Seeing Beyond the Obvious: Relationship or Transaction

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Optical illusions are usually seen as a clever trick for the eye. A vase becomes two profiles. A series of small patterns produce a three-dimensional image. The eye has to trip then refocus and see the new image. The illusions are ubiquitous, quick exercises in an optical version of slight of hand. But some are planned to be more. Some challenge not only the eye to refocus, but also the mind. What is seen at first reveals something deeper to consider.

In Nick Sousanis' book, *Unflattening*, the author uses pen and ink to delve into philosophical questions of human origin. He narrates and illustrates a discussion of how our thoughts and conclusions are formed. He presents black and white comic drawings to guide and follow his words while using the black and white medium to create optical illusions. What as first blush appears to be a spine of vertebrae bones gives way to outlines of bodies standing in line (15). Rays from a prism become DNA chains (36-37). Map lines swirl into VanGoghesque clouds (137). These artistic tricks are not meant to entertain the eye, rather to challenge the mind as it digests the words alongside the images.

Another example of mindful optical illusion is in Vanessa Dion Fletcher's sculptural piece, "Relationship or Transaction." On display at Museum London in London Ontario, Fletcher’s work is an exaggerated sized reproduction of the 1764 Niagara Treaty Western Great Lakes Chain Confederacy Wampum Belt. Historically, native peoples used wampum belts to signify a relationship made by treaty or transaction. French and British explorers interpreted the beads to be literal currency. But the beads of the belts were
meant to symbolize polishing processes of enduring relationships and the belt showed the bonds a certain agreement made during the relationship.

The Western Great Lakes Belt was woven from small purple and white beads. It was probably 5-6 feet in length and roughly 1 foot wide. Fletcher’s version is at least 8 feet long and 4 feet wide. The enlargement is due to Fletcher's use of rolled Canadian five-dollar bills in place of beads. Her use of present day currency challenges the eye not to see a pattern of antique beads, but to consider the transactional history of the native peoples and European settlers and what their relationship is today.

Seeing beyond the obvious image can be more than a visual adjustment. It can challenge the way we perceive the idea in front of us and enhance the information we’re taking in. The illusions allow us to seek connections that weren't there at first glance. As Sousanis explains, provoking images can accompany text and create "associations that stretch web-like across the page braiding fragments into a cohesive whole."

Vanessa Dion Fletcher's sculptural piece, “Relationship or Transaction”
http://cargocollective.com/dionfletcher/Relationship-or-Transaction