

We'd stood in front of one of his pictures in a quiet gallery in a grand building in London, a place full of the most beautiful paintings and almost nobody but us there looking at them, and you'd told me the story about how Cezanne would slash and burn his one canvasses in a fury, or when his child poked holes in them would exclaim with delight, look! He's given it windows! He's opened up the chimney!; how one day he threw something he was working on, a study of apples, out of the window of the top floor of his house and it landed in the branches of a fruit tree below, and he left it for weeks, till the day he looked up, saw it again and called to his son to go and get the ladder because it had ripened enough for him to work on a bit more.

The painting you we were standing in front of when you told me this, a painting of a lake and some trees, was so full of the colour green that its almost all I remember about it that greenness, though I remember you pointing it out to me how everything in the picture was treated with the same importance or lack of importance, how every slab or flick of colour mattered as much as every other, that that's how the painting made its shapes, and it mattered, too, that we knew it was a painting, something made, how Cezanne has wanted people who saw it to see how it was formed out of paint, made of colour, made of surface, before they even thought of trees or a lake.

That way, you said, the artifice was what made the place in the picture - as well as the picture - truly alive. That way, we knew it was telling us no lies, it was not deluding us, it was real.

Artful, Ali Smith p87-88