Nude with Crossed Eyes

A naked woman is sitting outdoors with her knees up in front of her, a backpack balanced between her legs. She is holding up a notebook and a pen close to her face, studying a butterfly that has just landed on the tip of the pen. Her eyes are crossed, the butterfly is that close. Her expression is serious, careful so as not to scare it away. Behind her is the rock she's sitting against. Her hair is wet.

Together, the front and back cover of the open notebook, from our perspective, resemble the shape of a butterfly that has spread its wings. But only in shape, in the symmetry of its shape. For in terms of color and content, the notebook's front and back cover bear no such correlation to each other: the front is a dizzying blend of colors (that could be just a blend, or could depict a more detailed scene we can't make out); the back cover is all black.

The notebook is being held up by the woman with her left hand. She holds the pen in her right, up close to the notebook. The butterfly perched atop it we see in profile, facing the notebook, its wings tucked up behind its back, unmajestically unspread. On the wing facing us, pointing upwards and near flush with the plane of the canvas, is a complex pattern of colors with one exception, one big black dot in the middle of it. The left wing not facing us we assume looks the same, because this is a butterfly we're looking at now, not a notebook, and butterflies, for all their complex patterns, are always symmetrical.

But we don't see this symmetry. We didn't see it with the notebook, and we don't see it now with the butterfly. And that's all that matters in the end, with a painting: what we see. And what do we see in this painting, at base, if we look past all the little details? We see a woman. Naked, with

crossed eyes, the viewer thinking about symmetry thinks. She who is the butterfly embodied, the notebook come to life. Life like the butterfly, facing us like the notebook, in full naked XX/XY chromosomal (naturally symmetrical) display. True, if we look closely, her symmetry is not totally exact. A birthmark here, a rosiness there, a shadow here. Wet hair tucked behind ears unevenly. A single right earring versus a plurality of earrings running up her left ear like a zipper. But seen from afar, or glanced at briefly from up close, she does appear to take on the symmetry of which we are deprived by the butterfly whose wings are not spread, and by the notebook whose covers are night and day. Because seen in this passive manner, it's her nakedness and eyes that triumph. Her momentarily crossed eyes, each turned equally inwards, that distract us from all the other lovely features of her face, that lead our eyes, with hers, towards the butterfly in the middle of the canvas — these, and her undressed body, its lack of possibly asymmetrical clothing, that we see above all else. Nakedness and crossed eyes; crossed eyes and nakedness. These are the two elements that give her this air of symmetry, and this is an aesthetic quality that is not so easily produced in realistic portraits.

But let us linger. There's more here. The details tell a story. This young woman with crossed eyes had been writing before she had been disrupted by the butterfly. But what had she been writing? Her wet hair, we think, suggests she'd just gone swimming. Swimming, of course, naked.

And then sat down to write about it.