

# Art and the Ambiguity in Shadows

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Art is often discussed in the context of the “sensation” of a shadowed white wall. Russell (1912) remarked that typically only “artists and philosophers” tend to be aware that this sensation is actually as of greyness, while Overgaard (2010) suggests that one can see greyness in the shadow by taking the “reflective attitude of a painter”. On the other hand, among those who deny that there is any such grey sensation, both Gibson (1986) and Schwitzgebel (2011) speculate that the root of the mistake is to take the analogy between seeing and painting too literally. I think that art *is* involved in the apparent qualitative similarity between a shadow and a grey patch, but in quite a different way than both Overgaard or Schwitzgebel suggest. I will draw on recent research which suggests that multistable perception (such as happens when looking at a duck/rabbit picture) is part of a general mechanism that allows ‘higher’ cognitive processes input into the disambiguation of perceptual stimuli (Leopold & Logothetis, 1999). I will argue that the shadow on the wall is an ambiguous situation of precisely this sort; though various cues bias us towards seeing it veridically (as a shadow on a white wall), the same mechanisms responsible for perceptual switching in ambiguous images allow us to see it as grey, if briefly, either intentionally or by prompting. The attempt to realistically depict a shadow on a flat canvas is just such a prompt. And just as it is difficult to spot that the duck and rabbit are not experienced at the same time, it is also difficult to spot that the ‘grey appearance’ of the shadowed wall is not experienced at the same time as the shadow itself. This can give the illusion that both are present in the experience of the shadow, and therefore that the greyness is an introspectible part of the experience.