

I can't remember how long we've owned one of John Gibson's "ball" paintings, which has had pride of place in many of the houses we've inhabited over the years. It's large, an oil on panel, with a stacked pyramid of balls of varying colors sitting in light that slants in on them from the right.

We own numerous other paintings and prints too, a few of which, I confess to my shame, I more or less stop seeing after a while -- they become backdrop, almost invisible. But when that happens, we move them to another room, another wall, in order to see them fresh, to renew our pleasure in them.

Not John's. We simply don't need to with John's. The pleasure is renewed every time we look.

First, and abidingly, there is the lusciousness of the way John applies paint. In our painting, the stippled feathering of brown over red in the background, something that rewards close examination. The smoother, richer layering of color on the balls themselves, which brings a satisfying solidity to each one. And then, the mark of their creator in the lines scratched through the balls' thicker paint -- contour lines announcing the perfect roundness of each one; contour lines you can't see unless you stand close to the painting to look at how John made it.

There's the light around the balls, the aura above them seeming to lift the background brown from the red underneath it, giving the sense of something glowing and almost magical emanating from the balls; as well as the brilliance of the balls' clear colors as they receive the light falling on them. They sit in light, these globes, but they generate it somehow too.

And of course, the shadows -- the ones on them, and the ones they cast. The complete violent blackness of the deepest shadows contrasting with the lovely moon-like gradations on the balls that have more light. Initially these shadows seem almost mathematically precise in the way they're cast; but then you notice that in places it's invented, the way the shadows fall, and that it works slightly differently on each ball, and with the shadow each ball throws. There's whimsy here then, rather than math. Or maybe in addition to it, I can't be sure.

All of this leads to the revelation of the impossibility of the whole contrivance -- the richly painted balls, the coiled spiral on each one asserting its roundness; the bright colors making the painting seem a kind of circus act, a balancing act: the beautiful balls sitting so precisely poised on each other in a way that simply couldn't happen -- partly because there are open dark spaces at the bottom of the pyramid they form, spaces where balls are missing from the pyramid's base. And partly because, after all, they are round! they are balls! they want to roll away. And yet they don't.

There's an enormous tension, then, in this seemingly light-hearted painting, and the mind doesn't tire of trying to work through it somehow, revising it endlessly, imaginatively, attempting to resolve the conundrum John has created -- all the while relishing the close observation which that attempt demands.