

Essay

'Compare the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat's "Dustheads" (1982) painting and Iris van Herpen's "Synesthesia Dress" (2010). Discuss the ways in which the artist's use innovative and abstract art styles to influence their work.'

This essay will compare the abstract art styles of Iris van Herpen and Jean Michel Basquiat. Innovative art styles refer to the artists ability to feature new methods and new ideas which may be "advanced or original" (Cambridge Dictionary 2021)

"Abstract art is art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of visual reality but instead uses shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect. (Tate)

van Herpen uses an example of abstract art styles in her Spring 2010 collection (*Arts & Culture 2011*), where she created the 'Synesthesia' dress. The dress was made using "specially treated leather coated on one side with shiny metal foil" (*Arts & Culture 2011*.) The dress was created to illustrate what it's like to live with the rare condition Synesthesia. Synesthesia affects people by altering their sensory perceptions allowing them to taste colours and see sounds. "van Herpen interprets this phenomenon as a hallucinatory sensation" (*Arts & Culture 2011*) and uses the visual aspects of the dress to gesture what it's like to live with the neurological condition. As the dress only creates the illusion of having Synesthesia, It's not a depiction of the true reality that those with Synesthesia experience. However, this doesn't make it any less impressive as she is able to create this illusion with innovative ideas and abstract design styles. Similarly to van Herpen, the artist Basquiat can also be seen creating work within the abstract art style. An example of this is his 1982 painting "Dustheads" (*Jean-Michael-Basquiat.org 2021*) which includes related abstract art styles such as:

"the twentieth century device known as the collage which existed from Constructivism (1915 movement that aimed to show art that directly reflects the modern world) and the Cubism (1907 movement which aimed to bring "different views of subjects usually objects or figures together in the same picture, resulting in paintings that appear fragmented and abstracted." (*200-percent.com 2021*)

Basquiat's "Dustheads" a neo-expressionist; ("a major revival of painting in an expressionist manner in the 1980s and it occurred internationally,") (*Tate 1982*) painting that depicts two drug addicts high on the drug PCP or angel dust.

The painting aims to gesture people who use hard drugs instead of offering a realistic depiction of the users, this can be seen in his childlike abstract art style. "Abstract art went hand in hand with the evolution of modernism and post-modernism, Interdisciplinary movements that encouraged a break, away from the traditional approaches, styles, and ways of thinking, inherited from the renaissance, early modern and Victorian ages." (Fussel 2020).

"Under the umbrella of abstract art, the following related movements can be categorized... as surrealism, dadaism, cubism, and Fauvism, constructivism, concrete, non-objective expressionism. Artists who work within the abstract art styles are Kandinsky, Sonia Delaunay, Naum Gabo, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Mondrian and Gerhard Richter." (Fussel 2020).

Both van Herpen and Basquiat use innovative and abstract art styles to create art that makes the audience question what they're looking at, thus making the concept or story behind the artwork that much more desirable. Even though Basquiat was a painter and van Herpen a designer they both use innovative ideas and abstract art styles to create artwork. An example of this would be in Basquiat's "Dustheads" (1982) and van Herpen's "Synesthesia dress" (2010 collection.)



(Figure 1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Dustheads* (1982) Courtesy Christie's.)

In Basquiat's "Dustheads painting" (Fig 1) he used, canvas, acrylic, oil sticks, metallic paint and spray enamel paint. It may be argued that these materials are not typically unconventional however, the way in which they are used is innovative and abstract. Basquiat uses bold vibrant colours throughout the painting making it immediately eye-catching to the audience. The painting resembles two figures in a gestural way, the characters in the painting have large circular eyes that contain concentric circles illustrating that the eyes are spinning. Basquiat also uses bold brush strokes and abstract shapes to gesture that the painting contains movement. Basquiat was said to have painted "conversations, situations and things that were going on around him" (*Jean-Michael-Basquiat.org*). This was evident in "Dust heads". Basquiat also admitted to using hard drugs in his short career as an artist. His friend "Toxic" recalled people being "high on PCP" in his friendship group. The title "Dustheads" is a slang word for the drug and hints towards the two characters in the painting being high on PCP, which is evidenced in the chaotic and innovative technique used in the painting. Perhaps Basquiat used drugs to offer the audience a way of seeing his world which would've been his drug infused state of mind translated onto a canvas. As *Dustheads* was created with abstract art styles the audience may not understand the painting at first glance; however once context is added the painting is translated and the story behind the painting becomes clear. The artwork can then be viewed in the way the artist Basquiat desired.

Basquiat once explained that he “was trying to make paintings different from the paintings that I saw a lot of at the time”, (Hutton 2019) by the phrase “at that time” Basquiat may be referring to the early 1980’s, around the same time that painting was made. Basquiat describes it as “mostly minimal” (Hutton 2019) this may be why Basquiat joined the neo-expressionist movement which was a direct reaction against minimal art.



(Figure 2. Synthesia Dress 2010 by Iris van Herpen source/cxainc.com)

Similarly, to Basquiat van Herpen used materials that are not typically unconventional in her Synthesia dress, (Fig.2) however it is the way in which they are used that is innovative and abstract. She can often be seen using 3D printing to give her garments an extra layer of innovation. However, she used “specially treated leather coated on one side with shiny metal foil”, (Arts & Culture 2011) when creating her Synthesia dress.

van Herpens' Synesthesia Dress was named after the

"rare neurological condition that results in a combination of sensory perceptions. For instance, some people can taste colours and see sounds. Iris van Herpen interprets this phenomenon as a hallucinatory sensation". (*Arts & Culture 2011*)

Like Basquiat, van Herpen may wish to convey an alternative way to view the world. The Synesthesia "dress enables the wearer to experience the world in an entirely different way" (*Arts & Culture 2011*) by fusing technology and science with everyday couture. Van Herpen uses innovative design styles to achieve her unconventional designs. An example of van Herpen's unconventional and innovative design techniques could be the "hypersensitive vibrating receptors" (*Arts & Culture 2011*) that enhances the senses of the person wearing the dress. By enhancing the senses of the person wearing the dress, van Herpen can create an alternative way of experiencing the world through fashion. The person wearing the dress can experience the world in the same way those with Synesthesia do. Like Basquiat's "Dustheads" where he illustrates two gestural figures hallucinating off hard drugs. Van herpen also brings elements of hallucination into her Synesthesia dress, as she interprets the dress as a "Hallucinatory sensation." the word hallucination is defined as a "sensory experience that appears real but are created by your mind" (Badii 2019). Van herpen's ability to transform the way a person experiences the world is a prime example of innovation and working with abstract art styles. van Herpen and Basquiat both carefully construct their work, using bold and striking abstract art styles. van Herpens' Synesthesia dress is striking in both its construction and concept. The black, futuristic Synesthesia dress in contrast with other cream dresses behind it (Fig 2), creates a sense of urgency or importance and makes the dress stand out from the others. In addition to this, the 3D horizontal lines that are repeated throughout the dress, perhaps have connotations to hallucination as people often see shapes and colours while in a state, almost as though the person looking at the dress is experiencing these hallucinations. The dress' complex craftsmanship is not reminiscent to anything we have seen before on the runway.

Her innovation and skill managed to land her a place in Times Magazines list of "50 best inventions of 2011" (Grossman, Thompson, Kluger, Park, Walsh, Suddath, Dodds, Webley, Rawlings, Sun, Brock-Abraham, Nick Carbone, 2011), proving that van Herpen is recognised as not only a designer but an inventor. Critic Osmand Ahmed (Ahmed 2019) highlights in his Vice article that van Herpen is "devoted to pushing the boundaries of truly modern fashion." By modern fashion Ahmed was referring to the fashion of 2019. Now in 2021 Van herpen continues to "push the boundaries" when it comes to her designs, Unlike Basquiat who died in 1988. It's hard to say whether; if given the chance, Basquiat would continue to make innovative artwork and work with abstract styles, however it may be argued that Basquiat's later work was influenced by heavy drug use which would inevitably lead to his demise. An argument could be that without the influence of drugs, Basquiat's artwork would not have the same effect on the audience as he wouldn't have been able to view the world in the way he did under the influence. However, a counter argument could be that van Herpen is able to change the way we view the world without the use of drugs and instead uses technology and science to create her designs, therefore perhaps Basquiat could've changed the way we view the world solely by his abstract style and innovative paintings.

Conclusion

In conclusion both van Herpen and Basquiat use innovative and abstract art styles to influence their work. This is evident in the artworks discussed in this essay. Van herpens Synesthesia dress was carefully constructed both physically and conceptually. Basquiats' "Dustheads" painting is both bold and striking. It tells a story and allows the reader to venture into the artists state of mind. Both artists not only create work that stands out and captures the audiences' attention but also offers an alternative way we can view the world as people. It may be argued, that for Basquiat this was the influence of drugs in his paintings where we could experience his art through the eyes of someone who's reality was altered or through the eyes of someone who witnessed others experiencing this alternative world. For van Herpen, it's perhaps suggested that she allows people to experience an alternative world by altering the senses of a person through her fashion designs. In addition to this, the artists have changed the way we as people view art and have reinforced the fact that "creativity takes courage" - Henri Matisse (Jennifer 2016). Without courage, pushing boundaries and going against the norms of how and why artwork is created, we would not gain insight to the complex and exciting world of innovative and abstract art styles.

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