

## **Pandoras Box: Have Postmodern Artists Gone too Far?**

"When Pandora opened the box a plague dispersed and doomed humanity to suffer ruin, insanity, and despair. She hastily closed the box to stop the plague but, pathetically, only Hope remained inside."

For centuries art has, at its best, evoked catharsis from its audience, and in so doing exalted the senses, the intellects, and the passions of those who experience it. Art has been a vehicle that has called upon the highest sentiments of the human creative vision and demanded exacting technical skill. Recently, however, art has taken on a new form known as postmodernism which, in too many instances, has served as little more than shock aesthetics - outrageous sensory stimuli created to provoke the "psychological processes." Many scholars and artists alike, believe this new artistic movement to be nihilistic and, at times, gratuitous. Art, a non-static entity, has undergone several significant metamorphoses in its history. It has seen greatness in Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Rembrandt, and Vermeer, and to suggest that the influence of postmodernism has altogether put the Arts in a bad way would be wrong. What can be said for sure is that postmodern art has gone too far in stirring controversy and shocking its audience for it to any longer be considered art. Also, that they are two broad reasons for this decline.

The Encyclopedia Encarta describes the aims of Dadaists' (the first postmodern artists) works as "... designed to shock or bewilder, in order to provoke a reconsideration of accepted aesthetic values," which is a misnomer for much of what we have seen produced to date (Encarta, 2001, p. 6). A recent article in the Toronto Star has challenged the parameters of postmodern art with its piece, subtitled: "Public autopsies, baby eating, and bog people... hot exhibits bait our fascination and disgust" (Star, 2003, H1). Human bodies are just that, neither artifact nor art and exhibiting them "is running up against some of the few taboos left in North American culture," says Meghan Williams, head of Canadian Conference of the Arts, an advocacy group. "And they're aren't many left" (Star, 2003, H1). Shows like "Body Worlds: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies," now in an East end London Gallery, to Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's foul smelling Cloaca, a mechanical digestive system, to Chinese artist Zhu Yu Allegedly cannibalizing a newborn child on video -tape, are examples of "artists" who have ventured above and beyond the reaches of tasteful art. There are several plausible explanations for this decline in the quality of art, the foremost resulting from the transgression of ideals throughout history, particularly in the past two centuries, and the second dealing with the medium - the curators, who base their exhibits on "contemporary aesthetics."

As for the former, the increasing naturalism of the nineteenth century led, for those who had not shaken off their religious heritage, to a feeling of being alone and without guidance in a vast, empty universe. The rise of philosophical theories of skepticism and irrationalism led many to distrust their cognitive faculties of perception and reason, a philosophy which was addressed several centuries before by Descartes' theory of self doubt - "cogito ergo sum," I think therefore I am, he deduced. Stephen Hicks, a Professor of Philosophy and History at Rockford College suggests:

The development of scientific theories such as evolution and entropy brought with them pessimistic accounts of human nature and the destiny of the world. The spread of liberalism and free markets caused their opponents on the political left, many of whom were members of the artistic avant garde, to see political developments as a series of deep disappointments. And the technological revolutions spurred by the combination of science and capitalism led many to project a future in which mankind would be dehumanized or destroyed by the very machines that were supposed to improve their lot (Free Radical, Hicks, p. 3).

Postmodern art in many ways heralds a necessity to awaken from the chains of modern modes of perception and ideology such as modernism, industrialism, capitalism - the very diseases of our era, but has Zhu Yu's cannibalization of a young child furthered the cause or contributed to the amoral excesses of postmodern art? Namely, as with Duchamp's Fountain, to offend the sensibilities of the art going public. Cultural Gothic by P. McCarthy is a good example of this in sculpture. It is a mechanized sculpture in which a father encourages his adolescent son to fornicate with a goat. Branded by J. Saville is also an example in painting. It is a self-portrait in which the obese woman thrusts out a fistful of her flesh towards us in an angry and defensive gesture. Incised scalpel-like wounds that spell out words "delicate" and "decorative" cover her rotten-colored flesh. Again, postmodernism has herein gone further than merely challenging specific values. As artistic and aesthetic critic Michael Newberry accounts: "it has disrupted the psychological and epistemological processes or, in other words, shattered your sanity and throttled your mind. These works are esteemed by the postmodern establishment exclusively for their shocking content and not for their quality as painting or sculpture" (Free Radical, Newberry, p. 8).

Newberry's condemnation of the "postmodern establishment" brings us to our next culprit, the advocates of silence, the curators and art directors whose formation of a popular art culture dictates what is in vogue. Artistic value is now interpreted, meaning that it is up to the curators to evaluate who are the best artists based on contemporary aesthetics, which is inevitably postmodernism, and to support them accordingly. In this way postmodernists have substituted Erased De Kooning for drawing, Umbrellas for sculpture, and Empty Room for art. Shock aesthetics is also commonly known in art history as part of the anti-art movement. Oddly, modern art historians gloss over the fact that, logically, art cannot be art and anti-art at the same time. But this creates a "grotesque paradox," claims Newberry.

Notice what this does to the status of the art director as a guardian of art, it creates a grotesque paradox; the directors of contemporary art museums are the promoters and protectors of anti-art. One important way in which they protect postmodernism is by ignoring any alternative; they are silent when it comes to representational art (Free radical, Newberry, p. 10).

The postmodern movement has taken on the universality of representational art, with its history of 30,000 years, and succeeded, in the eyes of the contemporary art world establishment, in wiping it off the face of the planet. It has left the end point of art with "bile instead of progress, knowledge, and exaltation" (Free Radical, Newberry, p. 13). Rand and Aristotle have benevolent views of what that end should be. Rand believes that the creation of art should culminate in "a moment of metaphysical joy - a

moment of love for existence" (Free Radical, Newberry, p. 14). Similarly, Aristotle thinks that "every art is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" (Encyclopedia Britannica). Rand and Aristotle come from the standpoint that every act of human creativity has a human value as an end point, including art. The converse would be that if an act has a negative state as end it would be destructive or meaningless for a healthy humanity.

Is there any value to postmodern art aside from shock value? The artist, like every other thinking and passionate human being, has the power to decide whether to accept the assumptions of the recent past and work within them, or whether to strike out on his own, questioning those assumptions and actively seeking alternatives to them. However, the postmodern trend strikes one as outrageously defiant at times, as is the case with Cultural Gothic, Branded, and Zhu Yu's alleged "art," along with many others. Historically, the impetus for social change through art can be understood, although postmodern art has gotten out of hand in this regard. The destruction of the World Trade Center is the most brilliant example of the furthest reaches of what is possible to a postmodernist. "The enormity of the project is gigantic: the methodical planning, the support of volunteers, the huge waste of money, the real violence of the act, and the end result of nihilism. Beyond obliteration the consequential absence of the Twin Towers is the crowning glory of postmodern art" (www.[http://www.freeradical.co.nz/solo/newberry\\_terrorism.html](http://www.freeradical.co.nz/solo/newberry_terrorism.html)). Can we hail the alleged perpetrators of this inhumane crime as the greatest postmodern artists since Marcel Duchamp? If so, we too, should hail Pandora who, despite urgings to keep the jar sealed, unleashed a terror on the world that did more harm than good.