

Art Dissertation

Exploring moods, atmospheres and stories in paintings.

This year I have decided to base my projects on visual communication. I intend to investigate how artists are able to communicate stories through paintings. I will also consider any moods and atmospheres they create in these paintings.

At AS level I looked at nightlife and the social environment of pubs and clubs. I enjoyed doing this and I think this may influence my A2 work as well. I would like to develop my Unit 5 problem solving unit to looking at different situations - different stories, atmospheres, moods, etc. I may look at paintings creating happy atmospheres and compare them with paintings, which create unhappy, tense atmospheres; like 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch. To enable me to complete this properly I will use this Unit 4 contextual study to develop an understanding of the work of several relevant artists. Some of these artists are Edvard Munch, Kathe Kollwitz, Rita Duffy, Terry Bradley, etc. This should give me an insight into the different ways that different artists use to create strong atmospheres and moods. I think colour, line, style and tone will be the main ways in which this is done, but how?

Edvard Munch

A gifted Norwegian painter and printmaker, Edvard Munch not only was his country's greatest artist, but also played a vital role in the development of German [expressionism](#). Expressionism is artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse in him.

Edvard Munch has created such a strong, tense and fearful atmosphere in his painting 'The Scream'. "'The Scream' is regarded as an icon of existential anguish." I think he has been able to do this so well due to his choice of colours and style of painting. The composition of the piece also has a great effect as the strong lines of perspective and wavy curves contrast with each other adding to the tense mood created.

Munch wrote several versions of a prose-lyrical associated with his painting, one of which reads:



*I was walking along a path with two friends –
the sun was setting –
suddenly the sky turned blood red –
I paused; feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence
there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-
black fjord and the city –
my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling
with anxiety –
and I sensed an infinite scream passing through
nature.*

Munch said this about his paintings - The Frieze of Life, a series of deeply personal, highly expressive motifs in paintings and graphic works, imbued with existential angst. *"The idea was to paint life as it was lived or one's own life - Besides that, I had already had the whole Frieze of Life ready in poetic form for a*

long time, so you could say that all the spade work was already finished many years before I came to Berlin.”

I think the painting illustrates this poem really well. The poem also helps to give people a greater understanding of the painting.

Munch used a range of bright and strong contrasting and harmonious colours for example, the reds, yellows and oranges are harmonious whereas the reds and greens and the blues and greens contrast. These strong colours are very important within the piece as they so easily create such a loud and fearful atmosphere.

The style of painting gives the piece a lot of movement as there are so many lines, waves and curves, this gives me the impression that a lot is going on – confusion – maybe the main figure is in a fluster.

I think this piece is so successful and has been over so many years as it illustrates such a strong and expressive mood. The painting expresses a feeling of pure angst.

Kathe Kollwitz

Kathe Kollwitz was one of Germany's best-known artists during the early 1900's. She was a graphic artist, and later in her career, a sculptor. Kathe was a social activist and pacifist. She fought for the rights of women, the poor, and homosexuals. Women artists had to constantly fight for their own equality and recognition in Kathe's time, and her career was the result of many years of struggle.

Kathe Kollwitz is able to create such strong and tense atmospheres in her pieces “they explode with life force, audacity and self-confidence” although she accomplishes this by using a completely different more simple style than Munch. Like Munch, Kollwitz also uses contrasting colours although Kollwitz prefers a more tonal palette. This too is an effective technique and very powerful when creating a tense and powerful atmosphere. Her style is quite simple, as she seems to concentrate more on lines and light rather than on colour. I think the composition of Kollwitz’ work is important and helps create a mood and sometimes even a story; as she groups the people in some of her pieces together in an effective way and is able to let people know what type of mood these people are in by their facial expressions and different poses.

“The broad spectrum of her artistic work embraces both crucial aspects of life suffering per se, poverty and death, hunger and war - as well as the truly happy and positive sides of life.” – source: www.dhm.de



**Kathe Kollwitz –
Widows and
Orphans (1919)**

The piece above - Widows and Orphans creates an atmosphere, it is a sad and depressing piece. The composition of lots of women and children clinging together for support all with sad expressionless faces creates a depressing atmosphere. The strong contrast between white, black and greys is very moody and helps create a still motionless scene with lots of sadness. The strong lines and bold shading also help create this depressing atmosphere. I would not like to be one of the group.

Rita Duffy

One of Northern Ireland's most celebrated artists, Rita Duffy; born in Belfast in 1959 and grew up in South Belfast.

Rita Duffy is then quite different from both Munch and Kollwitz as her work is more detailed, is often autobiographical and includes themes and images of Irish identity, history and politics. "My background is Catholic so there is a rich legacy of imagery and iconography there" (Rita Duffy).

Her work is surreal yet still has a sense of realism. She is able to create great tensions throughout her work. "It remains intensely personal with overtones of the surreal, homage is paid to the language of magic realism and always there is exquisite crafting of materials". I think strong colours; contrasts and lines help her to do this. This technique is one, which I hope to use myself.

I was first drawn to Rita Duffy's work as I often wondered what her pieces were saying or illustrating and this intrigued me to find out. I enjoy and am attracted to paintings that are illustrating a story or depicting a mood or emotion.

Here is an image of Rita Duffy's work from this piece you can see how Duffy's use of colours, contrasts and strong lines have helped her to create a quite weird and depressing atmosphere, maybe even scary. It is also obvious that there is some meaning or story through the painting as it is not just a simple painting it has different details.

Stephen Bennett

The first three artists I have looked at; Munch, Kollwitz and Duffy have quite a contrasting style to the next artist that I will look at, which is Stephen Bennett. Munch, Kollwitz and Duffy have concentrated more on negative moods such as depression, anxiety and fear whereas Bennett has created just as powerful and strong moods and atmospheres only he has concentrated on happy moods in busy lively atmospheres.

Stephen Bennett was born in London, his father having emigrated from Ardara. He graduated with an Art diploma from Barking College of Art and Design in 1973. Stephen then worked in advertising for the next 18 years before leaving to follow his lifelong ambition of living and working as a painter in Donegal, Northern Ireland.



I was drawn to Stephen Bennett's work so much as I thought the atmosphere he created in the piece 'In conversation' was great. I feel he was able to create movement, noise and laughter in this piece; I think this is due to his individual style, choice of bright and bold colours and the composition of the piece. "He put a lot of effort into capturing people in their day to day situations, from doing a day's work to enjoying the music." He used a variety of media including acrylic, oil pastel and gouache. "He has a very good response to his work in a short time" - a quality I aim to give my work. Stephen Bennett has influenced me to be more experimental and creative in my own paintings, letting my imagination take over! I too want to draw the viewer into the picture and feel the atmosphere with in the image.

Conclusion

Through analyzing, comparing and contrasting these works I have been able to identify several ways that these artists have been able to create moods and atmospheres through their work. Stephen Bennett was the main influence on the direction that I have taken through my own development in Unit 5, although I have learnt a lot from looking at other artists. Bennett influenced me mainly through the bright and bold colours, mixed media and his unique technique, which is different, vibrant and eye-catching. I wanted to use this technique as it is quite experimental but mainly because it creates an atmosphere and tells a story, drawing the viewer into the image. You can almost hear the music and smell the beer and cigarettes.

The use of colours is probably the most effective way to create a mood or atmosphere, as it is easy to distinguish between 'happy' colours like bright pinks, yellows and oranges rather than between depressing colours like black, grey and other dark colours. Harmonious colours tend to help create a happy atmosphere as the colours go together well unlike contrasting colours like blue and orange (used in Munch's piece 'The Scream') and red and green. These contrasting colours would help create a tense and uneasy atmosphere, as they are used to. Colour in Bennett's work is essential. Images reproduced in black and white fail to evoke the same atmosphere.

The style of painting can also have a great effect on the type of atmosphere that is created. Edvard Munch's painting 'The Scream' has quite a rough style with lots of strong bold lines, which help create the fearful atmosphere, with his use of thick impasto paint. In contrast Stephen Bennett's distinctive style helps create his happy, lively, light-hearted atmospheres as he uses lots of squiggly lines and areas of bright colours; he also uses quite a lot of colourful shading. His colour is clean and pure, not murky, thick or opaque.

The composition also helps create moods within paintings. Kathe Kollwitz tends to group the people in her paintings together, which creates a feeling of desperation, clinging together for support whereas in 'The Scream' the composition is focused on one single person lost in a vast landscape. This also creates a feeling of desperation, fear as well as isolation – his realization that he alone is aware of the “scream passing through nature”.

In conclusion, I have learnt that it is important to carefully select colours and compositions when trying to create a strong atmosphere or mood. The use of texture, tone and contrast are also strong elements.

It is also important to adapt your style depending on what type of atmosphere you are trying to create, whether it is happy or sad, desperation or celebration. To create a powerful atmosphere or mood all these factors need to be considered in order for the piece to be successful, but out of all of these colour is the key.

“In his paintings he plays with colour and light creating moods and atmospheres that elicit emotional responses in the viewers.” (Regarding Stephen Bennett’s work).

