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On the Painter Beauford Delaney

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# ON THE PAINTER BEAUFORD DELANEY

From *Transition* 18 (1965)

James Baldwin

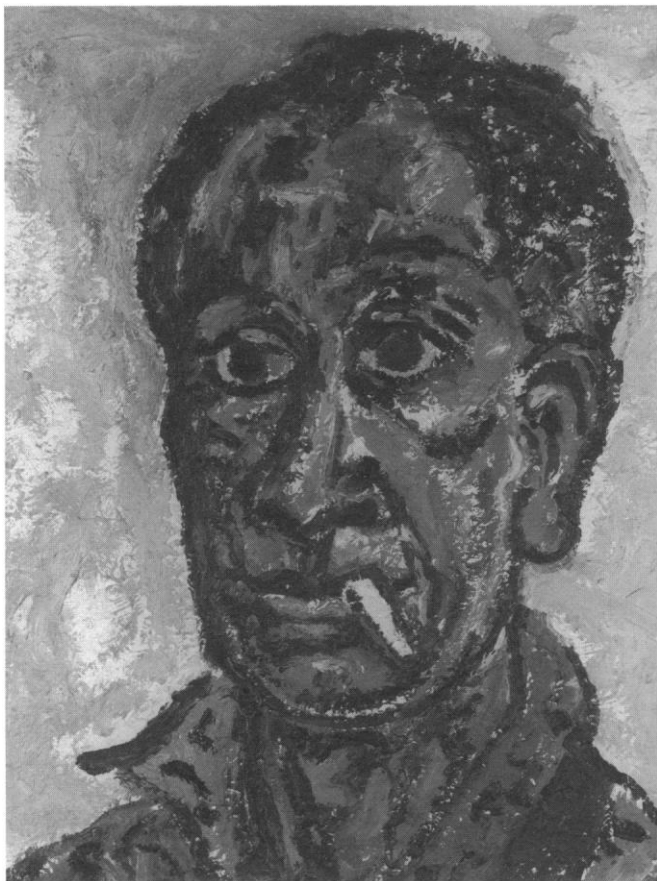
I learned about light from Beauford Delaney, the light contained in every thing, in every surface, in every face. Many years ago, in poverty and uncertainty, Beauford and I would walk together through the streets of New York City. He was then, and is now, working all the time, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he is seeing all the time; and the reality of his seeing caused me to begin to see. Now, what I began to see was not, at that time, to tell the truth, his painting; that came later. What I saw, first of all, was a brown leaf on black asphalt, oil moving like mercury in the black water of the gutter, grass pushing itself up through a crevice in the sidewalk. And because I was seeing it with Beauford, because Beauford caused me to see it, the very colors underwent a most disturbing and salutary change. The brown leaf on the black asphalt, for example—what colors were these, really? To stare at the leaf long enough, to try to apprehend the leaf, was to discover many colors in it; and though black had been described to me as the absence of light, it became very clear to me that if this were true, we would never have been able to

see the color, black: the light is trapped in it and struggles upward, rather like that grass pushing upward through the cement. It was humbling to be forced to realize that the light fell down from heaven, on everything, on everybody, and that the light was always changing. Paradoxically, this meant for me that memory is a traitor and that life does not contain the past tense: the sunset one saw yesterday, the leaf that burned, or the rain that fell, have not really been seen unless one is prepared to see them every day. As Beauford is, to his eternal credit, and for our health and hope.

Perhaps I am so struck by the light in Beauford's paintings because he comes from darkness—as I do; as, in fact, we all do. But the darkness of Beauford's beginnings, in Tennessee, many years ago, was a black-blue midnight indeed, opaque, and full of sorrow. And I do not know, nor will any of us ever really know, what kind of strength it was that enabled him to make so dogged and splendid a journey. In any case, from Tennessee, he eventually came to Paris (I have the impression that he walked and swam) and for a while lived in a suburb

of Paris, Clamart. It was at this time that I began to see Beauford's painting in a new way, and it was also at this time that Beauford's paintings underwent a most striking metamorphosis into freedom. I know this sounds extremely subjective, but let it stand; it is not really as subjective as it sounds. There was a window in Beauford's house in Clamart before which we often sat—late at night, early in the morning, at noon. This window looked out on a garden; or, rather, it would have looked out on a garden if it had not been for the leaves and branches of a large tree which pressed directly against the window. Everything one saw from this window, then, was filtered through these leaves. And this window was a kind of universe, moaning and wailing when it rained, light of the morning, and as blue as the blues when the last light of the sun departed.

Well, that life, that light, that miracle are what I began to see in Beauford's paintings, and this light began to stretch back for me over all the time we had known each other, and over much more time than that, and this light held the power to illuminate, even to redeem and reconcile and heal. For Beauford's work leads the inner and the outer eye, directly and inexorably, to a new confrontation with reality. At this moment, one begins to apprehend the nature of his triumph. And the beauty of his triumph, and the proof that it is a real one, is that he makes it ours. Perhaps I should not say, flatly, what I believe—that he is a great painter, among the very greatest; but I do know that great art can only be created out of love, and that no greater lover has ever held a brush.



*Beauford Delaney,  
Self Portrait. 1965.  
Oil on canvas,  
23 × 19¼ in. Courtesy  
of the Whitney Museum  
of American Art*