

The Art of the Verso: Coming at You from the Rear

Jonathan Curiel Wed June 12th, 2019 4:26pm

In “Philippe Gronon: Versos,” at the Modernism Gallery, the photographer exhibits images of the least-viewed sides of famous paintings.



Installation view of Philippe GRONON: Versos courtesy of Modernism, Inc.

In the art world, the “verso” side of a painting is the reverse side — the back of an artwork that has curators’ stickers on it, along with exposed wood and markings that aren’t meant for public consumption. If the front side is “Broadway,” the verso side isn’t even “off-Broadway.” It’s “off limits.” Usually, anyway. But that’s been changing over the years as artists and curators realize how fascinating and revealing these reverse sides can be.

Working with museums across Europe and a New York gallery, the Brazilian artist Vik Muniz has done a series of verso sculptures based on the works of da Vinci, Vermeer, Rembrandt,

and others. In 2001, the Harvard Art Museums showcased the art of Picasso, Michelangelo, and John Singer Sargent in “**Verso: The Flip Side of Master Drawings**,” which the university said was “the first exhibition devoted entirely to the display of drawings as three-dimensional objects with both a front and a back.”

The French photographer **Philippe Gronon** adds to this canon of work with “**Versos**,” an exhibit at San Francisco’s **Modernism Gallery** that spotlights the backsides of well-regarded paintings in the Louvre, d’Orsay, Pompidou Center, and other French institutions. With dozens of photos that are the exact size of the original works, Gronon’s color images are much more than facsimiles. They’re behind-the-scenes narratives that — sometimes with little information, other times with an avalanche — give away their clues.

In Gronon’s image of Raphael’s *Ezekiel’s Vision*, a 500-year-old painting that the Louvre owns, we see a few worn-out stickers, some odd letters and numbers, and faded shades of browns, blacks, reds, grays, and other colors. It’s beautifully and mysteriously abstract — a work that you can imagine Jasper Johns doing on a whim. And then there’s Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies*, which the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Saint-Étienne, France owns and has lent out across the world — evident by the countless stickers on the back that show it was shipped to Scotland, England, the United States, and other locales. The verso’s side-by-side stickers are reminiscent of a luggage piece that airport stewards have repeatedly tagged for security. This is the practical, unglamorous side of a Monet masterpiece, but it speaks to Monet’s posthumous value as much as anything. “Show, don’t tell” is one of storytelling’s consummate tenets. Here’s that tenet in action.

Unlike Harvard’s exhibit, Gronon’s art never shows the art’s front sides. We’re forced to imagine what they look like if we don’t know already — or we’re forced to go to our smartphones if we’re really curious. But there’s a reason that Gronon only documents the back sides, and it makes perfect sense.

“It’s interesting to point to things you can’t imagine,” Gronon tells *SF Weekly* in a phone interview from France. “It’s a painting at its origin. But you can’t imagine that the verso of the painting can become another painting.”

Like Muniz, Gronon will work with museums and estates over many months to get full permission to document the original works. And he spends almost as much time choosing which paintings to document. So the behind-the-scenes work is often the toughest part of making behind-the-art artwork that has to be a visual standout.

“I make a big casting to find versos,” Gronon says. “It should be its own painting — not only a verso of a painting. ... I have a verso of a painting by Leonardo da Vinci from the Louvre that has a lot of very fine drawings, like of bones. And you have small drawings in the back by da Vinci. For some artists, the back was very important.”

“Philippe Gronon: Versos” *Through June 28, at Modernism, 724 Ellis St. Free; 415-541-0461 or modernisminc.com.*