

Learning in the Digital Era

Fine Art

ADAA4000

Paul Duerinckx and Alex Duncan

‘Looking into the Light’

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Word Count: 1,975

To explore the use of lighting within exhibitions, one must explore the ambience created within the gallery space, and how that ambience coincides with the work being displayed. 'Edward Hopper's New York' (2022) exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, at first glance, seems typical of a regular gallery showing. On further inspection, and considering the vast collection of Hopper's work on display, it becomes obviously intentional.



Figure One

The gallery space is lit completely overhead, with a white colour balance, with almost no contrast value. Due to this lighting, there is a slight drop shadow lining the underneath of the paintings' frames. As most of Hopper's paintings include window scenes within the compositions, the drop shadows created by the overhead light looks almost like a windowsill, as if one could step past the frame and into each scene created by Hopper. Hopper includes a sense of light within his paintings that take place in every day spaces, such as street corners and diners, and this sense of light is cinematic, making the average setting seem special. Hopper is known for including linear and angled beams of

light within his compositions that draw the eye into the figures he wants the viewer to focus on. The lighting of the gallery space mimics the 'average' settings of the pieces, as the lighting is not special or experimental, and works more in servitude to the pieces themselves, letting the viewer clearly focus on the works of art, and not distracting them with dramatic lighting.

Isolation is a key theme that rises to the surface of a Hopper painting, and often includes 'portraits of aloneness' (Tate, n.d). The lighting used in this gallery space echos the feeling of isolation, with its stark white light exposing the feeling of emptiness within the exhibition. This lighting would even make groups of viewers feel alone in the viewing of the pieces.

As mentioned previously, even though the lighting is not manipulated in a particularly creative or emotive way, with no use of colour or chiaroscuro contrast, the light in this gallery space is successful in its function. It also works in harmony with the composition of the exhibition and the themes of loneliness and isolation in Hoppers pieces, carrying the feeling of the paintings into the space in which the viewer sees them.



Figure Two

'The Weather Experiment' (2003) created by Olafur Eliasson specifically for the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, is an installation piece based on the subject of weather, how it is a ubiquitous topic and is a recreation of the setting Sun.

The installation consists of 200 mono-frequency lightbulbs, to emulate the light that the sun emits. The mono-frequency lights are used in common street lamps and spreads orange light all over the Turbine Hall. To further emulate weather within the space, Eliasson created mist that spread throughout, and the mist effected the light of the exhibition, as it helped the artificial light emitted from the lamps to look like warm sunlight.

The constructed sun is the only light in the space, and this type of light exiles all other colour from the exhibition, except for orange and black. As the piece is the exhibitions only light, it would have the same effect and message in any enclosed space. Mirrored foil is covering the ceiling of the Turbine Hall, which reflects the light into every corner, not only making the space look bigger, but also giving the viewer the option to be completely immersed in the piece.

The theme of the installation is based on a term coined during the Romantic period in literature called 'The Sublime', which is the emotional and introspective effect that a natural element has on us. For example, how looking at the valleys from the top of a mountain makes us realise how small we really are. Eliasson wanted the sun in this piece to evoke the sublime onto its viewers, opening them up to introspective thought and meditation. The warm, glowing light is used so well that one could either be in awe of it or actually quite scared, hence making the experience different for each viewer.

All the elements of 'The Weather Project' work together in harmony to accomplish Eliasson's goal, but the most obvious and important element is the genius use of light, as



without this one element, one may understand the message of the installation, but may not actually feel the effects of it.

Figure 3

For my own piece entitled '*Woman Reading*' (2022), which is acrylic on a 11x16 inch wooden board, I want my piece to be clear and bold on display. After researching how the Hopper exhibition was lit, I decided to pull some inspiration.

The piece will be displayed in the traditional way, on the wall of a gallery space. For this piece, I wanted the light to work in servitude to the painting. The piece is made to focused on as there are many stories unfolding within it, and any coloured or experimental light could distract the viewer. I decided that I wanted a downlight centred and above the painting, letting the light illuminate it from above. The light would have to have high CRI level, as the higher the level, the more accurate the colours in the painting will be. Along with the droplight, the gallery overhead lighting would have to be dimmed

ever so slightly, so that the droplight can look slightly more dramatic, pulling in the viewers focus.

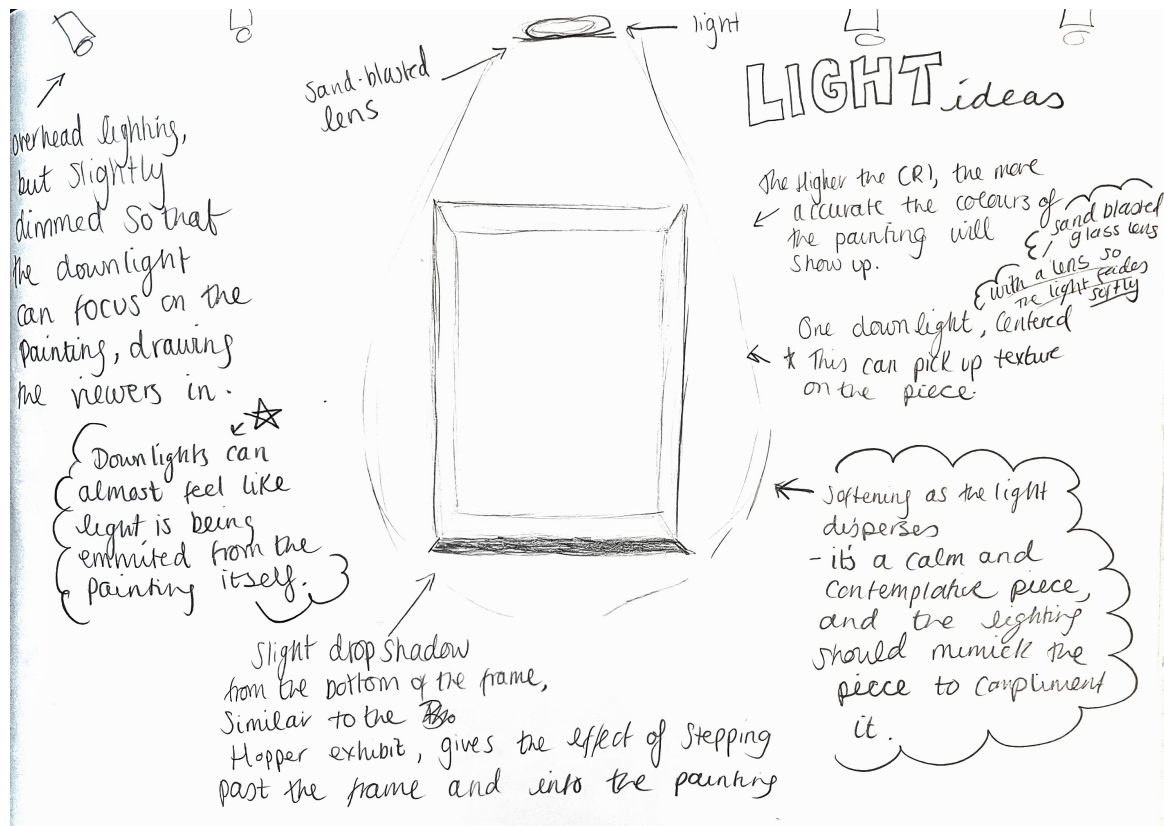


Figure 4

During my research, I found that using a sand blasted glass lens would soften the edges of the droplight, which is exactly the effect I want to achieve. This would be attached to the light and could be something I can craft myself. As this piece is about contemplation, the light should work as an extra way to express the pieces theme, so the light must be obvious but not harsh. The softening effect would help put the viewer in the same mood as the figure in my painting; calm and introspective, a woman strong, self assured in her own thoughts, even with the rest of the scene unravelling behind her in the mirror.



Figure 5

To further see my vision come to life, I decided to create a mock-up of what this type of lighting would look like on my own work. I used the application *Procreate*, and the apps' soft brushes to emulate the glow of light.

The light I have chosen for this piece has proven very effective and exactly how I imagined during the planning process. A soft droplight illuminates the painting, making the chiaroscuro sense of light within the painting stand out. The slight drop shadow underneath the picture frame makes the painting look almost three dimensional, almost like you could step right into the scene. Even though this type of lighting is technically simple, it means that this piece would work in any gallery space, and would be easy to transport.



Figure 6

For my final experiment with lighting, I have planned a more experimental way to light my photography piece. This piece is entitled '*Life Shadows*' (2022) and consists of two 16 x 16 inch framed photographs of my hand's shadow. The photographs work together as one piece of art and should be displayed on a gallery wall three to four inches apart.

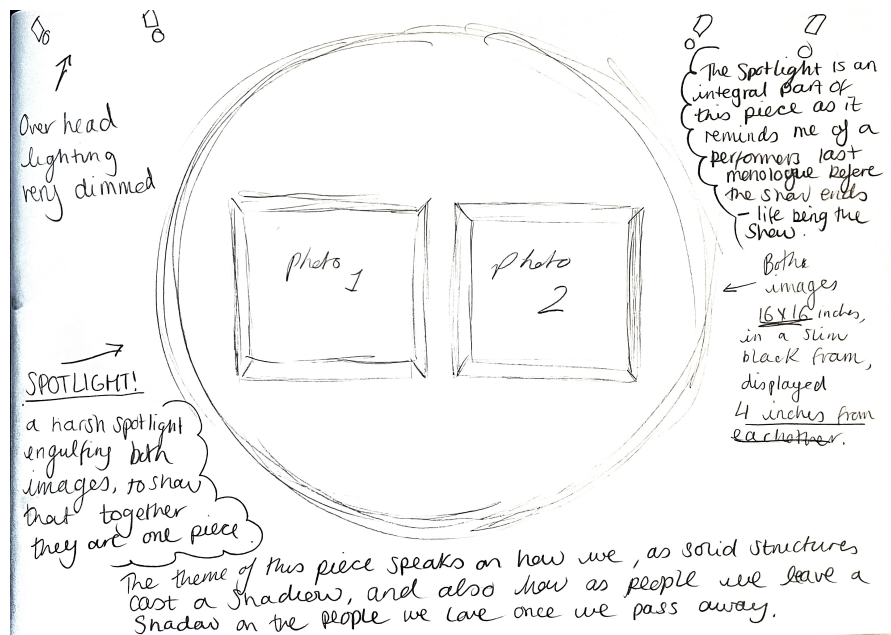


Figure 7

During the planning phase of this piece, I wanted the light to not only be a function to the piece, showing it clearly, but also wanted to use the lighting as an integral part of the piece it self. My work '*Life Shadows*' is based around my own experiences of grief and loss. When a loved one is lost to death or external influences, there is a shadow left by

that person. This metaphorical shadow projects onto you, and opens up new ways of seeing life; whether that manifests as a new value for ones own life, or a heavy weight that drags behind you. The photograph on the left shows an open hand, ready to embrace a positive way to view the world after someone is gone, and on the right, the palm is facing the ground, closed off and grieving. There is a visual balance created by the closeness of the photographs, and wouldn't be successful if one was without the other, which further speaks on the process of grief, how the hurt never leaves but with time you can carry on with a positive mindset.

With my purpose in mind, I wanted shade and light to be expressed in my lighting. I decided that a spotlight should shine onto the centre point between the two photos and that it should cover both images. The spotlight works as a way to remind the viewer of how life is a cycle that begs to be completed. With the spotlight covering both photos, it also expresses how these photos work together, further pushing the meaning of the piece.

For the spotlight to be most effective, the overhead gallery lights must be dimmed quite significantly, not so much that a viewer would struggle to move around the exhibition, but enough so that the spotlight is dramatic and forces the viewer to spend time looking at the piece.



Figure 8

Again, I decided I needed to see this lighting composition clearly and created a mock up of how the piece would look on a gallery wall. The spotlight works as an integral part of the work, and would not be allowed to be display without it. Visually, it has a myriad of geometric influences, that was in fact, not intended, but I feel adds a dimension to the piece and reinforces the narrative of my intention.

Overall, the lighting elements for this piece are not just experimental for the sake of it, but have become apart of the piece itself, which is something I have never attempted or gave much thought to before. The lighting of this piece not only draws and keeps the viewers attention on the work, but increases the emotive meaning of the photographs and the composition.

Throughout this exercise, I have learned key terms and different ways light can be manipulated, for function and effect. The most important lesson I have learned is when to utilise these techniques. As shown with my painting 'Woman Reading', any experimental lighting would not work harmoniously with the painting and would actually hinder it, distracting and confusing the viewer. 'Life Shadows' however, had a natural space to get creative with the use of light, and actually became apart of the piece, elevating the visual and emotional effect of the photographs. With the spotlight, they are no longer two photographs framed and hung, but an emotional experience for the viewer. Of course, a problem arises for artists when the work leaves their charge and they no longer have control over the exhibition of a piece.

If its recognised that the light is an integral part of the piece, like in 'Life Shadows', then can the artist demand an input to the lighting once the piece leaves the exhibition and is perhaps sold? Of course, this could be the case in public collection where the wishes of the artist are more closely adhered to. In conclusion, this query highlights the importance of the lighting of a piece, as 'Woman Reading' could be sold and displayed practically anywhere, as the lighting for that piece is simply so that it is visible.

However, with 'Life Shadows', if the spotlight is not present when perhaps exhibited outside the control of myself, the piece would no longer be an emotional and thought provoking experience that was intended, and would instead just be two photographs on a wall.

Bibliography

Text

Tate (n.d.). *Edward Hopper*. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/edward-hopper> [Accessed 12 May 2022].

Images

Figure 1 - R. Amstutz (2022), 'untitled', Whitney Museum of American Art. (Online) <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/edward-hopper-new-york#exhibition-photography>

Figure 2 - A. Dunkley & M. Leith (2003), Tate Photography. (Online) <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition/EXH101069/the-weather-project>

Figures 3 through 8 are all taken/created by myself.