

The Importance of Beauty

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Introduction

The creation and expression of beauty has been my goal and my obsession for nearly my entire photographic career. For the past two years, I have been enrolled in a Master of Fine Arts degree program, studying visual arts. In that program, I've learned that beauty has long been an either suspect or an outcast in the world of contemporary art. During my studies, I've alternately clung to, tried to dispense with (Fig.1), and ultimately come to terms with beauty and its relationship to my art as a photographer.

I've come to realize that beauty has been seen in absolute terms for much of history, and that includes the way I've seen it until fairly recently. This thesis is an consideration of beauty, especially as it relates to the idea of absolutes. It is a contemplation of the space between the sanctification of beauty and its banishment.



Fig. 1, "Ugly"

What is Beauty?

"Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty"? That's easy. Truth is a dead stop in thought before a proposition that seems to obviate further questioning, and the satisfaction it brings is beautiful. Beauty is a melting away of uncertainty in the

state of pleasure, which when recalled to the mind bears the imprimatur of truth. I do demur at Keats' capitalization. Truth and beauty are time-bound events. Truth exists only in the moment of saying of a true thing, and beauty exists only in the moment of the recognition of a beautiful thing. Each ceases to exist a moment later, though leaving a trace.¹



Fig. 2

One sunny summer morning, several years ago, I was working in our backyard. I was covered in garden dirt, bug spray and sun-screen. Sweat saturated my mismatched work clothes. The fingers of my garden gloves were worn through at the tips from digging and my nails were grimy. I was a mess.

Thirsty after several hours of work, I trudged back up to the top of a knoll where I'd left my water bottle. It was very quiet, even the birds weren't pecking at the air with their song. As I stood there, catching my breath, a satin breeze circled me, wrapping me in its arms. I closed my eyes and drank it in, feeling myself lift into a state of perfect peacefulness, perhaps for the first time in my life. I wanted that moment to last forever. It was a rare moment of transcendent beauty.

What is beauty? Beauty is...

"...music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you *are* the music" ²

¹ Notes on Beauty, Pg 58, by Peter Schjeldahl, from *Uncontrollable Beauty*, edited by Bill Beckley with David Shapiro, Allworth Press, New York, 1998

² The Practice of Beauty, pg 271, by James Hillman, from *Uncontrollable Beauty*, edited by Bill Beckley with David Shapiro, Allworth Press, New York, 1998

“...the mental solvent that dissolves something else, melting it into radiance.”³

“...bête noire, the snake in the garden. It steals the institution’s power, seduces its congregation, and elicits the dismay of artists who have committed themselves to the excruciating tedium of honesty.”⁴

“...that which being good is also pleasant” (Aristotle)

“...that which pleases when it is perceived.” (Thomas Aquinas)

“...That which pleases neither through impression, nor concepts, but with subjective necessity in an immediate, universal, and disinterested way” (Kant)⁵

"There is no objective definition of beauty. The existing definitions (both the metaphysical and the experimental) amount only to one and the same subjective definition, which (strange as it seems to say so) is that art is that which makes beauty manifest, and beauty is that which pleases (without exciting desire)."⁶

Beauty attracts us, entices us. It enchants and beguiles. Beauty can transcend the form in which it exists, and it can sweep us off our feet making our thoughts take flight. People want to come closer to beauty. It comforts, delights, puts one at ease, and lifts one up. Beauty inspires us, incites us to covet it. We want to own it, to emulate, to study, or spend time with that which is beautiful. It has the power to stop us, to arrest our thoughts and our movement, to

³ Notes on Beauty, Pg 53, by Peter Schjeldahl, from *Uncontrollable Beauty*, edited by Bill Beckley with David Shapiro, Allworth Press, New York, 1998

⁴ Hickey, David, *The Invisible Dragon*, Loc 218 of 1418, Kindle Edition,

⁵ Aristotle, Aquinas and Kant quotes from “The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline,” by Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 2, 1972, Pg. 166, published by The American Society for Aesthetics

⁶ Quote by Leo Tolstoy, *From Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, edited by Stephen M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 2008

make us want to pause, if only for a moment, in order to fully appreciate that which makes the object or idea beautiful.

One aspect of beauty's definition is that it is an attribute that elevates, something that sets an object, a person, an idea, or a solution apart from others. Beauty rises above. From a Buddhist prayer:⁷

Imagine that you are a lotus seed buried beneath a muddy lotus pond. There is mud all around you, and you can feel them clearly. Above you, above this muddy pool of dirt, mud and filth, are sunshine and air. You are not disheartened as you begin your journey towards the surface.

With a determined heart, you begin to wiggle in the earth. You grow roots deep, deep into the mud. Your little stem grows up slowly. Suddenly, "pop" you are out of the mud! Your stem grows higher and higher, taller and taller. You rise up slowly, fighting against the muddy water. All of a sudden, you are out of the muddy pond! You reach up towards the warm sun, shining down on you.

Your lotus bud begins to grow on top of your stem. It expands and grows larger and larger, finally bursting into full bloom. A white lotus flower. You stand beautifully above the muddy water, not dirtied by the mud from which you grow. You are white, fragrant and beautiful.

What all of these differing manifestations of beauty have in common is that they are all pleasing or entrancing in some sense beyond an average, or even an above-average, level of expectation.

A Brief History of Beauty in Art

We have an instinctual attraction to beauty. Dennis Dutton states that studies have shown infants as young as only a few days old will look longer at a more beautiful face (that is

⁷ <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/meditate/lotus.htm>, Guided Meditation, Buddhist Educational Associates, Buddhanet

symmetrical faces with “averaged” features) than at an unattractive face, long before culture and environment can mold aesthetic values.

Even though specific norms for beauty may change over time and with different cultures,⁸ humans appear to come pre-programmed with an innate appreciation for beauty, or an attraction to certain features which something possesses (an object, face, landscape) which we have come to define as beautiful.⁹

We’re conditioned by evolution to seek out beauty in each other.¹⁰ Why might this be so? A higher degree of attractiveness; symmetry of features for instance, is one marker for a healthy partner who may provide better prospects for procreation and hence survival of the species – this type of attractiveness is often described as “beautiful”.



Fig. 3

Plato wrote that, "if life is worth living, it is so in order that man may behold beauty."¹¹ Tatarkiewicz recounts that, especially in the Christian tradition, it

⁸ Consider the complexity of Louis the 14th furniture or Fabergé eggs, or, conversely, the beauty of roughened imperfection as seen in the Japanese concept of Wabi Sabi, or the green glazed, high-fired ceramic celadons of Korea, which depicts stories of royal country life.

⁹ In *The Art Instinct*, Dennis Dutton also states that this human attraction to beauty predates language. There is evidence that art was made as early as 1.5 million years ago, such as the example of Acheulean hand axes found in a widespread area through Africa and southern Europe.

We share, cross culturally, certain aspects of attraction. It is nearly universal that when one is asked to describe, draw or paint “the perfect landscape” that it includes trees, a grassy area, a path or a road, and evidence of water nearby such as a river or stream, and evidence of animals nearby. This replicates the ideal location for the survival of early man, a savannah with water, food and shelter nearby as well as some evidence of a path or accessible exit. We see this type of landscape depicted over and over, in painting and in photography.

¹⁰ *The Art Instinct* by Dennis Dutton, and *The Aesthetic Brain* by Anjan Chatterjee

¹¹ Ibid

was believed that "God is the cause of everything that is beautiful." Michelangelo said "I love the beautiful human form because it is a reflection of God."¹²

Beginning in the 18th century, there was further shift that lead to beauty, not only as evidence of God's hand in the making of art, but as the primary "purpose of the arts, that thing which linked them together and defined them." Art was no longer considered art until or unless it was deemed beautiful. Beauty defined an object as art.

Until the turn of the twentieth century, art and beauty remained bound together. Beauty was then stripped away from fine art. That separation coincided with several historically important developments. One milestone in this unfolding of events was the advent of photography. Painters were freed, first, from the obligation to represent accurately the human form; since a photographer could do the job with far less time invested and for less money.

Concurrent with the development of photography, the industrial revolution began to really take hold. We began to see mass production of items, as well as production of time-saving devices, and a move away from an agrarian culture.¹³ The industrial age also brought great changes for women. One example is change brought by the invention of the sewing machine. First, the sewing machine sped up the work of making and repairing the family's clothing and, second, it lead to businesses that made and supplied clothing at prices even middle-class families could afford. Gradually women found themselves with time to consider more than the immediate needs of the family. With more time, women began to find their voices as independent

¹² Religion is intertwined with beauty in art throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. Ulrich of Strasbourg (1225-1277) stated: "God is not only perfectly beautiful and the highest degree of beauty, he is also the efficient, exemplary and final cause of all created beauty." Tatarkiewicz, page 170,

¹³ This allowed people more leisure time. They were able to travel more easily, both locally and over longer distances. They also had access to more material goods which meant people could enjoy more amenities, a nicer standard of living, and the ability to more easily purchase and then live in the midst of attractive objects. For example, mass production of fabric became easier, meaning that people from many walks of life has access to sumptuous fabrics, something which was previously reserved for the wealthy.

World travel also became easier, meaning people had exposure and access to a variety of cultural ideas as well as cultural artifacts that surprised and therefore questioned assumed ideals of attractiveness, beauty and propriety.

thinkers, even fighting for and gaining the right to vote in Sweden, Finland, New Zealand, the western United States and several other countries as early as the late nineteenth century.

By this point in history, approximately one fourth of all professional painters were women.¹⁴ Although women were not being lauded in the art world the way men were, they were a deepening and undeniable presence in the art market.¹⁵

I suspect these early seed bursts of feminism at the end of the 19th century may have been a part of the psychological impetus to move



Fig. 4

away from the traditional ideals of beauty as well. Whenever we see a loosening of traditional entrenchments, such as the rigorous belief in men's unquestioned superiority, we generally see a sharp, counter reactionary pull toward traditional values.¹⁶

There is an essay by Camille Paglia in her book *Glittering Images*¹⁷ analyzing Pablo Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" (Fig. 5). She points out many clues to his attitude towards

¹⁴ Marsh, Jan, Gender Ideology & Separate Spheres in the 19th Century, Victoria and Albert Museum, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gender-ideology-and-separate-spheres-19th-century/>

¹⁵ I believe all of these changes played a part in the abandonment of beauty at the turn of the twentieth century. If women were quietly, but markedly (one quarter of the profession cannot be considered insignificant) making their way as artists in the area of traditional art, they were a growing threat to the male-dominated art establishment.

¹⁶ Even at this point in the relatively evolved history of women's rights, we see some "men's rights groups" pushing back against the progress women have made over the past 50 years, especially. For example, in June of 2013, Mike Buchanan, the founder of Justice for Men & Boys, gave a presentation entitled, "Let's Get Political," at the International Conference on Men's Issues, held near Detroit. His aim was to bring more attention to the "cries of pain and alienation" felt by men because of feminist policies. He advocates for men by saying men pay more in taxes and should receive more in benefits, and that women shouldn't have as many rights concerning abortion. Buchanan vociferously accuses feminists insulting and demonizing men. In response, David Futrelle says "Essentially, the issues they bring up are little more than an excuse or an opportunity for them to attack women and blame women for pretty much everything that goes wrong in the world." When someone gains power, someone else inevitably loses some, and it would have been a difficult reality to accept for those who had "ruled the roost" for century upon century.

¹⁷ Paglia, Camille, *Glittering Images: A Journey Through Art From Egypt to Star Wars*, Vintage Books, New York, 2013

women. One of the first things to notice about this painting is the size. The women are depicted larger than life-sized—approximately eight feet high—overwhelming, intrusive. The women’s breasts are rendered as weapon-like triangles. There are areas of the image that suggest blood, such as the women to the left with a blade-like leg that is awash in



Fig. 5

deeper reds. She appears, in Paglia’s estimation, to have “butchered” her clients and be standing in a wash of their blood.

Picasso zeroes in on the violence of ancient nature cults, with their rituals of blood sacrifice. Sex as portrayed in *Les Femmes d’Alger* is a gateway to an impersonal world of pure biologic force where man is nothing and where woman, a mother goddess splitting into her weird sisters, is everything. The little table has been seen as a phallically thrusting prow (in early sketches, a sailor sat at stage center). But it can also be viewed as a ruined altar laden with ashy forbidden fruits—a melon slice resembling a scythe-bike crescent moon, a mottled pear and apple looking like hacked meat. Has castration already occurred?¹⁸

These women are not smiling, not friendly. The woman on the lower right is twisted and even demonically distorted. They are fierce, dangerous creatures. They are portrayed, by Picasso, as threatening man-haters, essentially the visual representation of Mike Buchanan’s woman-phobic rhetoric.

So, we have an artistic culture where the artists, those whose voices were heard and whose art was highly respected at that point, were nearly all men. Beauty is often seen as a more feminine than masculine attribute. Perhaps the movement away from beauty in art was, in some part, also a way to strip any hint of the growing feminine power. The negation of beauty in

¹⁸ Paglia, Camille, *Glittering Images: A Journey Through Art From Egypt to Star Wars*, Vintage Books, New York, 2013 (pg 105)

art may have been a way for male dominated, artistic establishment especially, and men in society in general, to stomp the ground firmly and claim the (art) world for themselves.

There is also a world war happening in the early 1900's. Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists saw the rejection of beauty as a way of dissociating themselves, as artists, from the politics of the time which they believed caused and contributed to the war. They renounced beauty (or abused the ideals of beauty), severing it from art as an indication of their moral abhorrence of a society that valued art in direct proportion to its beauty. They saw society as perpetrating a futile, horrific war. The horrors galvanized these artists in their commitment to banishing beauty from art as an expression of their rage. However, in a telling indication of how intrinsically beauty had been bound up with art, the Berlin Dadaists declared that this was "the end of all art," (except the *Maschinekunst* of Tatlin).¹⁹ This intellectual and political move away from an intrinsic connection between beauty and art cemented the redefining of what constituted art.

In the mid-20th century, Clement Greenberg continued the assault on beauty by stating emphatically that "all profoundly original art looks ugly at first."²⁰ Greenberg used his influence as noted art critic and philosopher to support the avant garde and to eschew traditional aesthetic values such as beauty.

There are always exceptions, however, and beautiful art was still made. Furthermore, art that was not *intended* to be so was gradually *perceived* to be beautiful. Therefore, Beauty became an incidental facet of art, rather than the point of art, as it had been during the 1700's and 1800's. Arthur C. Danto distinguishes between incidental and integral beauty. The beauty of a Greek statue, for instance, is integral to its meaning. The Greek concept of beauty included

¹⁹ Danto, Arthur C., *After the End of Art*, Pg 26

²⁰ De Duve, Thierry, "Clement Greenberg: Between the Lines", University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996

moral beauty so the representation of the subject as beautiful included the inherent meaning that the subject was also a person of high ethical standards.²¹ Conversely, any beauty found in the form or execution of DuChamp's *Fountain* is incidental to its meaning, utterly unintentional and completely beside the point of the piece.²² In the modern era, Beauty became secondary, even superfluous, to art's meaning and its purpose.

There are many reasons why beauty became a virtual outcast in the art world, but there seems to finally be a growing acceptance of it once again. Perhaps one reason why beauty is making appearances in contemporary art is that we seem, over the last one hundred years, to have open up and explored nearly every available artistic avenue. It's possible that we have reached a point where art has become so eclectic, so wide-ranging, so dissected and unearthed that we are looking at ways in which to reinvigorate every possibility available to us for artistic expression. Art exists from every imaginable medium: from metal to waste matter, from paint to blood, in two dimensions to digital expressions in video form, from sculpture to walks through the woods. Art is born of any material and can take nearly any form.

One hundred years ago, we arrived at the point in the art world where we had meaning in the absence of beauty. Duchamp used the abstention from beauty as a political statement against a warring and undeserving (to his mind and that of the other Dadaists) society. Greenberg embraced the ugly as innovative.

Now we have art rendered without any demonstration of skill in drawing, painting, or sculpting. We have art that leaves no physical trace other than some sort of record that it existed, and that record may be only verbal or written. Yet these pieces are still considered *art*.

²¹ Tatarkiewicz, Wladyslaw, *The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline*, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, published by The American Society for Aesthetics, Volume 2, 1972, Page 166

²² Gaiger, Jason, *Incidental and Integral Beauty*, pg. 121, *From Beauty: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by David Beech, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2009

Meaning is now valued so highly that these conceptual pieces exist as only meaning, formless, yet that fleeting existence alone is enough that these pieces are considered to be art. Maria Abramovic's performance piece at the Museum of Modern Art, "The Artist is Present" (Fig. 6), is one example of this. Abramovic sits at a small table and looks at a succession of people. Samuel Rowlett's dragging a cement block around a city or carrying a blank canvas through the woods is another example.



Fig.6

These artists work not just with ideas but *in* ideas.

These pieces, otherwise traditionally not recognizable as art pieces, are defined as such by their makers. Sol Lewitt expressed his opinion that "Ideas alone can be works of art; they are a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical. . . . The words of one artist to another may induce an idea chain, if they share the same concept."²³

The acts derive meaning for the people involved and for the people who observe them. This observation and consideration gives the art its strength and value. There is no form to purchase or hold. The idea *is* the art. Beauty has no place in this art form.

A New Relationship to Beauty

So, we have a historical progression from beauty being evidence of the hand of God in art, to beauty being a required value in order to define something as art, then to the expulsion of

²³ Lewitt, Sol quote from *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 ...* By Lucy R. Lippard, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1997, Pg. xiii

beauty, and eventually to art existing as solely as idea or action. It is a progression of historical absolutes placed on beauty.

Today art can exist as only meaning, without beauty. But beauty, in order to be considered valuable in contemporary art terms, *must have meaning*. That is the difference between the way in which “beauty” appears in art today versus the art of two centuries ago. Today creating only a form that is beautiful is not enough. Vapid beauty fails to fulfill its promise, which is worse than not making the promise in the first place. We are finally moving away from seeing beauty in absolute terms.

When beauty does make an appearance in contemporary art, the art must also contain the substance of thought and intention. A piece can have beautiful form, but the form is only one element of its being considered as something of beauty. One such example is the work, “Total Reflected Abstraction” by Josiah McElheny. McElhney works primarily in blown glass, often using mirrors or reflective materials. These are stunningly beautiful pieces (Fig. 7), but they are bound to contemporary art through strong connections with history, memory and reflection, with



Fig. 7

clear references to the infinite, purity and utopia. In other words, they are laden with meaning.

McElheny's pieces compel you to engage with them. I walked into the room in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts where this piece resides, and I immediately approached it, then circled it. I examined the components to dissect its design. I looked

at it from different distances and from different angles. I found myself beguiled, and part of that beguilement was generated, in no small part, by its beauty. I needed to know more about it. That

is how I feel beauty must function in my work, too. This piece stopped me in my tracks and opened a door to a new way of thinking about space and the relationship of objects. It brought me to a place I hadn't known existed before, much like that day in my garden. It gave me a new understanding of the way in which I could feel about art and a new perspective on its power to change the viewer. It prodded me, in part because of its beauty, to investigate further and to comprehend it as the embodiment of the artist's intentions.

That is beauty's power. To arbitrarily disengage from that potential, I feel, would be an lost opportunity. To feel that draw, like the pull of a magnet, inviting you into a new experience, insistent that you see, investigate, and embrace a new possibility. Beauty in form, in concept, in performance facilitates connection.

Peter Schjeldahl, in his essay "Notes on Beauty" states: "The attractive or pleasing enhances the flow of my feelings. The beautiful halts the flow, which recommences in a changed direction."²⁴ To achieve that is a grand ambition for an art piece. Visual criteria used to accomplish that in the past, now we (perhaps just the educated elite)²⁵ appear to need more than just "appealing form" to inspire this experience.

My training and background as a photographer have been to find the compelling to photograph, and then to use my skills to make the imagery meet criteria established as compelling in the marketplace as perfect and beautiful as possible. One of my early influences was Mary Ellen Mark. With her great technical acumen as well as her deep commitment to the potential power of her art to change views, she opened up the lives of the underrepresented. Her work, while not dressed up, is so skillfully crafted that even when the subject is horrific, the images still

²⁴ Notes on Beauty, Pg 53, by Peter Schjeldahl, from *Uncontrollable Beauty*, edited by Bill Beckley with David Shapiro, Allworth Press, New York, 1998

²⁵ Well-educated artists, art critics, curators, museum directors and the "trustees of culture," as described in *Trustees of Culture: Power, Wealth, and Status on Elite Arts Boards*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, by Francie Ostrower, 2002

draw us in and invite us into a world that would almost certainly otherwise repel us.

Mark was working on a project with young street kids (Fig. 8 and 9) when I studied with her. She used her art to shine a light on the situations in which people, in this case children and young teenagers, lived. The conditions in which they lived would sadden, anger, and possibly even sicken most of us. Mark's images were gritty, sad and touching, and they were also wrought beautifully. The lighting, the tonal ranges, and the composition of each piece work together to comprise beautiful imagery.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

The subjects of Mark's work could have been portrayed as disturbing and off-putting, but they were presented in beautiful imagery, with lighting that deftly sculpted and made use of the full rich tonal range. Mark's use of beauty draws us in, making us consider her

subjects and even, possibly, find empathy for her subject's plights. It was Mark's hope that these images would attract people to view them and to consider her subjects carefully. She hoped that they would serve to create some social awareness that might eventually lead to better lives for her subjects in much the same way as Dorothea Lange's photos (Fig. 10) during the

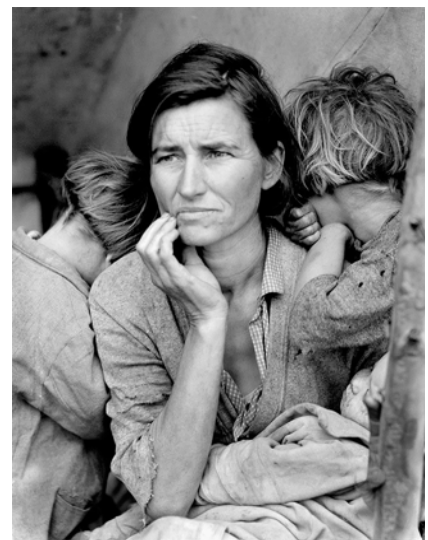


Fig. 10

Great Depression personalized the hardships of those suffering most. This imagery was intended to connect the viewer to the person in the image, and the beautiful rendering was intended to facilitate that connection.

This is one reason I believe that beauty is needed in contemporary art and photography, and why I am compelled to work towards including it as an aspect of my art. There is an inherent optimism in beauty, a rejection of cynicism; you don't redecorate your living room if you believe your house is about to be washed away in a flood. Beauty in art can be seen in a similar way. It not only engages us, but contains the seeds of hope for positive change as well. We've had a century of art that distanced itself from beauty and that artistic cynicism did not heal the world. It did not stop climate change, nor did it lead to more effective governments. It didn't improve math scores nor did it lessen our desire to go to war, as the Dadaists had hoped.

Does the current lack of regard for beauty in the contemporary art world indicate that we are still mired in a repeating loop of producing antiestablishment art? Or is it indicative of a kind of intellectual conceit, the artistic embodiment of elitism? Is the rejection of the beautiful form a way for artists to give themselves exclusivity?

There is evidence of this in the language used to discuss art. Over the last 150 years it has become increasingly aloof, beyond comprehensibility to all but a relative few. It's entirely possible that, in seeking intellectual superiority, beauty's status as outcast was further cemented. Unlike beautiful art, art which doesn't entice by means of visual attractiveness requires education in order to make a connection. One needs a point of entry to understand what one is seeing and experiencing, and a way of questioning so that they can be open to art that doesn't present itself to us by way of aesthetic appeal. One needs information, enlightenment.

Beauty's long expulsion from art is undoubtedly built upon a complex conglomeration of ingredients which begs for repeated distillation rather than acceptance and acquiescence. If we

bind ourselves to any status quo or absolute thinking as contemporary artists, are we not failing, on some level, to fulfill our calling, our potential?

Here are a few ways in which artists speak of the motivations intrinsic to their art:

“Making connections” (Janine Antoni)

“Building bridges” Cao Feo²⁶

“I wanted to expand the consumerist story...” —Ron English²⁷

Marina Abramović speaks of her art “elevating the human spirit.”²⁸

Even if an artist is using his art to explore a certain materials or the way in which that material may be used, he or she still expects some change in perspective to take place concerning the material:

“...subvert the stereotype of metal as a stiff, rigid medium and rather reveal it as a soft, pliable almost sensuous material capable of being adapted to specific spaces.”²⁹

“...an artists (is) “someone who brings new thinking and generosity to his work, who does human work that changes another for the better.” —Seth Godin³⁰

“The definition of being a modern person is to examine yourself...” —Josiah McElheny, as he reflected on the meaning of his work.³¹

As contemporary artists and photographers, we should always be re-examining ways in which to approach or create our work, which means always questioning, always digging beyond

²⁶ Art 21

²⁷ Huffington Post, 15 Captivating Works of Art that Challenge the McDonaldization of Society, August 30, 2015

²⁸ Art 21

²⁹ Artworks, africa.si.edu, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art,

³⁰ Bond, Keith, “Be An Artist: Don’t Settle for the Status Quo,” Fine Art Views, faso.com, 3/5/2012

³¹ Art21, pbs.org, Josiah McElheny in “Memory”

the surface to the nuances, always reassessing judgments. It is my belief that included in an artist's job description is the questioning absolutes. Simplification of issues leads to quick responses and, often, poorly examined ones. As an artist who works in photography, my work must be about seeing and better defining the gray, everything that existed from darkest black to paper white.

For me, beauty and the hesitancy to accept it into contemporary art continues to speak to a kind of absolutism. Art became xenophobic in the early 1900's. The avant garde became rather dictatorial as soon as their work was accepted. Beauty was dispatched, belittled, and trivialized. But while there is certainly a great deal of empty beauty in the world, beauty in art should not be left out of the contemporary art conversation.

In her essay, "Scapeland," Rebecca Solnit talks about how she saw the desert as ugly when she first arrived in it. She interpreted its sparseness, emptiness and its lack of familiar elements--such as water, plant and human populations--as missing contributors to a beauty ideal.³² She notes that we even have a biblical reference to this in that deserts were a place of exile, punishment, trial, and purification. Just as I still look back to that day when I took a short break from the sweaty work of gardening and experienced the gift of a moment of transcendent beauty, Solnit came to see great beauty in the desert landscape:

It takes time to see the desert and surrender to it. Only after one has given up looking for pleasing variety, dappled light, the softening veils and mists of humidity, verdure, and abundance, do the light, clarity, starkness and scale become beautiful....The absences and austerity that at first made the desert look ugly to me became the bases of a beauty so profound, so moving, it eclipsed my love for all other places.³³

³² Solnit, Rebecca, *As Even Said to the Serpent*, essay entitled "Scapeland," pg. 65, University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA, 2001

³³ Solnit, Rebecca, *As Even Said to the Serpent*, essay entitled "Scapeland," pp. 67, 68, University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA, 2001

In his book, *Six Names of Beauty*, Crispin Sartwell identifies these ways in which beauty can be manifested:

...An object of long (English)

...glow, bloom (Hebrew)

...holiness (Sanskrit)

...idea, ideal (Greek)

...humility, imperfection (Japanese)

...health, harmony (Navajo)³⁴

I return to thoughts of that moment on the hill overlooking my gardens, that moment of feeling embraced by the breeze, of sublime peacefulness, of a perfect awareness...a moment that changed the moments after. That is what I aspire to in making my art, creating a moment like that.

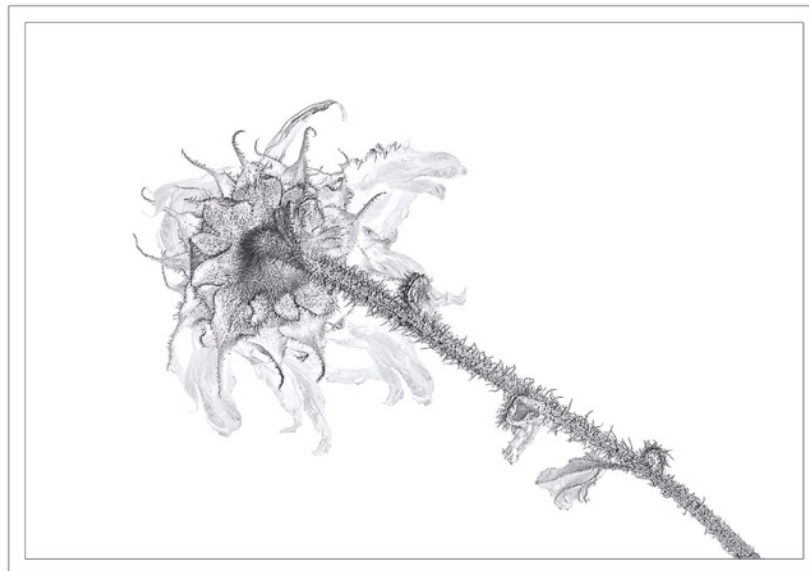


Fig. 11 - "Past Life" 2015 Loan Image by Ella Putney Carlson

³⁴ Sartwell, Crispin, *Six Names of Beauty*, Rutledge, New York, 2006

Images

Figure 1 - "Ugly", Ella Putney Carlson, 2014

Figure 2 - "Garden Rose", Ella Putney Carlson, 2012

Figure 3 - "Kunstformen der Natur - Tafel 28", Ernst Haeckel, 1902

Figure 4 - "The Boating Party", Mary Cassatt, 1894

Figure 5 - "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon", Pablo Picasso, 1907

Figure 6 - "The Artist is Present", Marina Abramovic, 2010

Figure 7 - "Endlessly Repeating Twentieth Century Modernism", by Josiah McElheny, 2003-4

Figure 8 - "Tiny in her Halloween Costume", by Mary Ellen Mark 1983

Figure 9 - "Tiny, Pregnant", Mary Ellen Mark, 1985

Figure 10 - "Migrant Mother", Dorothea Lange, 1936

Figure 11 - "Past Life", Ella Putney Carlson, 2015

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