

## The Relevance of the Beautiful?

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Little is said around the art world these days about beauty; the beautiful is simply a quaint and mistaken idea from some past that no longer exists. It is seen as a bit too sincere, a touch saccharine and absolutely irrelevant to the contemporary art scene. In some circles, it is even viewed as reactionary, subversive to the idea of being subversive.

But, my friends! Beauty is the poison on the tip of the arrow, the infecting mechanism an artist must use to infiltrate their message beyond the intellect and into the tender innards of the audience. It is through beauty that the artist most clearly speaks; it is in the beautiful that truth of any epoch is most effectively expressed.

Baudelaire stated:

"All centuries and all peoples have their own form of beauty. All forms of beauty contain an element of the eternal and an element of the transitory – of the absolute and the particular. The particular element in each manifestation comes from the emotions."

All true art wrestles with beauty in its yearning towards the creation of a true artistic voice. In my grim assessment, the lack of beauty in the contemporary art world, and in art world conversation in general, is but one more example of why this artistic era of humanity, our era of visual dissolution, represents a true fallow period in the ebb and flow of the human creative impulse.

Beauty, true beauty, that which touches the soul by moving beyond the comprehensible and into the evanescent realm of the spirit, is impossible to quantify. As Albrecht Durer averred:

"The beautiful and the more beautiful are not easy to discern. It would be quite possible to make two different figures, neither of them conforming to the other, one stouter and one thinner, and yet we scarce might be able to judge which is the more beautiful. What is beautiful, I know not, though it adheres to many things."

If Durer had such a hard time quantifying beauty, painting as he did during an epoch when the visual offerings operated within a narrow range, imagine how much more difficult now, in this era of visual bulimia, it is to actually find a sense of beauty that will be relevant to and captivate the citizens of our era.

As an artist moves beyond simply wanting to create something "beautiful," to producing an object that is searing, relevant, personal and beautiful, the road does indeed become unclear. After all, as Baudelaire stated, the ideas of beauty evolve and change over time; what was beautiful in the 18th century would most definitely be considered "saccharine" or trite these days. The reason that the contemporary art world so often seems to reject the idea of "beauty" in general is that the gatekeepers of that absurd and stunted little village (the art world, that is) attach the idea of "beauty" to one particular place and time – the Modern conception of a "perfect" beauty.

In fact, the "beautiful" of our era should be something relevant to our era, and not represented by a bevy of cows in a pristine English field. Creative thinking, creative understanding of the aesthetic is necessary to extract a conception of Post-Modern beauty. The ideal of beauty itself has changed over time – this is inevitable and representative of the evolution (or at least movement) of the human experience. For many millennia, beauty was tied in with Platonic ideals and utopian visions, of the narrow view of human possibility (which, in retrospect, appears immature) and a mainstream ideal. This was not a beauty that challenged and expanded human vision; it simply expressed the yearnings of a species whose understanding of the world was based in myth and dream.

We consider ourselves "knowers" now, not dreamers, and as such, our conception of beauty should represent this. We no longer go to astrologers and seers for the answers to our lives and to understand the world around us; we can no longer accept a beauty that is simply the representation of an idealized world, one which is comfortable, banal, yet full of a certain, understandable magic.

Being "knowers" -- and furthermore, inhabiting an era that yearns for "knowledge" – artists can no longer offer a beauty that simply represents the possibility of hopes and dreams. Beauty must go beyond representing to teaching; it must offer entrance into some world or sense of understanding that no other aspect of the human experience can. While Durer was correct in saying that it is impossible to "quantify" beauty – in this, we can still agree with him – nonetheless, the contemporary artist must continue to search for a beauty that will access the spirit of his/her audience, and express the spirit of our age, by bringing to those viewers a new manner of conceiving reality, a fresh vision of possibility.

This is an era of tremendous movement, a fact that is easy to discern by simply looking at what is being created in the art world. The "new" and the idea of "creativity" are closely linked; however, the contemporary ethos has denatured art of beauty. All of this makes perfect sense – after all, our technological innovations and nascent psychological understanding of ourselves have moved us into a vaguely defined, "post-emotional" era, where we believe that our intellect and technology can overcome all of our emotional problems. Of course, this is wrong, but this stolid belief in the power of the human intellect can be seen in the lack of the beautiful in contemporary art.

This is not quantified into a theory of contemporary art, so much as representing something that is simply "in the air" of our contemporary milieu, and ingested by osmosis. But like so much else in our epoch, this belief in technology over matters of the emotions or the spirit, is simply the representation of a failed comprehension of where we are as humans, and defines a misplaced belief in our ability to control things, through our intellect, our technology, our misuse of language etc.

A contemporary aesthetic based in beauty is needed now more than ever. Yesterday's beauty, which simply expressed the highest yearnings of a myth-bound species, is irrelevant. We must offer a beauty that reaches into the spirit not to soothe, but to teach; in this manner, the beauty of our era will most definitely be different than classical ideas of beauty. It will not be easy to quantify, but as both Albrecht Durer and Ronald Reagan's commission on porn both averred, we will know it when we see it. And this inimitable beauty, this new conception, must grow out of the sincere searching of the artist him or herself, coupled with a clear view of the times in which we live.

To simply eschew beauty because classical ideas of beauty are now irrelevant is irresponsible and immature. The artist must think, and think clearly about where they are in the stream of human history, about why classical beauty is no longer relevant, and about how to create a searing beauty out of the cyborgian nature of our age.

This is the task at hand.

