

# ARE WE AFRAID OF BEAUTY?

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Before the Renaissance art was about beauty and divinity. After the Renaissance it was assumed that all art would be beautiful. I am taking the term 'beauty' where either the subject is considered beautiful, or there is an aesthetic balanced harmony and is considered beautiful from a historic viewpoint. For example, I personally do not find a Botticelli beautiful, but I can appreciate why others do. I find Georgia O'Keefe's work beautiful, but this is where the 'beauty' becomes subjective, yet both Botticelli and O'Keefe historically have been considered 'beautiful'. Contemporary art has forced the idea of beauty within art to be a 'taboo', instead art needs to have a message about life itself, focusing on the harsh realities rather than celebrating the beauties within life. This viewpoint has evolved over 100 years from Duchamp's urinal and the dawn of conceptual art.

Duchamp revolutionised art, questioning what constituted as art and this led to the inspiring movements from Abstract Expressionists to the New British Artists of the 90's. Conceptual art has empowered the artist to create beautiful land sculptures and deeply profound sculptures of preserved dissected animals, which touch the viewer in a way that a painting in a gallery would struggle to do. Objects and installations are multi-sensory artworks, whereas the painting will always remain visual, art works of this genre are becoming less and less exciting. Some artists have started to associate great art works as shocking, therefore all the emphasis is placed upon the shock rather than evaluating it as a 'good piece of art'. A pile of bricks being put in a gallery 50 years ago was shocking at the time as it had never been done before, Emin's bed was controversial because she was the first to do it, but those artists continuing in the same genre are no longer considered shocking, but passé. There seems to be a trend that a great artwork needs to be shocking, and you need to portray something vulgar, ugly or controversial. Instead they are simply patronising the viewer because they have seen all this before and it is no longer original, questioning art, or the viewer and it is becoming a little boring. It has been forgotten that Monet was as controversial as Hirst and it is not the shock that made the great artworks but the originality.

Sadly artists are probably trying to be as shocking as possible to achieve publicity in the newspapers, but even media coverage is reducing because it is becoming the norm. For example, the Swiss artist Christoph Buechel has put a swingers sex club 'Element 6' in Vienna's Secession art venue, so that visitors viewing Gustav Klimt's 'Beethovens Frieze' have to pass mattresses, erotic images and statues covered in condoms. Buechel does not try and deny that he is being deliberately controversial, and politicians have openly criticised the art work but:

"Buechel's efforts to cause a large scandal appear to have largely failed, with many ordinary Austrians being more amused than shocked by it."<sup>1</sup>

This is indicating that the majority have become de-sensitised to shock; the public has seen too many pornographic artworks and films such as Saw and Hostel. So the art is achieving nothing but a lame attempt at publicity to boost popularity and sales.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Phillips, "[Swingers sex club built in art gallery](http://www.metro.co.uk)", www.metro.co.uk, 2010

Duchamp believed that art had become morally corrupt which is why he displayed his urinal and famously gave up art for life (whether he did or did not is still debated). Sadly 100 years on, art is still morally corrupt, if not more so. Art is about commodity and consumerism; artists are deliberately being shocking to get publicity so their art is noticed. Art has become about ego and the market and is becoming a part of the celebrity culture. As Craig Martin says, "The Art of today shows the world as it is,"<sup>2</sup> (but we know how the world is as it affects us all daily, art does not need to patronise to show us this. I want art to challenge me, not to be an extension of BBC News 24. I'm not advocating that art should be quaint chocolate-box landscapes; just not that it is deliberately controversial for no other reason. Conceptual art is starting to degrade the quality of art, and artists now need to be brave enough to take its great achievements of the last 100 years and move it forward to something new and exciting!

The fascination of art portraying life has skewed towards showing the cruelty of life, rather than celebrating the miracles. Beauty has been shied away from, and to show it within art is considered quaint and backward, art has forgotten that life can be beautiful. The contemporary philosopher, Roger Scruton, believes "I think we are losing beauty and with it the meaning of life."<sup>3</sup> This creates a paradox - if art is showing life but not beauty, it is changing societies view of life to see only the vulgarity, focusing on sadness rather than happiness. According to Scruton, art has become preoccupied with purpose, brand and consumerism. We have lost Oscar Wilde's idea that "All art is absolutely useless"<sup>4</sup>. If art has no purpose, then art can be created for itself. How many artists admit they have created something just because they felt like it? It would be career suicide, the gallery always needs a full 'statement' of intent, and it isn't accepted to create without a message. Traditional art considered that beauty within was a spiritual necessity to enrich the soul, and following the Platonic belief that beauty would lead both the artist and viewer to the divine. With the industrialisation and mechanisation of war in the twentieth century, art could no longer be beautiful because life wasn't. But can life be beautiful if art does not give it hope to be beautiful? Scruton believes that without beauty in art we have lost our ideal, hope and beauty and the "cult of ugliness is leading us into a spiritual desert."<sup>5</sup> During the recent financial boom greed and consumerism has literally caused the collapse of society and the infrastructure of it, but being an idealist, that is not what life is about - art should not just show this side of society. Life is also about hope, compassion and love, which still exists but simply is not reflected within art. Of course, there are those who are not deliberately provocative, but they are far from creating great art works. Instead, they create bland canvases that will colour co-ordinate with the magnolia paintwork of middle class homes.

Craig Martin would argue that it is the artist's role to make something beautiful, even though it may not normally be perceived as such. A contemporary viewpoint of Rembrandt and his belief was that beauty is all around us in the everyday, we merely need to find it. I think Hirst achieved this in his animals in formaldehyde, for example, 'Death in the Mind of Someone Living' was a preserved shark. The sheer magnitude, stillness and peace of the shark suspended in what could have been water allowed the viewer to admire the beauty of the creature. Yet, you also held it in respect, as the viewer knew it was a vicious predator and cruel to its victims. Hirst's fascination with

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Scruton "Why Beauty Matters", BBC2, 2009,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

death is a traditional concept, one that artists have shared for hundreds of years. Bosch created paintings of grotesque imagery depicting torturous hell, and Bosch was achieving this in the fifteenth century, so is this view now a little outdated? Very few artists are continuing to achieve the idea of creating beauty from confronting the everyday. One exception being Chris Ofili, beautifully executing a wide variety of subjects but unfortunately he is in the minority. Ultimately this ideal is failing because of the shift towards shock rather than originality. Unfortunately, many art movements do not achieve their goal. Minimalists wanted to bring art to the public and not have meaning behind it, apart from the pure geometry of the pieces. The public however didn't understand what they were trying to achieve, only other artists did therefore continuing the elitist artworks of the modernist era. Duchamp wanted to end the corruption within the art market, but 100 years on that is what art is; a self referring product within a society obsessed with consumerism. Craig Martin also thinks that art should capture the imagination, but how can it when it is showing us "how the world as it is"? We know what life is like as we live it and art showing this does not inspire the imagination, it merely depresses us as we are shown the hardship of life.

There is hope; the 2009 Turner Prize included Roger Hiorns stunning blue crystal installations and Richard Wrights beautiful gouache paintings. I am not against conceptual art, rather what it has degraded into. Beauty should not be a taboo and artists shouldn't feel pressurised into explaining their work and placing themselves within art history. Artists should be creating work true to their own ideals, and furthering art into something interesting and new rather than pandering to the new cult of commodity. Can leading contemporary artists pick up their paintbrushes (metaphorically speaking) and paint from their hearts rather than their brains, and not worry if what they are creating is or is not contemporary, sensational or beautiful? Or am I simply a 21<sup>st</sup> century romantic, and is that such a bad thing?

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March 2010