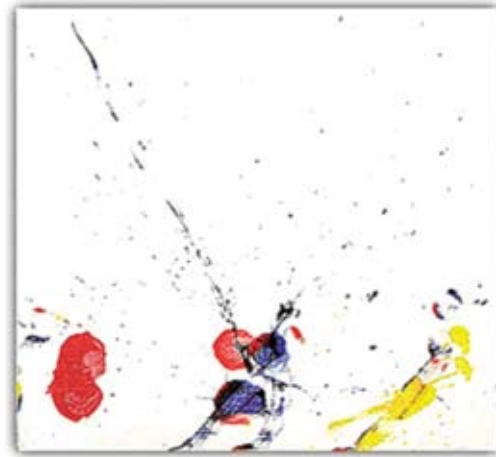




A



B

Let's begin with a test!
Look at the three pictures (A,B,C) and try to determine who is the most expressive artist.
Which of the three most moves you and why? Which would you proudly purchase and hang on your living room wall?
Each of the three artists has exhibited in galleries, and their work is being sold over the internet. You can find out who these artists are at the end of this article...



C

In Search of the Emperor's New Clothes **by Nic Costa**

Way back in the summer of 1826, in an obscure village in France, a momentous event happened. Almost nobody at the time even knew that it had happened, but its consequences have been enormous, not only for art but also for world history. In that year Nicéphore Niépce created the world's first heliograph. Photography was born.

Up until that point an artist's main function was to faithfully record the world around him, primarily the aristocratic one, and to produce portraits of the rich and famous. With the advent of photography everything changed. Within a few decades the camera could do in seconds what it took weeks or months for the artist. And not only that, it could do it much more accurately and cheaply.

As a consequence many artists became redundant and gave up art altogether or became photographers instead. Many of those who remained began copying from photographs. With the advent of the snap-shot camera, centuries-old rules of composition were abandoned and new more dynamic viewpoints incorporated. In order to survive, art had to change.

One thing a camera could not do was photograph a person's thoughts, feelings and ideas. Thus, as a means of survival, artists turned increasingly to producing work which focused upon these areas, areas a camera could not yet reach. Modern Art was born.

We all know about abstraction, it is the ubiquitous path that art has followed since the turn of the last century. For the Supremacist Kasimir Malevitch, way back in 1915, it was an attempt to portray some universal spiritual truth which existed beyond the material world. Yet by the 1960's with almost identical pictures, the Minimalists were maintaining the exact opposite. In 1966, Frank Stella was saying it was: "based on the fact that only what can be seen

there is there. It really is an object... What you see is what you see."

Paul Klee took another approach, inspired by synaesthesia, he tried to make painting transcend the senses- he tried to visualise musical notations by means of colour and shape. He was enormously successful in his life-time, but what no one seems to have questioned is that when one looks at a picture every colour and shape is seen instantly, whereas in music the notes unfold in a linear fashion over a given period of time. Thus as depictions of musical mood Klee's pictures patently fail. Yves Klein in the 1950's with his work saturated in a single colour was much nearer the mark.

→ **Art is what you can get away with!**

Way back in 1917 Marcel Duchamp exhibited his now famous urinal, and the concept of the ready-made was born. He is also famously known as saying that if an artist chooses to call a work 'art', then it is 'art'. Andy Warhol in the 1960's took the premise even further and declared: "Art is what you can get away with!"

For Duchamp art was ultimately no longer anything to do with the artist, it was the spectator who counted: "I believe that the artist doesn't know what he does. I attach even more importance to the spectator than to the artist."

Another area of attack has been the art system itself. Repeated attempts have been made by artists to take art out of the 'gallery system' and away from the hands of the tiny band of rich oligarchs who ultimately determine 'good' art from 'bad' by means of their

↪ *Would you trust a person who called himself a brain surgeon but had never held a scalpel?*

In which other area of life is this situation acceptable. Can you be a doctor or an athlete just because you say you are? Would you ever stand a chance of winning a race if you never trained? Would you trust a person who called himself a brain surgeon but had never held a scalpel?

Now let's look at the other side of the coin. The frenetic activity of the late 19th and early 20th century in the arts was actually carried out in the main by people who had trained. All had been steeped in the time honoured traditions of learning the basics, how to

purchasing power. And yet for all these decades of 'rebellion' where are we now? How are a work and an artist defined? In exactly the same way as ever - exhibitions in prestigious galleries, inclusion in national collections, purchases by rich investors posing as art aficionados (most of whom know or care precious little about the art they buy or the ideas contained within it), and prestigious awards and grants to friends of friends.

Thus as the 20th century progressed less and less came to be seen as signifying more, to the point where something no longer has to be produced, it just has to be thought about. Art since the Second World War has been repeatedly slamming itself into the Duchampian brick wall. The artist nowadays does not have to train or even to make any of his own objects. So what is left?

Tom Wolfe sarcastically said in *The Painted Word*: "All these years, in short, I had assumed that in art, if nowhere else, seeing is believing. Well—how very short-sighted! ... I had gotten it backward all along. Not "seeing is believing," you ninny, but "believing is seeing," for Modern Art has become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text.

Yet few seem to have noticed and the 'rebellion' continues to this day each one trying to be more outrageous or blander than the next. Nowadays, we are shown dead animals and told that the work is about death, erect penises and told that it is about sex or a pile of bricks and told they are bricks. Surely this is tautology posing as something more profound. It relies on two strands, our inherent biological conditioning and our self fulfilling illusion that we can be objective observers.



Damien Hirst *Away From The Flock* 1994 © The Saatchi Collection



above right .bricks

draw well and how to mix and use colour. These skills take a long time to acquire. They used the knowledge they gained to react directly against an entrenched system. This is what in my opinion gives their work quality and validity. People like Duchamp really did help to engineer changes in how we as a society perceive and respond to our environment.

By the 70's this was no longer the case. Extensive training was all but abandoned and discouraged in the name of 'creativity'. Old ground has effectively been gone over time and again. The 1960's onwards has been a rehash of the early 1900's. One could forgive Rip Van Winkle for thinking that he had never fallen asleep! However if you don't train how can you effectively express yourself, and if society is accepting of extreme reactions what is there left to validate the kicking? Training, particularly in drawing, creates new pathways in the brain and forces us to perceive the world in unaccustomed ways. If I don't train, I have fewer neural pathways at my disposal. For instance I can still make a noise on a piano, and initially it can appear quite radical, but after a while I find that all I am doing is producing the same noise ad infinitum, and no matter what I say to justify this, a whole spectrum of exquisite sounds is beyond my reach, thus my initial freedom becomes my eventual prison.

↪ *Every **artist** is portrayed as wonderful and brilliant and their work described as deep, meaningful and vibrant when the reality is that most work produced is insipid, derivative, and safe...*

This sadly, with some exceptions, is what has happened to art in the last 50 years or so.

Thus what do we find, particularly here in Cyprus when we open up the paper relating to yet another exhibition? Every artist is portrayed as wonderful and brilliant and their work described as deep and meaningful and vibrant when the reality is that most work produced is insipid, derivative, and safe, in effect little more than decorative wall paper bought by large hotels to fill empty white spaces, or by clients because it matches the décor in their living room. If it looks deep and meaningful, then it must be, and I can bask in the kudos it creates... who am I to judge? The 'artist' (using Duchamp's premise) throws the ball to the 'aficionado' and the 'aficionado' bounces it right back, each pretending that the other knows. At the end of the day it is little more than the blind leading the blind. The emperor really is naked nowadays! Abstraction has been the preferred medium, a good way to mask poor drawing and painting abilities, and let chance and our biological predisposition to construct order and meaning from what is essentially meaningless chaos.

Then there is the other branch of art which most of the world's population subscribe to- the production of naturalistic pictures depicting pleasing imagery such as landscapes, flowers, and the like. Most untrained people subscribe to the theory that art should be pleasing to look at and not make you feel uncomfortable. In their minds the Impressionists are as radical as you can get, and they happily buy reproductions by the tens of thousands of weeping children, clowns, gipsy girls, harbour scenes, and flowers or cheap 'original' oil pastiches painted on a conveyor belt in some obscure sweatshop in the Far



East. Whilst some of the products may be technically perfect they fulfil no greater service to art or humankind,

than Mills and Boon does to literature. One sigh of 'oh how pretty' and the image is instantly forgotten.

↪ *Art is a thug lying in wait. It delivers painful truths*

As the art critic Simon Schama recently put it, "Art is a thug lying in wait. It delivers painful truths."

So what is the definition of a successful artist?

One particularly Cypriot definition has stuck in my mind. I was once told: "Now she is a very successful artist, every time she has an exhibition she sells a lot of pictures... you see, she has many wealthy relatives and they always come to her exhibitions and buy her work."

In reality when we look back upon the work of some of the great 20th century artists we actually find the opposite. Many led ordinary lives doing mundane

jobs for a good percentage of their lives with their work consistently rejected, ignored or belittled.

Duchamp was a librarian, Renoir a plasterer, Magritte a civil servant, Ensor sold tacky souvenirs, and Klein was a judo instructor, to name but a few. Almost all faced ridicule and rejection, even that golden boy of the 20th century Pablo Picasso was so ridiculed by his peers for Les Demoiselles d’Avignon that he rolled it up and hid it from view for 10 years.

↪ *All profoundly original art looks ugly at first*

So take heart, if people don’t buy your work because they think its ugly, unfinished, or just plain daft- you might actually be on to a winner- in so long as you have trained and worked as hard as you possibly can and you are trying to produce work that stems uniquely from yourself and is not plagiarizing, imitating or trying to please others.

As the critic Clement Greenberg once said:
“All profoundly original art looks ugly at first. . . but there is ugly and there is *ugly* !” . . .

There are always two paths in art. If everybody is travelling on one, you must always choose the other; inevitably it’s a lonely road...

Now back to the quiz:
Which piece of abstract work did you select?
Who, in your opinion is the most accomplished artist? Was it A, B, or C?
Well A was painted by a female artist called Jesse who is a chimpanzee; B was painted by a male artist called Koko, a gorilla, and C by a Thai artist known as Ngam (© Novica.com) who also happens to be an elephant!
Caveat emptor.

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