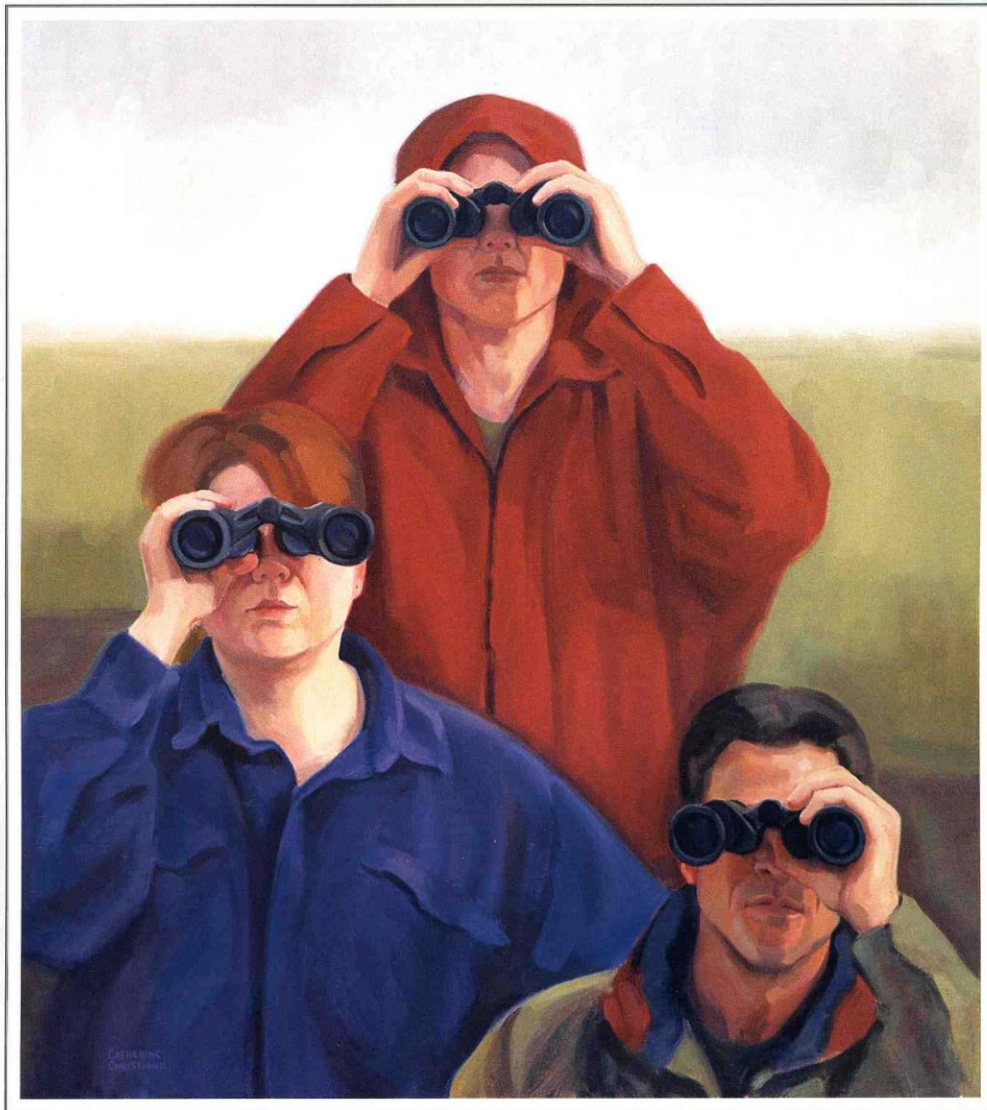


# JAMA<sup>®</sup>

January 7, 2004

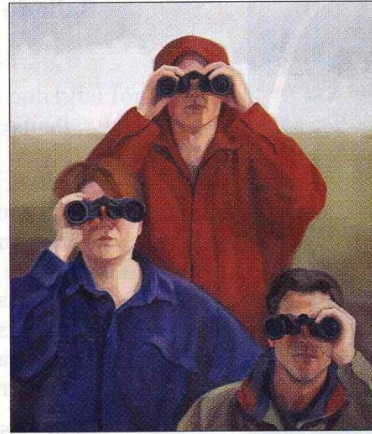
The Journal of the American Medical Association



HERE IS AN ART TO LOOKING, AS ANY FINE ARTIST—OR scientist or clinician—can attest. There is a paradox to looking as well: What happens when the observer is also the observed? Who is the object? Who is the subject? What transpires between them? And what happens when the observer seals the exchange of looks in a portrait, where then it is possible for a third observer, the spectator, to also enter, unseen by either? Artists and scientists from Van Eyck to Velázquez to Magritte to Heisenberg have pondered the riddle, but have only succeeded in uncovering deeper layers of the same phenomenon. In a sense, this is the conundrum Connecticut artist Catherine Christiano (1962- ) poses in *Binoculars* (cover). It is part of a series of four paintings she recently completed of people looking through binoculars, sunglasses, a camera lens, or, hidden, playing the part of voyeur. The common theme of the series is observation, but it is a special type of observation, one that creates an unequal relationship between observer and observed: “mechanical eyes,” as Christiano terms these ubiquitous instruments or actions, have no souls. Moreover, they hide the very windows through which one human soul communicates with another.

Not surprisingly for someone who liked science and math, Christiano’s original career began in the sciences, where she studied everything from drafting to chemistry to physics. She received the degree of bachelor of engineering (chemical) from Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1984. Four years later, in 1988, she received the degree of master of business administration from Rutgers University Graduate School of Management in Newark. But an interest in art that had been present since her earliest years persisted and, in 1990, Christiano enrolled at the National Academy of Design in New York City, where she remained for two years. For the next decade or so she remained in the business arena, but studied art, including anatomy, whenever she could. Finally, in 2001 Christiano obtained a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Connecticut. *Binoculars* was her senior thesis project and was exhibited at the Lyme Academy the year of her graduation. The date of the painting is significant, perhaps even symbolic, for beyond all its philosophical musings, it also opens the new millennium with the artist looking toward the horizon opened by a new career.

Christiano’s engineering background is evident in the careful construction of the painting. Its large, predominant areas of reds, blues, and greens take the shape of a pyramid set against a flat, indeterminate landscape. With binoculars taking the place of eyes (the most important being at the peak



Catherine Christiano (1962- ), *Binoculars*, 2001, American. Oil on linen. 86.3 × 76.2 cm.

of the pyramid, as suggested by the use of both hands, the others in supporting roles), the identities of the models remain not only unknown, but mysterious, even a little unsettling. There is no hint of what they are looking at, what they are seeing, what judgments they are making. Their expressions remain as inscrutable as the expression of the sphinx. All appear to be looking at the same thing—or at least in the same direction. In spite of this apparent unity, however, the figures remain separate and independent, each occupying its own space. (It should be noted that Christiano was unable to have all the models sit simultaneously, so she did what the 17th-century Dutch flower painters did: She painted each separately and then arranged the images in a group.) On the other hand, each figure is necessary to the integrity of the pyramid and balance of the composition, not only in details of line and color, but even in how each holds the binoculars, so that their hands and arms—left, right, both—form its sides and top. If it is the future they are trying to fathom, they are engaging in an occupation as old as humans and as noncommunicative as an Egyptian cat. But there is no harm to looking, so long as one knows it is part of the art.

Since 1997 Christiano has had numerous juried exhibitions throughout Connecticut and has won several awards. In 2000, she submitted the winning design for the new town seal of Old Lyme, Connecticut. Christiano works in both oil and tempera, letting the subject of her work determine the medium. For *Binoculars* she preferred oil on linen.

M. Therese Southgate, MD

Courtesy of the artist. Copyright © Catherine Christiano (<http://www.CatherineChristiano.com>); photography by Rick Scanlan.

The Cover Section Editor: M. Therese Southgate, MD, Senior Contributing Editor.