

ALONE IN THE WEST WITH A PORTRAIT OF ART HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

How do we find our place in the historical narrative of art on the vast continuum of human creativity? Art is a reflection and director of culture that embodies historic movements and fundamental principles that enable us to see a continuity and a relationship to humanity over the centuries. To understand our place in the historical canon we must reflect on the past to evaluate our current situation. We draw from the past to inform our understanding of art and culture to take responsibility for the direction of art in the future. To do this we must find a relationship to the aesthetics of historical, cultural movements and investigate the ideas and processes of different ages, to see how we can relate to them, and figure out how to represent the expanding collection of culture and art going forward.

INTRODUCTION

Although artists are not exempt from examination, they have the freedom to work from a place of imagination and personal experience, guided by a continuous process of feedback and evaluation that takes place during the act of engaging with materials to create and transform them. This process is not free from the influence of historical forces and past artistic practices, and some of these influences and parameters will be explored in this thesis to assess their potential for expression.

The story and explorations in this thesis will be told through the lens of personal experience and responses to art movements, as art making is a highly personal and reactive event. As such, it is inevitable that my own story and experiences will find their way into this account.

There are many conflicts and contradicting forces acting on the artist simultaneously, but these pressures are necessary. Historically impactful art movements were in response to very difficult challenges and there is evidence that great pressure in many forms will act on us indefinitely and we do our best to understand how to creatively and critically process the events of the individual and collective to form a visual language that articulates our best understanding.

My intent in this process is to outline a few selected examples of art movements in their historical context. Of course, in any given age there were incredibly complex events happening so this is a way to pull out a few lasting principles from the expanse of history.

In this thesis, I will also examine the process of art-making, exploring how I create and transform materials to express my experiences and observations. I will explore the role of

intuition and imagination in the creative process, as well as the influence of historical and cultural forces on the work of artists and how they relate to the spirit of an age.

By examining the work of various artists and their unique approaches to art-making, and how those are related to cultural movements, we will gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which artists engage with their materials and the world around them. Through this exploration, I hope to shed light on the value of art as a means of personal expression and a reflection of the human experience.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTIST

The process of unraveling the mysteries of the subconscious or unconscious and intuitive is an incredibly exciting and engaging experience. While personal dreams and psychological states or quixotic impulses may not always be of interest to others, the act of honestly addressing these experiences can create a strong psychological bond between individuals and a broader audience (the unaffected truth is usually strange, and people usually express a genuine gratitude for those willing to go there). By tapping into the automatic process and utilizing archetypes and motifs from art history, I am challenging my mind to find connections that may not be able to be expressed rationally but seem to have a deeper connection that engages my mind in a way that is encouraged by art and other artists and the creative process. The goal is to be acutely aware of the suggestions of the material to hopefully create works that resonate with a wide audience on a deep, emotional level. Isn't it more exciting to follow the guide of a dream where the normal materials of life get mixed into a puzzling and complex logic and where the rules of the rational world are no longer the dominant force?

I try to access my unconscious to create meaningful and evocative connections by eliminating the need to make a rational image and focus on the possibilities of observing how material can form together to spark a connection that creates bits of narrative by unconscious association. Often the result feels like waking from a dream as there is some story or message out of reach or bits of psychedelic allegory that suggest a message. By embracing intuition and allowing the creative process to unfold organically, I hope to create powerful and impactful art that speaks to the shared human experience of aesthetic beauty and the complexities of life.

In this passage, I acknowledge the deep connection that humanity has to its roots and the cosmic scale of time and space. I caution against abandoning the virtues and principles that have been established over civilizations, despite the perception of social evolution and advancement. I believe that art is a powerful force that helps us understand our place in the universe and appreciate the creative achievements of humans. I think with a certain sensitivity we are bound to absorb art and aesthetics. The pieces of the imagery I digest mold some of the formal aspects of my art and any individual's art is a self-contained mimicry of their conception of art as they understand it.

Art is effected by the time, place, technology and historical events of the culture surrounding it. Artists are bound to their time, but each new generation has elements that create new effects and opportunities to build on the past. DaVinci's exploration of anatomy informed his work on the figure, the adoption of mirrors and lenses enabled Renaissance artists to create perspective and the effective illusion of space. The tube of paint allowed impressionists to leave their studios and paint outdoors; to capture light and atmosphere. Trade routes being opened allowed media to cross-pollinate cultures; the Japanese wood block prints that were packing material for shipped goods coming from Japan, changed western painting in Paris during post-impressionism. These innovations happened during different periods and allowed for movements to explore new methods and gave new tools to artists. I emphasize the importance of the long and rich history of art and the stewardship of artworks over the centuries, as well as the benefits of rigorous study in art history even though the novelty of these events do not seem as impactful or transgressive in our contemporary atmosphere.

THE ANCIENT WESTERN IDEAL

I have studied art history for the last twenty years and have seen the influence of one style on another. It began slowly, I started to recognize individual artist by their style and then I could clearly see the influence of previous artist in their work. Through tracing everything back to its source, I have confirmed the importance of historical artistic influence and gained confidence in my own work. Most of the major influence on western art can be traced back to the Greeks who over centuries refined and built some of the most sophisticated works with the limited aid of fairly primitive technology. The Greeks established some of the first real rules of proportion and aesthetic ideals that we can track over the centuries. This understanding that we are not re-inventing the wheel and that a lot of the established and ancient principles are impressively refined is something I was able to accept and pay “homage” to. There is an epic quality to the mythos and artistic accomplishments of the ancient world that still remains fresh and alive, which is why the first step in my process is to build a reference to the foundation of the Greek temple, using a compass, pencil, and straight edge to create a floor plan through a series of steps: the circle, triangle, square, and golden ratio. There is a journey through the basic forms; all are contained within and grow out of each other. The Renaissance was a revitalization of Greek and Roman ideals, and this part of my process is an effort to evoke that event. Michelangelo believed he was freeing the slaves from the stone as he chiseled away. This idea that there is some form or narrative buried in material and it is the artist’s job to interact and allow the narrative to appear and not through the domination or mastery over a given material, leads my understanding of the artistic process. It seems to find the balance of imagination of

approach and a high sensitivity to a much greater potential for a real conversation to happen as opposed to the art being an artist or personality sermonizing for some aesthetic preference.

The temple is not an end in itself but a place for interaction and activity, where figures and actions take place to activate the interaction of art and life. The Parthenon, which is a monument to the Greek ideal was born out of a great conflict as well. The Greco-Persian Wars, which took place in the 5th century BCE, had a significant impact on the creation of the Acropolis in Athens. The conflict between the Greek city-states and the Persian Empire resulted in the destruction of the Acropolis in 480 BCE, when the Persians sacked Athens and burned the city, including the temples and buildings on the Acropolis.

After the Greek victory in the Battle of Plataea in 479 BCE, the Athenians began to rebuild their city and the Acropolis. The leader of Athens at the time, Pericles, initiated the ambitious rebuilding project known as the Periclean building program in 447 BCE. This program aimed to transform the Acropolis into a magnificent showcase of Athenian power, wealth, and artistic achievement.

The most famous structure from this period is the Parthenon, a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, the patron deity of Athens. The construction of the Parthenon, along with other structures such as the Propylaea, the Erechtheion, and the Temple of Athena Nike, marked the beginning of the Golden Age of Athens.

The Greco-Persian Wars not only led to the physical rebuilding of the Acropolis but also influenced the artistic style and subject matter of the structures. The friezes and metopes of the Parthenon, for example, depict scenes of Greeks and Persians, serving as an allegory of the triumph of civilization over barbarism.

The Athenian's triumph over the Persians in the Greco-Persian War, where they were greatly outnumbered, and had they lost, faced the consequences of being subjugated by a tyrannical force was really a miraculous victory. The destruction of the original temple during the conflict cleared the space for them to build an even more magnificent temple in its place, which enshrined the values and beauty of that culture which would go on to inspire future movements in the arts. I think it is worth noting that the forms of the Acropolis were earned in a sense and played an active role as a set for the communal events of Athenians for almost 1000 years. The aesthetics and mythos of the Greeks were carried throughout the ages to inspire and be integrated into the art of other artistic movements.

This phenomenon gives evidence that art is not born in a vacuum of peace but that lasting meaning is arrived at by conflict and contending with a great force. The principles and ideas that defined the age: artistic, physical, intellectual, civic, and spiritual became validated through victory.

Most famously the Greek ideal was appropriated by the Roman Empire and later the artists of the Renaissance and that influence did not inhibit innovation or expression; it was a foundation that was used to build upon.

DADA, SURREALISM AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

I understand that an overly sincere or earnest approach at idealized forms can be tedious and ignore the dirty corners of the human experience and that by denying the 'ugly' for the sake of appearance can neglect truth for the facade of virtue. That is why humor is critical for balance. The court jester adds the irreverent to break the illusion of formality with comic relief. It reminds me to maintain a sense of humor, which is critical for surviving the flood of information in the information age. This humor acts as a lifeboat for navigating the complexities of the modern world. There is a playful irreverence at work with Dada and the surrealists that I believe subverts the kind of stifling moral authority that seems to limit creative freedom.

The DADA-ists were reactionary and likely had no intention of dissolving society, as true chaos or anarchy is probably much darker than one would imagine. There was a cataclysmic event; the horrors of World War I, that they were reacting against. In a world where the youth were being killed in muddy trenches to gain and lose an inch of ground, in misery, disease and death, for some vague idea of honor, sacrifice etc. one can see why they had such an antipathetic reaction to civilization. These were no longer courageous citizens defending their republic but people caught in vicious class war, killed without reason, with no illusion of heroic mythos or romantic glory. And art was one of the institutions that maintained this lie of civilized dignity that was absent in the trenches. Who could endorse a society where real human lives were thrown out yet the Mona Lisa had armed guards around it like some high ranking official. The anti-art of the Dadaists was the means of re-evaluating creative forms to regain that balance of reflecting the true human condition.

Mass media and understanding the psychological subtext of human desire through the psychoanalysts gave them even more material to process and experiment with. They could inject chaos and absurdity into the machines of convention and the result could reflect a more articulate image of reality than the surface of traditional expectations. The Surrealists were able to do similar things by playing with symbols and imagery that presented as absurd and otherworldly but spoke to the complex meaning of images and symbols that existed in the subconscious with the dream-logic we all experience.

Jungian principles of analysis seemed to affirm the importance of imagery in the subconscious as the underlying expression of a connection to the source of our collective desires. By analyzing dreams and sublimated fantasy, Jungian method aimed to create a real antidote to the psychological issues that were suppressed by the dull, safe, and sanitized culture of polite society. It offered an outlet and validated some of the seemingly irrational expressions of human consciousness that could be brushed off as nonsense, as they did not follow a familiar and logical narrative. This empowered people to observe and examine their dreamscapes and impulses to discover the content that might be in their minds and might not align with social expectations but had a pressing and important role of actualizing an individual. These symbols and archetypes that described these subconscious desires spoke in a common language of images that were created without any deliberate authority, meaning no bureaucracy had established these symbols and their meanings, yet they existed across cultural boundaries and connected all humanity to a common visual language. They were mixed images that when observed with a discerning analytical lens can be interpreted to strongly correlate to a specific condition. I believe this process of digesting images, to arrive at understanding culture and experience, is closely related

to and a result of the discipline of art history trying to figure the potential meaning of cultural artifacts and images that have been left by civilizations who have left us with little known intent. I am not interested in the clinical results of Jung or the healing potential of psychoanalysis, but there are discoveries he made that I feel are very important to the process of making art.

I vividly recall the case of a professor who had had a sudden vision and thought he was insane. He came to see me in a state of complete panic. "I simply took a 400-year-old book from the shelf and showed him an old woodcut depicting his very vision. "There's no reason for you to believe that you're insane," I said to him. "They knew about your vision 400 years ago." Whereupon he sat down entirely deflated, but once more normal. (Man and His Symbols,68)

The idea that someone can have a disturbing or profound vision that seems to have no possible reference and it turns out that this is a something that has been recorded over a great span of time shows a phenomenal connectivity and the great power of articulating, through imagery, the mysterious events of experience. Jung also understood the power of synchronicity, a phenomena where seemingly random events are connected through symbols. There is a famous anecdote where he was treating a patient who had a dream about a jeweled scarab being given to her in a dream and as she was discussing this in his office, a brightly colored beetle appeared at the window. This type of "magical" thinking may have many pitfalls and without some discipline these ideas can encourage a kind of schizophrenic response and become silly but when they are real, they are powerful reminders of the mysterious connection we have to the world outside of our limited understanding.

Different ideas can emerge at various times from the same piece of art, highlighting the importance of not limiting its' potential. Declaring intention in art can be a limiting impulse, as it can reduce the work to a mere definition or sign for something else. The difference that Jung deduces between signs and symbols is that a sign is a contrivance that is designed to stand for

something and the symbol represents something real, the meaning is intrinsic. This reduction to sign can make the art feel small and confined. The Dadaist and surrealist learned that there were often elements overlooked that could have a deeper meaning related to some sublimated anxiety or desire and found a way to amplify those elements to reach a more psychedelic drama unfolding in the meaning of symbols and archetypes.

The Dadaists and Surrealists had excellent methods and techniques for emphasizing the subtext of conscious thought, but to say that they exhausted the material would be a mistake. They only scratched the surface of what could be explored and surrealist painters like Dali and Tanguay still made formal pictures, composed in a form of landscape design to express this exploration. Dreams continue to inform us and the impulses that lead us towards expression remain pregnant with that subconscious meaning waiting to be explored, however, it seems we have regressed into making explicit and controlled expressions that say very little and ignore the messier and complex narratives calling for attention.

This is why I am so interested in the writings of Carl Jung, who is responsible for accessing the "source" of unconscious material and metaphorical imperatives. He studied these phenomena with a clear, scientific approach, but he did not discount the creative and uncanny powers of the psychic forces at work. His work provides a valuable foundation for further exploration in the realm of art and the unconscious.

In my own work, I follow the principle that any rational or organized statement I could make could only serve to show an ego driven cleverness, and that I should learn or reach some revelation through my work by lack of intention and openness to possibility. By giving preference to the momentary impulse or following through with some compulsion I have often

been rewarded by finding there is a logic or fulfillment of that urge. I have no direct message for the public, anyone who approaches art has their own loaded gun and heaps of baggage and as an artist, I do not wish to control a narrative but rather spark some synapse that sends an individual down a psychedelic and ecstatic roller coaster, the kind I have experienced that reinvigorates my life.

Jung's *Libre Novus* or the Red Book was written in the style of a medieval manuscript as if he was using that form as a metaphor for transforming from the dark age of his psyche into a personal renaissance. I can relate to the impulse to not only write something that requires the care and consideration of spiritualized aesthetics but that the content cannot be underdressed and that there was a sort of personal discipline and reverence for the difficult personal journey he was attending to, expressed by medium and that it was not for an audience. He was so embarrassed by the potential of not being taken seriously by his colleagues for his explorations into the psychological phenomena that lacked a certain rational methodology, that he did not publish this book. The ideas expressed, however, were important in creating the ground for the movements that followed to explore the complex but rich subconscious content and helped to produce this idea of rebirth through transgression and experimentation. He was up against the well-established consensus approval of the ideas of Freud, a friend and admired colleague, and he realized he needed to depart and rebel against his mentor and the difficulty of going out on that limb nearly broke him. The principle, it seems, he was able to maintain was that he had to do this work of understanding his own subconscious impulses to exhaustion before he could be of any use to others and that required the most rigorous attention to a true interpretation of events and

observations that were dangerously shrouded in the chaos, uncertainty and mystery of highly personal imagery that had the potential of being horrifying and consuming.

SISYPHUS IN A PAIR OF NIKES

All labor is repetition and ritual that can feel at times like futility and almost punitive, however, what brings victory over the burden of misery and futility is the idea that in the doing, we can sometimes feel surprised into awareness and are released from burden by a sense of wonder.

The work is an act of solitude, with directions coming subtly from the desire of forms and material as they build. Connections are made based on criteria such as: balancing color, composition, or figural elements, but without self-directed narrative structure. Instead, the work suggests an answer to what the media requires or suggests. This intuitive interaction with the material world is not clear as a narrative in the conscious space and thinking of a given moment. It is to be discovered later, with new ideas coming to the surface and informing the meaning of what has happened and what can be done.

This engaging aspect of art-making, the unexpected feedback born out of the chaos of non-intention, brings a clear message back from the void. The lack of intent for controlling some kind of narrative allows for true expression, unfettered by expectation. When expectation is fulfilled by a desired outcome, it is usually disappointing; when an unexpected positive outcome occurs, it is beyond our wildest dreams in its articulation of an essential and striking thought.

There can exist a real conversation with the inanimate that is open to what is being said without trying to control a narrative allows for the expression of inaccessible or unknown thoughts, rather than clever one-off declarations of known or determined conceptual remarks. While I take what is being said in the art historical assessment of important work with a grain of salt, I find that the most engaging reaction to be personal and different with each new interaction.

This sort of pigeon-holing effect of art historical canon can be a pit-fall, but even so, the individual engagement with art remains essential.

Recently, Fine Art as I know it, in galleries and coherent movements seems to have vanished in a meaningful way. The things that now have vast cultural currency are often outside the realm of traditional Fine Art. Art today strives to represent genius, whether through subtle charisma, intellect, or the allure of star power that Andy Warhol aspired to. It seems today, artists would be content with being mistaken for geniuses by a market hungry for the next big thing, even if it's just a scam. There's a cult like obsession with identity and the niche eccentric as opposed to collective competitive growth within a purposed movement. It is my impression that this fragmented, personal brand development approach to art is shamelessly shallow.

Conceptual art, with its specialized language and walled garden, has transformed trends into canon and made following a theoretical thread to its conclusion the best practice. Academic institutions, in their quest to multiply words and set agenda, create work that over-promises and under-delivers. Even art critics seem to be floundering to pick up a unifying thread for some energized artistic direction.

Allowing the unusual and strange ideas that develop in a work of art enables us to tell highly personal truths while avoiding all the boundaries of making a statement. A personal observation becomes universal and humorous when articulated artfully. Although there is a lack of intention when approaching the work, there must be some discipline and method, some building or container that lets us create vortices of focus, concentration, and contributes to values that bring joy and excitement to the mind's eye.

There is a huge difference between this phenomenon and mere home decor or something that suits the style and genre of an affected lifestyle. An "alive space" is critical and requires something that transcends the overtly pragmatic, economical, and industrial.

I can relate this body of work to the pursuit of the ideal in the classical Greek nude. The artwork is stripped of clothing and conceptual trappings, relying on its own presence (that of a framed picture) to answer the primary aesthetic imperative: does it honestly look good naked? Beauty can cut through the tedium of desert-like environments with endless liminal spaces, and my motivation is to disrupt this dullness and offer a contrast to the stolid and mundane.

Culture has reached a point where beauty is interpreted as a function of exclusion, compelling people through social pressure to socialize beauty towards inclusivity. Beauty then becomes an act of imposing unjust regulations, rather than experiencing transcendence and aspiring towards a divine quality. The aphorism "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" has become a testament to the subjectivity of the concept. However, there are cultural forces at work to control the narrative of what beauty is and it not just about appearance or looks the entire concept of beauty is being politicized and causing serious division because people are being coerced into to corporate/political agenda.

Without common values and reactions that are free and collective, we struggle with our crushing, totally subjective, individual solipsistic existence. The over-emphasized subjectivity can be anti-human in its directives. By dismissing the concept of beauty as a bourgeoisie indulgence and holding it in contempt for its "elitism," we risk dividing and destroying ideals that genuinely unify a culture.

Shared values that form out of an internal response to something are essential for establishing meaningful experience with other people. Without these shared values, we are forced to push a narrative that becomes an illusion of art, buttressed by the skills of the craft, like the usurping brother of the King of Denmark who hides his dark manipulations well behind the trappings of the court (even fooling the queen herself). The court jester, who brought joy and lightness is reduced to a skull in the graveyard. Hamlet sees through the facade and exposes the wicked manipulations with a play, a bit of art, telling the truth with a lie.

CONCLUSION: CUT AND PASTE

Regardless of chosen medium, the work of an artist begins as an order of conscious steps and the meta-narrative of exposing that process in the entry to the act, is one way to acknowledge the necessity of conscious thought. However, we can break down the rational and conscious beginning of one thing becoming two, two things becoming three and so on, that the labor requires, and use the unconscious directions of the emptied mind to bring a wholeness back to the work. The work is finished because the sensation of the whole has returned and, in that sensation, purpose is restored.

Since I have access to representations all of art periods simultaneously (in print), the images become the material that I choose to interact with. Beauty or a certain quality become the criteria for selection but they are not just collections. Even though I am not drawing or reproducing master works I feel the lines with scissors as I cut. I carefully place and combine forms in order to give new vitality and expand beyond the icon not to deface but to explore possibilities and offer new potency and life to images of the past, so that they may flower anew.

These images that I find are somehow not enough on their own. This happens with the printmaking I do as well an image needs alteration, it needs directions, it needs to combine with another image to become harmonious again. The material or images I choose require no determined association or plan, much like the work it is guided by a sense of beauty or aesthetics but with no associations other than my instinct to selection, a harmony between the human and material . Then I simply allow them to fit together as naturally as Cinderella's foot in her glass slipper.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Just look! Go alone, you don't need to be distracted by coming up with small talk or worried if your companion is enjoying it too. Wander around the gallery and if something calls out to you stand in front of it for a while, an uncomfortable amount of time. Someone may approach you trying to figure out why you are giving so much attention to that thing, ignore them and keep looking. Not every time, sometimes, if you look long enough an angel will fly down and land on your shoulder and electrocute your spirit with a little lightning bolt of true and ecstatic awareness and you will never again have to wonder if you get it, you will know. You may feel a quietening, a flood and start to soar as you recognize something truly beautiful and turn around looking for a witness, "Did you just see that!?"

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