

# The Position of an Artist in Postmodern Society

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

A true artist is capable of creating a new language where ordinary language fails. The object he creates cannot be an end in itself; on the contrary, it is a means of reaching people. True art reveals essential aspects of human existence in such a way that they may be shared. An incommunicative art is therefore a negation of an essential aspect of art.<sup>i</sup>

Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez

As a fine art painter, what role does my style of work have in the post-modern consumer culture we are dominated by today? Where do my loyalties lie: with the need to investigate the possibilities within painting or with the need to generate an income to survive? Is it really possible to honestly and sincerely combine the two? These are questions that I feel I have a responsibility to consider when contemplating my future in the world of fine art and the role of fine art within today's society. My current medium is oil paint, usually on canvas, often very large canvas averaging four metres by two metres. By referring to the dimensions before I have even begun to describe the content of my paintings raises questions as to the marketability of the work; after all, acquiring a wall large enough to accommodate such a size is not a regular occurrence. But as fine artists do we paint to sell or do we paint to paint?

Serious questions as to the role of painting began to arise upon Daguerre's development of photography in 1839. This led the painter Paul Delaroche to declare, "From today painting is dead"<sup>ii</sup>; the medium was left struggling to find a new role while photographic reproductions began to dominate the market. Since the Renaissance, during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, painting had been a practice that portrayed an image of human knowledge of the world, the photograph had begun to dominate this role. Yet as photography became increasingly popular, and quite significantly cheaper to reproduce, the personal touch of the brush within painting meant that it became a possession of social prestige due to its exclusivity, rarity and consequently its value, thus paintings new direction began to unfold. What followed was the onset of Realism, as led by the painter Gustave Courbet. His painting *The Stonebreakers* of 1849 depicted workers grafting, grinding the stone, providing an honest view of his subject, a direction previously unexplored. Through the use of the medium; thick, scraped, fat knife-fuls of

impastoed paint, Courbet portrayed scenes that were no longer providing the romance of pensive people perched on cliff tops but real people, with real pain. With this expressive use of paint Courbet endeavoured to enable the viewer to engage with the world portrayed on the canvas. Now unable to ignore the plight of the 'workers', the intension was that the viewer, through the additional expressive brushwork, would begin to feel their toil, sweat and pain. Realism continued to become not only one of the first self-proclaimed "isms" but also it helped define the role of painting up until the present day. Courbet's revolutionary way of applying paint began a journey of continual experimentation for the medium, where it would travel through various guises leading others to proclaim its death time and again. By 1890 Maurice Denis had made his famous declaration, "Remember that a painting – before being a warhorse, a naked woman or some story or other – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order."<sup>iii</sup> With this in mind artists continued to push the boundaries of what they saw and how their subject could be portrayed, developing increasingly challenging movements, accumulating with the groundbreaking Cubism by 1910. Picasso and Braque were at the forefront of this new art form and through their creative sparing, rules were broken and abstraction was born. These investigations provided a revolutionary way of seeing, through formalist ideas of line, colour and shape. The Formalist view is such that when we engage with a work of art, we should not consider what it represents but how it presents. What matters is the form, not the content, hence the label 'formalism'.

Presently the role of the painter is undefined. Once we had painted to create metaphors of reality, painting Royalty, Aristocracy and Landed-Gentry in all their finery, as well as documenting history, significant battles and celebrations. The advent of modernism and the emergence of consumer societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries forced the evolution of painting thus pushing the medium to continually find a new voice and so beginning what I consider to be the most exciting period of the development of painting, so far. Over the years the avant-garde has ventured through many varied, hugely experimental movements and painting has been declared dead many times by many people, some artists, some critics, all opinionated and in my view all wrong. Of course I realise the different arguments behind the "painting is dead" debate but I wish to make clear it is through educated experience not romantic notions of being a painter myself that I form my opinion. As to where painting stands in this the twenty-first Century, consider the following quote:

A work of art is a gift, not a commodity.... Every modern artist who has chosen to labour with a gift must sooner or later wonder how he or she is to survive in a society dominated by market exchange. And if the fruits of a gift are gifts themselves, how is the artist to nourish himself, spiritually as well as materially, in an age whose values are

market values and whose commerce consists almost exclusively in the purchase and sale of commodities?<sup>iv</sup>

These words of Lewis Hyde I find clearly awaken the contemporary debate which must be considered when those who choose the career of the Artist struggle to find their own voice, their own style, within the post-modern consumer culture in which we reside. As painters working in a predominantly materialist western world, over shadowed by an escalating demand for art created using new-media, we struggle as we find a way to be sincere and true to our work. The twenty-first century has brought with it a capitalist society that provides a constant demand for new products which are then repackaged, given a new slogan and sold as newer products. It is a symptom of post-modern culture that western - and increasingly eastern - society now works to consume, no longer working to produce, indeed as Paul Crowther has noted postmodernism brings with it;

[...] an ever-accelerating demand for the new and unexpected. Sensationalism (especially as provided by the media) does not simply play its traditional modern role of offering a break from the routine continuum of life; rather it is an *addiction*. This even extends to the domain of art. For whilst novelties, outrage and scandal have always been an important element in Modernism, in postmodernism they are demanded almost as a matter of course. And this, of course, drives art and its critics to greater extremes. We need the likes of Damien Hirst and Robert Mapplethorpe to satisfy our cravings.<sup>v</sup>

## II

### ARTIST AS BRAND

A certain sincerity appears to have departed from the work of modern artists. Prominent figures such as Warhol, Hirst, Koons and Emin create works that thrive on the art market; in a sense the market is their medium. Back in the days of "Studio 54" Warhol's work was playing to the media, his famous quote about us all realising fifteen minutes of fame enveloped the idea of the media and celebrity, indeed celebrity all but consumed Warhol and his career. Many artists working today have reputations that precede them, their personalities are selling the work rather than the intellectual artistic merits it may, or may not, contain. Within the walls of the "artist factories" that have emerged throughout western culture the makers are playing to their audience as though the audience is their art, is their medium. Such artists create work that captures media attention giving their career certain exposure. As interest rises so they play to the media circus and gradually the brand - with which we are all so keen to categorise everything - begins to appear, again think of Warhol, Hirst, Koons or Emin. As the attention increases so the value of the brand increases, shock tactics and instant gratification prevail, the work gains merit, the brand gains momentum and the overall value increases. Eventually the artist becomes consumed by their reputation as agents and collectors who have invested in their work keep afloat their ideas, pushing the marketability of the work, feeding the tabloids and media, forcing the value of each piece even higher as they strive to see their investments increase in monetary value. And the original meaning behind the work slides into insignificance, the artist loses their individuality and becomes a brand. Progress becomes fuelled by the product – the art – rather than by intellectual progress within the art. But is this "playing to the media" as shallow as I make it sound or are these artists not intelligently replying to the post-modern world within which they revolve? By being aware of the multi-media soaked, fast moving, disposable society within which we struggle to have an identity, and working to apply their skills and create art which is relative to their environment artists such as these are seen to be forerunners of the Twenty-first Century art world. But, I ask, at what sacrifice? Disposable art in a disposable culture, art that lacks integrity, content and style, this is where the art world is presently failing, by promoting work that lacks substance it has over-shadowed all that which exudes sincerity.

When referring to the artist as a brand I do so in the sense that the creator in question has developed a reputation that is not only fuelled by the work they make but also the amount of media coverage they, and their people, can muster.

At this level the artist has become a “creative company” where their name sells their products rather than the intrinsic qualities the pieces may hold, rather like a sports personality or an actor may endorse a running shoe or a shampoo. Indeed, Damien Hirst answered the postmodern consumer hunger for exclusive brand names when he came to auction the contents of his defunct restaurant, “Pharmacy”, all he needed to do was to stroll through the premises signing various pieces of paraphernalia, such as ashtrays, to enable each item to reach what could easily be considered extortionate prices, had they not had his scroll they would have been considered near worthless. The intrinsic value of each chosen object sensibly gains nothing by the addition of Hirst’s signature, but once defined by the endorsement of the Hirst brand the appeal to the collectors of the art-world is irresistible beyond all reasonable consideration. Hirst has developed a reputation that has been fired by marketing and mass media, “Sensation” indeed, his very name has become a brand, it has value and appeal in much the same way as a Burberry coat, a Nike shoe or even a can of Coca-Cola, each item is marketed and promoted to manipulate the consumer into believing they are buying part of a postmodern dream. Of course Hirst has produced much art of great merit particularly in the early nineties, but more recently it seems the business acumen of this postmodern artist has engulfed his creative development. Certainly, it is my opinion that Hirst, with the new collection of photo-realist work he has recently been developing in his factory in New York, is presently not contributing to the progress of art. I am not opposed to his factory, indeed many artists find it relevant to produce in this manner; Andy Warhol is a clear example, rather I consider it irresponsible of an artist in Hirst’s position to be producing “new” work in the same vain as that which has been tipping out of art schools, and adorning the walls of various art fairs and contemporary institutes, for at least the last three years. An artist in Hirst’s position should be a *maker* not a *follower* of his fashion, when people look to him for guidance of the present condition of the avant-garde they are foolish to trust that they are viewing work which is on the edge of critical acclaim, instead they are experiencing signatured, unoriginal, regurgitated ideas, that make a questionable contribution to the art world as a whole – and quite scarily he is not alone.

Yet this promotion of artist as brand and celebrity is not a contemporary development, indeed during the latter years of the nineteenth century the great Impressionist Claude Monet was busy building a reputation of his own. Monet was undoubtedly the main and purest Impressionist, creating sensitive paintings to be adored all over the world. With his success he quickly learnt how to become a huge self-publicist; courting high-society and politicians, and constantly being photographed, filmed and interviewed, he became “a kind of art god”<sup>vi</sup>. He controlled his success and drove up his prices by setting art dealers against each other and purposefully painting similar scenes of work; such as his

famous haystacks depicted at different times of the day, in different lights. By creating several series' of paintings in this way he provided for an American millionaire market who couldn't get enough of Monet. By 1873 Monet was earning £20,000 a year, during this same year a doctor or a lawyer would have expected to earn £12,000. During the 1880s a rise in the popularity of Impressionism eventually led to Monet earning £200,000 a year and being driven by a chauffeur in a Rolls Royce. There was no stopping Monet's innovative self-promotion as the critic Mathew Collings has commented:

Monet would arrange positive profiles of himself to appear in the newspapers before the exhibition opened rather than after they'd closed. Now standard behaviour in the art world – but it was Monet that set up a lot of what we now consider standard in art.<sup>vii</sup>

Monet is considered *the* most popular artist in the world, partly due to the rise of the culture industry, partly due to his undeniable ability of translating his environment through the use of paint, and partly due to the Monet lifestyle we believe in as a culture. If you were to now enter his famous studio; where he painted his enormous panoramic water lilies, you would find yourself consumed by the world of Monet, in the form of key rings, jigsaw puzzles, cookbooks, calendars and even mouse mats, for his studio at Giverny is now a mammoth souvenir shop where those who wish to be part of the "Monet dream" - possibly aspiring to own the garden, the bridge and the water lilies - can purchase a little reminder of the Monet experience.

Practicing as a Fine Artist today you find yourself working in a culture dominated by the mass media, you are surrounded by hype and over-exposure. As high culture collides with mass culture the roles of the two are metamorphosing, fine art is gradually becoming consumed by a human need for pigeon holing and branding, for dumbing down and stereotyping. As a society we are becoming a manipulated culture unable to think for ourselves. Consider this, I recently visited the "Turner, Whistler, Monet" exhibition at the Tate Britain, the gallery had very sensibly organised timed tickets, supposedly controlling the amount of people entering to view the show at any one time. Sadly, due to the overwhelming response of people wishing to see the work, even with crowd control all the galleries were rammed. I awkwardly travelled shoulder to shoulder with my fellow enthusiasts but found the exercise extremely uncomfortable and almost completely pointless as I joined the conveyor-belt-shuffle past the paintings. Why is it that in the past when I have visited the Clore Gallery of the Tate Britain which houses their collection of Turners the rooms are practically empty but when I then choose to see the collection in a different form I find no room to breath? Any curatorial creativity within the "Turner, Whistler, Monet" exhibition will have surely completely passed me by due the inability to be able to truly experience the work. Of course there could be many arguments as for the possibilities leading to such an occurrence but I feel the dominant reason is that

of media hype. I consider it more than likely that if it hadn't been for a large marketing campaign the galleries of "Turner, Whistler, Monet" would only be half as full, and *maybe* I wouldn't have even been there myself.

What was once seen as innocent, innovative self-promotion of your ideas can easily be perceived in today's world as cashing in on capitalist consumerism. Artists are presently working in an environment where success is measured in monetary value. There is an extremely fine line between painting and success, and painting and selling. It is not to be assumed that just because your work sells you are a success in the art world, indeed this is often the decision of your peers and the critics rather than your clients. Success through sales can be a dangerous thing, backing you creatively into a corner as you paint for your audience and not for your work. As I develop as an artist I ponder on the modernist values of Monet's Water Lilies; which ask you to see them purely visually, to see them as nothing but themselves, and I cautiously consider the role marketing and self-promotion has within my postmodern world. I choose to paint and provide a gift rather than a commodity to whomever it may concern. The work I strive to make is driven by an intellectual value rather than a monetary one, indeed yes I would like to see each piece sell for significant amounts of money for obvious reasons of basic survival etc. but I don't seek inspiration for the work as a product, to be sold, each piece is made as an intellectual investigation into the visual. Art is a form of expression and the essence of expression is not a science that can be packaged and sold.

Before I delve too far into such purist views I must remember the thoughts of the Australian art critic, Robert Hughes:

The work of Titian and Bernini, Piero della Francesca and Poussin, Reisener and Chippendale would not exist unless someone paid for them, and paid well. Picasso was a millionaire at forty and that didn't harm him. On the other hand, some painters are millionaires at thirty and that can't help them. Against the art starlet one sees waddling about like a Strasbourg goose, his ego distended to gross proportion by the obsequies of the market, one has to weigh the many artists who have been stifled by indifference and the collapse of confidence it brings. On the whole, money does artists much more good than harm. The idea that one benefits from cold water, crusts and debt collectors is now almost extinct, like belief in the reformatory power of flogging.<sup>viii</sup>

And I am inclined to agree, it's not the actual money that's having such a detrimental effect on the quality of work presently being produced by artists but the postmodern art market itself; it's no longer about art, it's about money. Let me try to explain, *investing* in the art market is a relatively new phenomenon and it wasn't until well into the nineteenth century that such investments began to affect the market. During the latter years of the twentieth century, due to the overwhelming amount of students graduating with arts degrees each year, the market became saturated. With such an enormous supply of new, potentially very successful, artists flooding the galleries combined with an increased amount



of general cash flow due to the boom of the eighties, art became a recognised form of investment, often creating better returns than blocks of shares. People were wise and buying straight from the degree shows – as did Saatchi – hoping they had discovered the next big name, consequently generating fine returns on their investment.

This perception of art as commodity has produced an aggressive market with daunting consequences. It is acknowledged that the art market is now driven and dictated by auction houses and collectors. Yet, as we progress into the twenty-first century it becomes apparent that many are not buying art for the intrinsic qualities the work holds, indeed it is reported that American hedge fund managers are presently bulk buying work by artists such as Martin Kippenberger and Richard Princes, one collector alone owning as many as 125 and 75 pieces respectively. Since the tragedy of 9/11 in 2001 art has increasingly become the new commodity, rising in value three times more than the average stock, as reported by Alex Mar in ArtReview magazine:

Over the last few years, a number of hedge fund men have turned 'collectors', hoarding works by hot contemporary artists, establishing a new price level by paying exorbitant sums at auction, and then dumping the pieces at a considerable profit a short period later. 'One hedge fund guy I know – he probably owns \$75m in art – said to me, "Art is an unregulated market, why shouldn't we do what we want?"' says one New York collector. 'People have always bought art to make money, but nobody manipulated it so obviously and brazenly.' 'It's a cold way of looking at art,' says David Ross, executive vice-president of the Artist Pension Trust, established to help artists benefit from the rising value of their work. 'It's pork bellies or art for these guys. You're just abstracting the value of the works.'<sup>ix</sup>

In this sense art *is* a commodity and nothing more, these "collectors" hold no interest in the underlying intellectual value the work holds, indeed they may never even view the pieces they have acquired perceiving them purely as a product to be sold. New York gallerists have reported such "art buyers"<sup>x</sup> as having ever increasing aggressive purchasing tactics and tainting the gallery and museum circuit with their shallow interest in art, they despair at the present market. Gallerist David Zwimer has commented;

We want people who love the work and have a long-term interest, people who do not treat art as a commodity.<sup>xi</sup>

So where does this soulless art investment leave the artist? In this environment it increasingly seems to have less and less to do with the intellectual gain and intrinsic qualities that first inspired the work and more and more to do with the financial gain of a product. Maybe this is true, maybe we have to prepare ourselves for the onslaught of postmodern disposable culture when considering the future of the role of the artist in general. If Robert Hughes is to be believed

those collectors who “buy from informed love rather than herd instinct”<sup>xii</sup> *are* becoming a rare breed but sadly are actually less desirable to the galleries in the long term because they *do* buy art to keep for life. As Hughes has explained:

The ones the [contemporary art] market needs are the people whose apartments are shifting anthologies of the briefly new. They buy large quantities of art because they are infatuated with the art world as a system.<sup>xiii</sup>

The phrase “briefly new” that Hughes uses in the above quote is a phenomenon of our postmodern society. Nothing is made to last, not cars, hairdryers, and sadly in this mobile society even friendships and marriages can be thrown away. The art tourists residing in our postmodern popular culture, those who purchase purely for a slice of the lifestyle, a piece of the contemporary art world dream, are often critiquing the work for its financial or entertainment value rather than the craftsmanship and intellectual value it encompasses. Such art buyers and a large section of the art world in general need to remember this is not Hollywood and reconsider some of the values presently perceived as nostalgic by many in the contemporary art world. Have people forgotten the origins of art? It’s not about celebrity and sensation, investment and returns, it’s about informing the spectator, showing them something beyond which they would have normally considered, providing another way of seeing the world.

### III

## AUDIENCE, SPECTATOR

Much of the art marketed today is considered low-art, with this term I refer to work purchased to entertain, provide a focus in a room or fill a gap, pieces that are bought because of the instant visual satisfaction they portray, art that has an audience, falling under the category of low-culture: comic strips, television, popular art and entertainment. There is less awareness for work that is considered high-art, work that to be fully appreciated needs a certain level of informed intellectual understanding, art that has a spectator, fitting the category of high-culture: fine art, classical music, opera and ballet. In the world of popular culture these divisions are becoming increasingly difficult to uphold as content, substance and meaning are being sacrificed in place of surface simulations, images and signs. In my opinion much of the art being made today lacks integrity and intellectual depth, but is this so wrong, I ask again, are artists who work within the popular culture criteria not quite simply fulfilling the postmodern brief for new work? In which case, with an ever-evolving society, do my concerns have foundations to exist? After all, if this is the art the audience wants then who am I to try and change the course of history.

Such distinctions between art that has an *audience* and art that has a *spectator* are further defined by Jean Paul Satre:

Low culture: the expression of a meaning potentially appreciable by all.

High culture: the individual expression of the unique meaning.<sup>xiv</sup>

By defining relationships between what I call audience-art and spectator-art: low-art and high-art, the grounds of what is being sacrificed for popular culture begin to become clear. Here I turn to the philosopher Richard Wollheim to aid me in my explanation:

If we wanted to say something about art that we could be quite certain was true, we might settle for the assertion that art is intentional. And by this we would mean that art is something we do, that works of art are things that human beings make. And the truth of this assertion is in no way challenged by such discoveries, some long known, others freshly brought to light, as that we cannot produce a work of art to order, that improvisation has its place in the making of a work of art, that the artist is not necessarily the best interpreter of his work, that the spectator too has a legitimate role to play in the organization of what he perceives.<sup>xv</sup>

Wollheim believes, as I do, that when viewing a work it is a requirement of the spectator to understand the artist's intention; that they should be appropriately

informed to fully appreciate the piece in question. It is to be considered that any artwork falling into the realm of high-culture should allow room for the spectator to contribute by bringing a particular set of cultural associations with them that affect their individual interpretation of the final piece in question. The role of the spectator is to be informed intellectually; where as the purpose of the audience is to be entertained. When I refer to the spectator I am not speaking of an elite who are superior to everyday society but quite simply of people who hold an in-depth understanding of the subject within which they choose to indulge, whether it be art, gardening or sport for example. Imagine a cricket match being appreciated by an *audience* on the local village green on a gorgeous sunny Sunday afternoon, all those watching can lie back and enjoy the afternoons entertainment, counting the runs, cheering the catches, but when you have an informed, experienced, understanding of the game you begin to perceive it differently, more critically, it is at this point you become a *spectator*. You are no longer there to be solely entertained, as is the audience, but are forming an opinion of the match through critical experience, as a spectator.

The above theory extends to consideration of what you may actually be perceiving when viewing a piece of art, for if you had two paintings of Mickey Mouse, for example, both painted the same size, at the same time and placed in the same frames there would be no reason to think them apart, until you consider them in different environments. Place Mickey one in a child's bedroom and Mickey two in a Cork Street gallery, Mickey one would be clearly seen as a symbol of entertainment, clean wholesome living, the American Dream, comfort and goodwill, Mickey two however would no longer be perceived as Walt Disney had originally intended, now Mickey would symbolize something else, maybe a statement of institutionalised marketing, or never ending childhood realities. By placing Mickey Mouse in the gallery environment we are asking the spectator to look beyond the surface meaning of the image and bring instead an informed intellectual critic. Wollheim has referred to this experience in the context of "criticism as retrieval", where-by the spectator, to fully appreciate the work, brings with them an informed opinion of the artists intention, enabling an enhanced understanding of the piece. He further explains:

The critic must certainly respect the artist's intentionality, but he does not have to concur with it. On the contrary he is justified in using both theory and hindsight unavailable to the artist if thereby he can arrive at an account of what the artist was doing that is maximally explanatory. Retrieval, like archaeology, and archaeology provides many of the metaphors in which retrieval is best thought about, is simultaneously an investigation into past reality and an exploitation of present resources.<sup>xvi</sup>

And it is with these "past realities" and "present resources" that the artist and the spectator communicate, works of art need to be intellectually criticised and considered within the context that they were first perceived, this includes the location, cultural associations, historical era and artists intention, but also it is

accepted that the meaning of the work can and will develop over time, as and when it is perceived in different realities. We find the artists intention, and how the conclusions of those intentions are viewed, relative to certain issues as raised by T.S. Eliot in his 1919 essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, within which he focuses not specifically on the "artist as creative individual", but on "the complex interactions between the artist and the broad historical and cultural context of which he or she is a part"<sup>xvii</sup> The knowledge we bring to a work of art is relevant to our social, cultural and critical environment, as well as to our depth of understanding of the artist's intention. It is important to have an intellectual awareness so as to enable the spectator to execute a valid critique, it is also relevant that the viewer brings any previous influence to the work to enable a deeper informed understanding, which can thus also be communicated to the artist providing them too with a certain enlightenment.

# IV

## INDIVIDUAL STYLE

As I have previously stated painting is presently in a fortunate position where it is struggling to find a new voice, this may seem like an oxymoron but by having no real movement to guide us we as artists find we can apply ourselves to the intrinsic values of the work. As a painter I have the opportunity to develop a style, as I manipulate the medium working across the canvas my interpretation of the environment is unleashed and given the foundations to evolve; as described in the words of Roger Hilton:

Painting is feeling. Just as much as a sentence describes, so a sequence of colours describes.

When I paint it is an affair of instinct and intuition. I feel the shape and colours inside myself. I have the feel of a work other than a vision of it. The picture is completed when the plastic form of this feel has made its appearance.

One must express oneself. There are situations, states of mind, moods, etc., which call for some artistic expression; because one knows that only some of art is capable of going beyond them to give an intuitive contact with a superior sort of truths. The direct imitation of life or nature cannot express the complex human situation which exists for us all today.

All art is an attempt to exteriorise one's sensations and feelings, to give them a form.<sup>xviii</sup>

When considering my approach to painting I find my thoughts echo those of Jules Olitski when he states, "What is of importance in painting is paint."<sup>xix</sup> Painting has broken all the rules and pushed all the boundaries, but just because it is no longer revolutionary it doesn't mean the language of paint has lost its voice, in fact the very nature of the medium - wet pigment on a flat surface - ensures its unique ability against all others. For me, as I work, the questions, answers and conclusions are in the process of painting itself, the work I create invites the spectator to consider the aesthetic values and formalist qualities I choose for the finished piece to communicate. My troubled concerns lie with those works which gain nothing when experienced by the viewer, those pieces which lack expression and fluidity leaving the viewer unable to contribute anything of themselves to the final conclusion, the work that lacks the ability to gain from the experience of the spectator. The paintings I create allow room for the viewer inviting them to apply their own interpretation to the overall composition, they are investigations of style aided by my graphic sense and visual awareness of the formal qualities they portray, they are not created for reasons of shock and sensation such as certain more commercially focused

artists. I work to give myself a voice, to be free with my ideas and strive to not be pigeonholed into a “marketable” corner. Creating a market for your work to enable yourself to survive in the chosen career of an artist is an eternal fact that needs to be sensibly embraced but not at the sacrifice of intellectual progress. It is my opinion that the trappings of commercial success can, if not managed correctly, quickly stunt the progress of an artist.

Much of the work being made today is, in my opinion, achieved through the sacrifice of style. When considering “style” I refer not to general style; that which can be learned, but to individual style; that which must be formed, as Richard Wollheim has explained. The philosopher Arthur C. Danto equally has made reference to the differing aspects of style referring to the subject as a gift; the artists basic actions, applied in a certain manner; that which can be learned.<sup>xx</sup> Stephanie Ross expands on Danto when she writes:

He glosses style in terms of the artist’s way of seeing the world together with a metaphysical proposal that each of us is in essence, a representational system, that is, a bearer of a distinctive worldview.<sup>xxi</sup>

The ability to develop an individual style stems from a heightened understanding of my medium and an awareness of direction within my work. While developing my language of paint, I constantly realise the effect different combinations of marks and varying densities of colour and pigment have on the canvas. Gradually, as I work, my intentions become more focused and fluid. Wollheim has defined the important differences between language and style as follows:

A person knows a language because he has learnt it, an artist has a style because he has formed it. Another difference is that, though both knowledge of a language and possession of a style are inconceivable except in an embodied creature, style reaches deeper into the body to find its moorings. It modifies – something we have already seen with thematization – innervations to the limbs and muscles, and it imposes discriminations upon the eye. Individual style has not only psychological reality, it has psycho-motor reality. Though this is true to some degree, it is true to a lesser degree, of knowledge of a language.<sup>xxii</sup>

To further explain, consider *style* as an individual’s handwriting. Each persons handwriting is as unique as their finger print, once a child has developed an awareness and understanding of the different letters that form their alphabet; after realising the varying combinations of curves and lines that depict each letter, a certain confidence builds that allows each character to be written more freely, a confidence that allows letters to flow forming words and sentences. Upon viewing freehand script by two or more persons it is normal to see quite clear distinctions between each visual style: I refer to visual style and not the style of the prose and content, as the words chosen are not what I am asking you to consider in this example. Over the years an individual’s handwriting will

develop, often becoming more sophisticated and mature in its appearance, neat or untidy, but the basic underlying structure of each character will remain the same, however legible. This development of style through the mastery of the medium – the medium in this instance being handwriting – is something that is unique to each individual, each person's particular style is exclusive and relative only to them, it is influenced by individual experience and influence gathered over the years. It is largely considered that a *good* artist shows a development of an individual style, but this does not mean investigations of style have to be confined to one medium as the artist David Reed has stated:

Just because I worked in a different medium didn't mean I had to have different concerns. One should be loyal to ideas, or obsession, or dreams. Not to a medium.<sup>xxiii</sup>

So basically, you can develop the style of an idea, interpreting it through different mediums, evolving a connected, continual investigation of your creative ideas. But as Jennifer Raingold has recently observed while reviewing the work of Lucy McKenzie;

Style has become a taboo word in the contemporary art world. Many artists refuse to be typecast, preferring to bask in the rainbow of their creative vocabulary. They could be accused of playing the dilettante, flitting down multiple routes without ever arriving at any kind of artistic destination: but in an age of dissolving boundaries, perhaps one label can no longer comfortably represent several forms of expression.<sup>xxiv</sup>

As I read the above quote I worry about the integrity of the art world, are we really existing in "an age of dissolving boundaries" or is this opinion just shading a general lack of commitment arising from many artist studios today? Or indeed, it should be considered that this "goldfish attention span" is not exclusive to the art world but an issue for the whole of western society. As I have previously explained, you need commitment of some definition to allow a true style to blossom. Perseverance can get you everywhere.

The medium I largely use to exploit my ideas and develop my style is oil paint but I do not work exclusively in this manner, increasingly I find as my investigations deepen so too does my desire to indulge in new ways of developing my concepts in support of my paintings. My medium of choice partially dictates the outcome of the final composition, I allow 'abstract accidents' to happen, making them all part of the piece. As I have mentioned sometimes I work in paint; where I can drip, wash, glaze, layer the paint on, sometimes with print or collage; cutting from magazines, tearing up paper, allowing the original marks on the page to predict what to discard, what to keep, or charcoal, pencil and ink, or combinations of them all. More recently I have been experimenting with stone, creating hand sized abstracts loosely based on the human form. While working on these particular pieces I have realised the aesthetic value of the stone itself and with my hand by carving, polishing, manipulating the



surface, have created an extension of my investigations into the aesthetic possibilities of form. Each stone I choose first undergoes scrupulous examination by me. Much consideration is taken as to its organic state; I wish for it to be as natural as possible, with few manufactured, cut edges. Handling the stone - turning it, considering it, looking for inspiration within the marks, colours and crevasses it holds – helps me compose a basic sketch in my head, an aesthetic direction with which the piece could begin to evolve. The tools used to erode the stone rasp and file, and if necessary chisel. In the final stages the stone is smoothed with increasingly fine grades of wet and dry paper and lastly, sometimes, polished. The whole process is very tactile and I constantly reassess the differing relationships of the contours, aware that removing even only a millimetre of one area could have dramatic consequences for the aesthetic balance of the whole piece. Sometimes I need to proceed tentatively, others quite brutally. Gradually as I work a relationship develops between the piece and myself. This way of working translates through all the materials I use, I find there is always a stage where the form begins to speak to me; my graphic sense coagulates with the medium and an aesthetic composition ensues. This recent adventure with stone has helped me clarify the motives behind my work, it is time for me to embrace the opportunity of “slow art,”<sup>xxv</sup> considered, engaging, metamorphosing art. I find Gillian Ayres explains what I mean wonderfully:

You are simply evolving something, rather in the way perhaps that a bar of music or a line of poetry follows from the last, developing & changing. It's not a matter of chance, but you have good days & bad days, and I'm not able to explain that: it's like tennis, you can suddenly sense that you are going to make a shot better than you usually do, & you do, & then you can't do it again.<sup>xxvi</sup>

So, with my creative voice I'm not making any political statements or even developing a new 'ism', what I am hoping to achieve is an appreciation from the viewer of my graphic sense, my ability of handling my chosen materials but overall the additional appreciation of the aesthetic values the work holds.

The formalist attitude is one I take with my own work. It is a formalist observation that “a painting [...] must live by the strength of the paint alone, must rely on the means which are proper to it, without the aid of melodrama or anecdote”<sup>xxvii</sup> My pieces are not subject driven, but balanced visuals of aesthetic judgements. My objective is for the viewer to be moved by my work, not through its content but through its form. My ideas are autonomous, self-sufficient in their beauty, allowing room for the viewer, but not for any deep political or conceptual analysis. As my spectator consumes the form they are invited to bring as little or as much of themselves to the work as they would like, they may bring their own analogies to the pieces I make, and find room for contemplation; as I would have had when creating them. Matisse considered his work in a similar vein when he likened it to “a good armchair.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Through the use of oil paint I depict a certain expression within my work, interpreting my way of seeing the world. As I paint I consider each piece as an investigation, as an endeavour of problem solving rather than directly as a painting, by thinking of the work in this way I see beyond the boundaries the canvas may entail. Each of my investigations approaches the possibilities of space and light and how it may be recreated through the form of painting. The work is quite autonomous only looking to external inspiration to generate a sensation within the dimensions of the surface plane. The paintings I create are presently of a grand scale beginning as raw canvas stretched directly onto the wall, primed in position as far as the canvas can reach, the reason being so as to not confine the overall format of the composition to preconceived dimensions as it would have been had I previously placed the canvas over stretcher bars. With the canvas stretched in such a way I am prepared for the opportunity to crop each work enabling me to create a more enhanced visual dynamic should I find it appropriate, but this is not always the case as when I work I think of the picture plane as a whole. The oil paint I use is first applied thinly, almost randomly as I subconsciously react to each previous mark I have made. With careful consideration I select different sizes and shapes of brushes, sometimes using rollers and sometimes using rags so as to push back the paint that has been previously applied, each tool is carefully chosen to create different marks for different sensations. Care is taken as I sensitively choose my colours, using a limited palette, mixing as I do in large quantities, being sure I have enough of the medium to cover vast areas. An understanding of my chosen medium allows me to encourage a level of blending of the pigment on the painting itself, sometimes the surface I work is bone dry, other times completely wet or somewhere in between depending on the amount of mixing and blending I wish to occur on the painting. The subject of the work becomes the medium itself as I allow the physicality of the paint to play a role in the overall composition, using the weight of the medium in a similar manner to the artist Alexis Harding; allowing gravity to pull the pigment over and through the existing marks, the piece becomes an expression from me and of the paint itself.

The work is partially preconceived but mostly develops as the layers of the piece evolve and I begin to read the painting, allowing it to speak to me and to guide me as to where it could possibly go next, proceeding in the modernist realm of work inspiring theory rather than the post-modernist ideas of theory inspiring work; as to work in such a way leaves little room for expression. Much of the time is spent just looking, considering the piece as a whole while also focusing on the relationships of the detail, the placing of a brush stroke, the blending of a colour, how each aspect interacts, watching the colours visually pushing and

pulling each other, moving the eye of the spectator. The painting is complete when I find it visually captures a sensation of a moment in a similar way as you might experience when you view a work by Patrick Heron for example, or when the piece exudes a spiritual silence such as you may find within the sculptures of Antony Gormley. Heron has written at length about his own experiences when he works and I find my thoughts echo his:

By the time the picture is actually being painted it is too late to *think*: the hand, arm and shoulder and, above all, the eye, are in sole control when work is literally in progress. Thought there is all the time: but the thought that goes into the painting is already something that has been done before the act of painting began: it is the *result* of the hours of thinking (while looking, walking or talking: not painting) that flows, only semiconsciously, from the memory into the picture that is under construction... True painting shows the animated hand, nearly autonomous, eliciting meaning and energy from the mind *and* body of the painter.<sup>xxix</sup>

Close inspection of my paintings will allow the spectator to experience some of the hidden history documented behind the many layers of paint. The different elements such as line, colour, shape, scale and form are direct translations or expressions of my mental state as a painter.<sup>xxx</sup> The final piece will be very abstract with no pictorial form as I choose to apply paint to create a sensation of a moment for the spectator, much in the same way you may experience a big sky or an intricate landscape. When my work is considered by the unformed viewer; the audience, it can easily be misunderstood, but when experienced by the spectator; the informed viewer, it can be seen as a celebration of the sublime; impressing the mind with a sense of grandeur and power, inspiring a sense of awe. This beauty and sublimity is something I strive for within my work which is partly achieved by the grand scale on which I work but also by the choices I make as an artist creating subtle visual depth, contrasting space and abstract relationships between marks and details. And so I develop my language and my *style* of painting.

# V

## BEAUTY AND THE SUBLIME

Through investigating formalist theory - known to take its philosophical lead from Immanuel Kant - I raise issues of aesthetics expressed through studies of beauty and the sublime. Beauty has provoked philosophical interest since the time of Plato (428-347 BC) and over the years there has been many differing opinions as to how it is defined. After personal investigation I have discovered that whether you are considering the subjective ideas of Plato, or the objective approach of Aristotle, discovering the beauty in nature as considered by Kant, or the beauty in art as defined by Hegel I find myself agreeing with the editor of The Philosophers' Magazine, Julian Baggini when he states, "Beauty is more complex than any single aesthetic account of it has actually managed to say."<sup>xxxix</sup> Other cultures, societies and other eras have varying views of what defines beauty, and it is largely considered that now, with all the different cultural influences we encounter today, beauty has become too variable and subjective a standard to judge art by. As Hegel has explained, different appreciations of beauty belong to different historical eras,<sup>xxxix</sup> our environment and our perceptions of the culture within which we reside undeniably influences us.

Beauty is not a science, it cannot be analysed and compressed into a mathematical formula, beauty is an opinion but of what? Somehow one just knows when something is beautiful, but beauty is also relative to the individual experience and cannot be assumed. As explained by Kant, "There is no science of the beautiful, but only a critique."<sup>xxxix</sup> When I speak of beauty I mean it in an aesthetic sense, from a disinterested stance, not allowing emotions and moral principles to cloud ones judgement. By ignoring the questions about the real existence of what is represented the meditative qualities of the work can be consumed. Edward Bullough claimed "that in order to appreciate objects aesthetically we must distance ourselves from all practical concerns with them,"<sup>xxxix</sup> I am inclined to agree. For example, when considering the aesthetic qualities of a flower it can be seen to be very beautiful, but if on further investigation you identify the flower to be a species called Ragwort - a known weed that grows in suffocating proportions and is highly poisonous to cattle - any previous visions of beauty become tainted. Your new knowledge has influenced your moral judgement of beauty. We cannot look at something aesthetically if we allow practical principles to hinder our view. If you see a huge, wild stormy sky developing on the horizon you cannot perceive it aesthetically if you worry about the practicalities of becoming stranded without a coat. It is perception, not thought, that results in an aesthetic experience, and aesthetic

appreciation is not simple, being a complex matter, involving both emotional and intellectual factors. Aesthetic pleasure can also be sad and tragic, for example when watching a play you may feel tearful or fearful and yet take pleasure from your voyeuristic role as you appreciate the performance in a detached, 'aesthetic' way. It is with this detached approach with which I intend my work to be considered.

When considering the sublime aspect in my investigations I do so in a similar vein to various philosophers including both Kant and Longinus who limit the topic to the experience of engaging with nature from a subjective, intellectual and spiritual realm; intense and absolute beauty beyond all comparison. Kant defines sublimity "as the capacity of certain phenomena to evoke an awareness of our supersensible self."<sup>xxxv</sup> Other philosophers have developed differing theories, Burke for example based his findings on the grounds of the sublime provoking pain and terror, not violent or destructive terror but a kind of delightful terror, as described by Paul Crowther when he writes:

Burke's sublime is fundamentally an existential one. For him, we enjoy the sensory overload of vast objects, or the threat of dangerous ones (when encountered from a position of safety) precisely because the shock they give us revivifies our sense of being alive.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The findings of Hegel, however, developed Kant's theories believing that the sublime cannot be contained in any sensuous form but rather ideas of reason. It is in this abstract sense I have preceded with my investigations. The subject of the sublime is not one I can yet speak on as an authority but as I understand that which I have discovered so far, it is necessary for the subject of sublimity to be abstracted as Richard Hooker has explained in his essay *Sublimity as Process*:

The important theme Hegel amplifies is the idea that the object which precipitates the sublime experience must remain inadequately presented to consciousness in order that inadequacy can be represented. As soon as the experience of the sublime is linked with a specific object, that object is defined either sensuously or rationally, which precludes it from evoking our experience of inadequacy of these faculties.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Basically meaning, as soon as the experience of the sublime is linked with a specific object it is defined as no longer sublime. For something to be *sublime* it needs to be obscure, to be abstract, it is a relationship of informed experience not a specific thing; the *experience* of the storm not just the look of the sky. Indeed as Hegel has expanded:

The sublime in general is the attempt to express the infinite, without finding in the sphere of phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation. Precisely because the infinite is set apart from the entire complex of objectivity as explicitly as an invisible meaning devoid of the shape and is made inner, it remains, in accordance with its infinity, unutterable and sublime above an expression through the finite.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

When considering the visual content of sublime art there are known factors developed through theory, for example Burke claims that the sublime is enhanced by darkness and obscurity – possibly in reference to the necessary abstractness of the subject – and that dark colours such as brown, black, deep purple and even sometimes a strong red, can contribute to sublime aims in painting. Burke and Longinus have both observed theory stating that sublime visions should “make some sort of approach to infinity”<sup>xxxix</sup> and “since the sublime activates an upward turning, Burke claims that verticals are more sublime than horizontals”<sup>xl</sup> This particular piece of theory echoes a theme occurring in a series of my most recent paintings where abstract verticals have developed as a natural course of investigation. See figs. 1 & 2. When speaking of sublime paintings, particularly in the vertical context, I feel the work of the painter Barnett Newman cannot go unmentioned, particularly the piece he titled *Onement I*, 1948, with which he undisputedly claims to have made a major breakthrough not just for *his* painting but for painting in general. The philosopher Arthur C Danto explains:

There can be little question, I think, that Newman connected this work with the tremendousness conveyed by the idea of the sublime. It was somehow too momentous an achievement, in his mind at least, to think of as merely beautiful, or beautiful, really, at all. Some decades later, the post-modernist thinker, Jean-Francois Lyotard, was to write that in the “aesthetic of the sublime... the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms.” And it is clear from the way in which Newman polarizes the two concepts, that he saw no possibility of finding the axioms of his art in the aesthetic of the beautiful. If there was to be an aesthetic for *Onement I*, nothing less than the sublime would suffice.<sup>xli</sup>

The work developed by the sublime painter is created to arouse a sense of presence within the spectator, a sense of transcendental oneness with the capacity to rehumanise.<sup>xlii</sup> You will find such qualities in the work of not only Barnett Newman but also Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko or more recently in the paintings of the contemporary artists Terry Shave and Philip Taaffe. All these artists create a certain tension within the picture plain, a balance of resonating colour, and a heightened awareness of darkness and light, these aspects and more all help encompass a true reality of something beautiful that is sublime.



Fig. 1. *Blue Lamu* oil on canvas 121 x 336 cm 2005



Fig. 2. *Blue Mali* oil on canvas 340 x 173 cm 2005

# VI

## CONCLUSION

The drive that fuels my paintings in this increasingly materialist western world is the desire to contribute to the art world, to create work that makes a difference. It is an ever-increasing belief that much of the work being produced today contributes nothing but the sensation of the emperor's new clothes and that soon the bubble will burst bringing with it a need to reconsider the role art plays in today's society. It is popular opinion that a return to slow-art is called for, considered art, art within which the informed spectator has a role, art that exudes expression and evolves style. Leo Tolstoy once wrote a clear account of the value of expression in art:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and [...] then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling so that others experience the same feeling – this is the activity of art [...] Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them [...] Art is [thus] a means of union among men joining them together in the same feelings.<sup>xliii</sup>

As far back as the Ancient Greeks the pedigree of expression can be found in art, yet somehow through the recent evolution of art theory, expression seems to have been discarded. The work being made in reply to present theory lacks any personal touch the artist could possibly recreate. Painting enables a personal, physical expression from the mind and body of the artist. There is a true reality within the expression of painting, not a distorted reality as you may find through other more detached mediums. Cliff McMahon, in his essay *The Sublime is How* raises the opinion of the critic Dan Cameron when he writes:

The painting should say that there's another possible world by saying, "Look at the world inside this painting, and figure out how the two came together". That should be the level of intellectual engagement that a painting sets up. One's appreciation of the world inside the painting should produce a more acute awareness of life.<sup>xliiv</sup>

As I work, investigating the world of the sublime and different formations of beauty, I do so through the evolution of style and expression, not by following the blueprint of a preconceived idea.

The nature of celebrity is continually distorting views in many art schools today, the society within which we are nurtured constantly attempts to brain wash us with a measure of success that can only be achieved through celebrity status.



I do agree with generating publicity to promote your ideas but not with shock and sensation at the sacrifice of content for celebrity. This is like living in a virtual reality where nothing is real and nothing has true meaning, but this *is* our reality and maybe those artists who create work that sacrifices style and expression *are* the true reality of what art is today, but I feel this could only be so because we have lost focus of the simple priorities in life as we bow to pressures incurred by our disposable society. As an artist in the twenty-first century I consider it a responsibility to expand my spectators intellect beyond that which they would normally imagine, to enlighten their minds and guide them towards an alternative way of seeing the world, if only for a moment, and to remind them that art is not a *commodity*, it is a *gift*. Matthew Collings summarises my argument when he writes:

The art world is now a slave of mass culture. We have a sound-bite culture and so we have sound-bite art. You look at it, you get it – it's as immediate and as superficial as that. The tendencies, ideas and so on are really only infantile crushes, they're not worth taking seriously. The art I think is good asks for contemplation. By its nature it is a critique of current art practice. It isn't aiming to appeal to the place where primitive fantasies or desires come from, or reflect that place back to an infantile audience. Which is not to say that it doesn't aim to be pleasurable to look at, but it also asks you to think about the structure behind its production – a critique sadly lacking from today's fantasy art. So, instead of that I propose an art that is against immediacy but for investigation.<sup>xiv</sup>

That which is considered contemporary art is largely a reflection of our environment. Presently we live in a disposable, insular, western-world that lacks commitment and sincerity, much of the art that is made is a reflection of this world, it is time to *stop* looking in and to *start* looking out. The recent evolution of the artist has been soured by commercialisation, as noted by Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez in his book *Art and Society*:

The supreme goal of art, its need and reason for being, thus becomes more imperative than ever, because in a world ruled by quantitative criteria (exchange value), by the alienation of man, art – because it is the creation, expression, and objectification of man – is one of the most valuable means by which to reclaim, assert, and extend the real richness of humanity. Never has art been more necessary, because never has man been more threatened by dehumanisation.<sup>xv</sup>

As I work developing my style being sincere and true to my medium I do so to give something back to society, to provide my spectator with another way of looking by taking them to another place, I wish to inform them beyond their present reality. There is a role for *all* the different mediums whether it be paint, stone, metal, performance or multi-media art, but maybe they have *different* roles. I believe the role for *painting* it as a conduit of enlightenment. A journey by the artist, given to the spectator, and in this respect I return to the words of Lewis Hyde when I state "art *is* a gift"<sup>xvii</sup>. (my emphasis)

As artists we need to reclaim our profession from the auction houses and the Hedge Fund Managers and remember where the origins of inspiration for our work derive from, not from the pockets of fat cat business types but as tools of communication and reformation. Suzi Gablick reminds us;

Art is an instrument. It can be used to make a difference to the welfare of communities, the welfare of societies, and to our relationship with nature. It is *good* for something. And this, in large part, should be the true measure of its success – not money, not favourable reviews, or an impressive list of shows, signalling a conditioned allegiance to art world approval. I have come to believe that true success manifests through a certain quality of awareness and an ability to live in an interconnected way, with companion and responsibility. This means being able to step away from acquisitive and exploitative forms of individualism, and from the egocentrism of the present social order.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Art is a means of forming a union between the artist and the viewer, from the spectator in the gallery to communities as a whole. Many of today's artists, and the work they make, are in danger of becoming insular and selfish, traits that are a reflection of postmodernism. Viewed from this position I realise, when pondering on my recurring question as to the present role of the fine art painter, that these postmodern artists *are* simply replying to our consumer society, as Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez states:

In a certain sense, each society gets the art it deserves, both because of the art it favours or tolerates, and because artists, as members of society, create in accordance with the particular type of relations they have with that society.<sup>xlix</sup>

Artists need to remember what a powerful voice art is, how it can widen and enrich the human territory and aid in the development of society as a whole, on a local and a global scale. I conclude with the words of Vazquez:

The relationship between art and society cannot be ignored, for art itself is a social phenomenon: first, because the artist, however unique his primary experience might be, is a social being: second, because his work, however deeply marked by his primary experience and however unique and unrepeatable its objectification or form might be, is always a bridge, a connecting link between the artist and other members of society; third, because a work of art affects other people – it contributes to the reaffirmation or devaluation of their ideas, goals, or values – and is a social force which, with its emotional or ideological weight, shakes or moves people. Nobody remains the same after having been deeply moved by a true work of art.<sup>li</sup>

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