sandy dunes and a line of people crawling up the whale-like spine of a hill, shovels in hand and white t-shirts on their backs. In my memory, they are lined up along the cresting peak of the mountaintop.

There might have been other images, maybe some drawings or maps, but all I remember are the white shirts against the caramel brown sand against the sky blue sky and a seemingly infinite line of mountainous dunes. I think that I may have added the shovels after the fact. I am doubtful that they were part of my first impression of the work, which exists as a long shot in my mind. I had never heard of Alÿs before and I remember my embarrassment a few months ago when I realized (years later) that Alÿs and his volunteers didn't actually move the *whole* mountain. I'm not even sure what moving a whole mountain would involve but somehow I had imagined them relocating the entire thing from its base. As if it were a pyramid and you could pick it up and move it 3 inches to the left, like a top hat or an upside down cone.

It's always hard to separate out your recollection of a first encounter from the knowledge that you accumulate about that person or thing along the way. This is especially complicated with experiences, which tend to change and redefine themselves immediately and continually over time. It never dawned on me that I needed to see Alÿs works in person, in an exhibition space, as an artwork. At the time, they functioned as an impression, a story and an image. They spoke to the part of me that wanted to move mountains. Or at the very least, wanted to make a similar suggestion. My earliest memories of Alÿs and his work are inextricably intertwined with that night in the studio. Looking back, I realize that it's even difficult for me to separate Alÿs from the boy. I find myself walking back and forth between the memories of our studios, looking for something more.

Emily Highfield