Admiring the merits of thematic slipperiness

By Sebastian Smee

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The word "slipperiness," on the surface, is slippery, hard to define. "Slippery" is used nowadays, it seems, to describe things that are vague, imprecise or fuzzy, as in the phrase "slippery slope," which connotes a gradual descent into a dangerous or undesirable state. In the arts, "slippery" is often used to describe works that are not clearly defined, that are open to interpretation, or that are abstract or surreal.

One of the most slippery of all is the concept of "slipperiness" itself. What does it mean to say that something is slippery? Is it a metaphor for something else? Or is it a way of saying that something is hard to pin down or understand?

In the case of "slipperiness," it seems to be both. It is a word that is used to describe the way in which certain artworks or ideas are not easily grasped or understood, but that also serves to highlight the way in which the arts themselves are slippery, constantly evolving and changing.

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