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The importance of materiality in conveying a message through artwork

Introduction

The characteristics of a work of art depend to a large extent on the type of materials used in its creation. They determine the degree of its success or failure in channelling the message the work carries. Materials may reject formation in some aspects and accept it in another. The degree to which an artist has influence over their choice of material is most obviously noted in the use of marble and perhaps the best example of this is Michelangelo's masterpiece "The Pieta".

In traditional art forms, the materials used are typically limited to paint, clay, metal, fabric, etc. These materials have been used for centuries by artists to create a wide variety of works, from paintings and sculptures to textiles and jewellery. However, the use of these materials is not always straightforward. Different types of paint, for example, can produce vastly different effects on a canvas, and the same can be said for other materials.

In contemporary art, the use of materials has become even more varied and experimental. The artist does not limit the realm of materiality to just those materials, they incorporate everyday materials in their work, exploring the use of everyday objects in their work with things like chairs, electricity and light. Some artists even use industrial or natural waste as a medium, challenging the traditional notion of what can be considered art. They may even use intangible mediums such as sound (Gordon, 2013).

The artist Henry Moore wrote in 1941: "*Truth to material; the artist shows an instinctive understanding of his material, it's right use and possibilities*" (Lange-Berndt, 2015).

The essay will explore the importance of materiality in art by looking at the work of several artists who have used it to powerful effect. Do Ho Suh, Doris Salcedo, Edgar Degas, Susan Hiller, and Michelangelo Pistoletto are all artists who have used the materiality of their work to enhance the essence of their commentary.

Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, known for his installations and sculptures that explore the relationship between art and life, often incorporated materials such as mirrors and other reflective surfaces into his work. However, this essay will instead discuss his reuse of materials in other works of his to create a striking commentary on consumerism culture.

The French artist Edgar Degas was a master of capturing the physicality of the human body in motion, and the materiality of his work is essential to the power of his art and the message he evoked with their usage. He used his mastery of materials and sculptures to depict a criticism of the French Bourgeois society in his Little Dancer sculptures.

Following this, the essay will evaluate the work of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, who is famous for her sculptures and installations that deal with the legacy of violence and trauma. This essay will explore in particular her use of the everyday object of a chair and how it is used poignantly throughout her work to reinforce the emotional weight of these themes.

Additionally, there will be some discussion on the work of American artist Susan Hiller. She had a particular focus of exploring the boundaries between the everyday and how they are intertwined with memory. In her work, the materiality of the objects she uses is essential to the way they are experienced by the viewer. The essay will delve into Hiller

transforming unnoticed everyday objects into material photographs to add significance to these unnoticed objects.

Finally, there will be consideration given to how Korean artist Do Ho Suh communicates the relationship between space and identity in his work. He often uses fabric to create architectural models that blur the lines between the physical and the psychological. Although this essay will instead explore his later works and different materials the artist used that resonate with these themes.

Michelangelo Pistoletto

After World War II, Italy experienced a long period of social and political upheaval in which the cultural level deteriorated and consumer culture increased. In 1967, the Arte Povera movement emerged as a reaction against the rising elitist art world and consumer culture of Italy. The naming of the movement translates to "poor art", and among the generation of Italian artists who participated in this movement there were shared common principles, the most prominent of which was the use of unstable and temporary materials. The reuse of these materials in multiple works, either by transferring or transforming them, was not a problem as long as it served the goal of creating a work of art. This movement was not necessarily an avant-garde aesthetic movement, but rather it combined basic, natural, and mundane materials from everyday life with classic artistic materials such as wood, marble, bronze, and even gold.

One of the most important founders of this movement was the painter Michael Angelo Pistoletto. He is distinguished in the production of photographic works, such as a self-portrait of himself or of people, drawn on metal, where he combines photography and drawing together using collage on reflective backgrounds using the screen print method. As he did in his famous work "Standing Man" (Wood, 1999).

This essay will explore his other distinctive work, "Venus of the Rags". In Pistoletto's sculpture of Venus, the Roman goddess of beauty and fertility is depicted turning away from the viewer and towards a pile of discarded rags that were once used to clean mirrors in the artist's mirror project. The sculpture is not the only representation of Venus created by Pistoletto, as the artist has produced multiple copies in various materials including cement, plaster cast, plaster, marble, and gold (Tate, 2009).



Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venus of the Rags*, 1967. (Fig. 1)

This work (Fig. 1) showcases the contradictions that exist in society, specifically the juxtaposition of fine art and the increasing waste that plagues our world. Beauty in the face of ugliness. The statue of Venus, a symbol of classical beauty, is surrounded by discarded rags, representing the negative effects of consumerism and social marginalisation. The sculpture serves as a commentary on the materiality of waste and consumerism in modern society, evoking memories of things that were beautiful and close to the soul at one time, but have now become just a pile of waste.

Edgar Degas

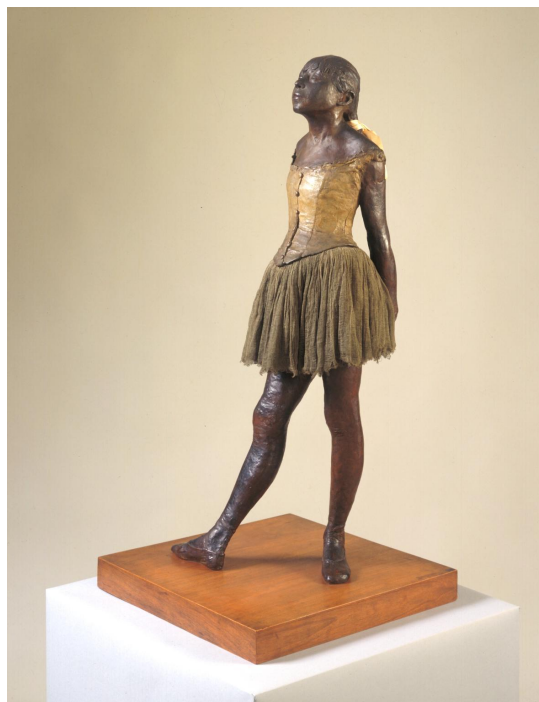
Edgar Degas is best known for his paintings of dancers, which he created using a variety of media including oil paint, pastel, and charcoal. Degas' dancer sculptures are considered some of his most innovative and important works. The most famous of these is the "Little Dancer of Fourteen Years", a sculpture of a young ballerina that was originally sculpted in wax and then cast in bronze. Degas' dancer sculptures are notable for their naturalistic portrayal of the human form, as well as their use of unconventional materials such as wax and cloth. These sculptures were a departure from the traditional, idealised depictions of dancers that were popular at the time, and they helped to establish Degas as a pioneering figure in the world of modern sculpture (Trachtman, 2003).

Edgar Degas's sculpture "The Little Dancer of Fourteen Years" (Fig. 2) is a notable example of the way in which Degas's work explored the relationship between materiality and representation. The sculpture was created using a combination of materials, including wax, cloth, and human hair, which gave it a highly realistic appearance. This use of materials allowed Degas to create a sculpture that was both lifelike and expressive, capturing the essence of the young dancer whom he used as a model (Dumas, 2004). When Degas first exhibited 'Little Dancer of Fourteen Years' wax sculpture at the sixth impressionist exhibition

in Paris 1881 she was dressed up in real ballerina's clothes. Dressed in a combination of short gauze skirt, pointe shoes, and a silk ribbon to tie the hair.

For Degas, creating sculptures was an obsession. An examination of his sculptures reveal that they were constructed with a mixture of ordinary materials: wire, wine corks, and rags. Degas's intention was to transfer all the elements of life to this sculpture. This external realism arrangement was not the embodiment of a beautiful girl, as many people argued, but rather it represented the end of the future of a fourteen-year-old girl. The glass box of the ballerina sparked a tidal wave of controversy and disgust. The sculpture of the opera mouse, as the ballerinas at the back of the stage were called, was posed to challenge the traditional bourgeois French society. A slap to the visitors of the exhibition, forcing them to see the dark and hidden side of urban cultural life, which was mired in corruption and moral decay (Rewald, 1990).

The realism represented on the wax sculpture of the little dancers intends to force the visitors to witness the reality of these ballerinas, who often came from the poor and destitute working class. Distastefully referred to as "petite rats", the ballerinas were often forced into prostitution and Degas does not hide this ugly reality in these sculptures. In this design, he launched for the first time the concept of using natural materials instead of idealist materials in the world of modern sculpture, creating a new trend in the practice of sculpture (National Gallery of Art, 2012).



Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, c. 1879–1881. (Fig. 2)

Degas' purpose was to get people talking about his work, and he did so by introducing natural materials in a way that challenged the societal norms of the time. His use of these materials was a symbolic representation of the ugliness of the real world and a statement against idealism. This new approach to sculpture created a trend in the art world and sparked conversations about the role of art in society. The use of natural materials intends to give his sculptures a greater sense of realism and life. This added a level of discomfort for viewers, as it forced them to confront the ugliness of reality rather than the

idealised versions of beauty often portrayed in classical art. This was like a message to society, emphasising the importance of addressing real issues rather than escaping into fantasy. He never showed the Little Dancer to the public, instead keeping her in his studio along with a collection of wax figures that he used as models for his paintings (Rewald, 1990).

Doris Salcedo

"I believe that the major possibilities of art are not in showing the spectacle of violence but instead in hiding it" - Doris Salcedo (Basualdo et al., 2000).

As an artist, Doris Salcedo uses a wide range of materials in her work. From furniture and clothing to everyday objects and even soil, Salcedo incorporates a wide variety of materials into her art. This use of materials is an essential aspect of her work, as it allows her to create powerful and thought-provoking pieces that speak to the events and experiences of her home country, Colombia (Lubow, 2015).

Salcedo often responds to events characterised by violence and brutality in her works. By doing so, she not only relates to her own country, but to any country that has experienced similar tragedies. These works in particular embody the manifestations of mourning through the use of materials that an individual uses in their daily life, such as chairs, cabinets, pieces of clothing and even shoes. The use of these materials allows her to create powerful visual representations of the pain and suffering caused by these events, and to remind viewers of the ongoing impact of violence on individuals and communities (Widholm & Grynsztejn, 2015).



Doris Salcedo, *Plegaria Muda*, 2008-10. (Fig. 3)

The chair for example, she used as the main material in several of her works to announce to the beholder that there was a life full of hopes and dreams occupying these chairs, but were forced to abandon it. One of such works that received significant attention is a piece entitled "Plegaria Muda" (Silent Prayer). This work consisted of a large number of wooden chairs, stacked one on top of the other, in the middle of a public square in Bogotá, Colombia (Fig. 3). The chairs represented the missing and disappeared individuals in

Colombia, who had been forced to leave their homes and belongings behind due to violence (Widholm, 2015).



Doris Salcedo, *Noviembre 6 y 7*, 2002. (Fig. 4)

In another of her work, "Noviembre 6 y 7" (Fig. 4), a haunting and poignant reminder of the human cost of political violence and trauma, chairs were used as a medium again to highlight the vulnerability and innocence of the victims. This work represents the takeover of the Palace of Justice of Bogota by the guerrilla forces on the 6th and 7th of November 1985. The event ended in a terrifying way in which more than 100 were killed. Salcedo presented this piece for 53 hours, the original duration of the siege. In total, two hundred and eighty wooden chairs were used. Salcedo and her team performed this distinctive artistic piece by lowering chairs from the Supreme court building at varying lengths, illustrating the different points at which the people in the court were killed (Widholm, 2015).



Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 2003. (Fig. 5)

Another installation of hers that involved chairs as a medium was an untitled piece (Fig. 5) produced for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial. It involved an approximate 1550 chairs all congested into a narrow deserted place between two buildings of an old neighbourhood. This work is another story that Salcedo attempts to direct the world's eyes to, another story about violence, loss and grief. It tells the story of the mass displacement of the Greek and Jewish communities, who were forced out of their neighbourhoods over a period of fifty years. The chaotic arrangement of the chairs also suggests the disruptions and disarray that can result from such traumatic events (Herzberg, 2015). The installation invites the viewer to consider the broader implications of violence and forced migration in society. The façade created by the chairs, with their uniform appearance on the same level as the surrounding buildings, serves as a metaphor for the ways in which such issues can be hidden or ignored by those who are not directly affected. However, upon closer inspection, the jumbled mass of chairs reveals itself to be a chaotic pile, evoking the imagery of a pile of corpses.

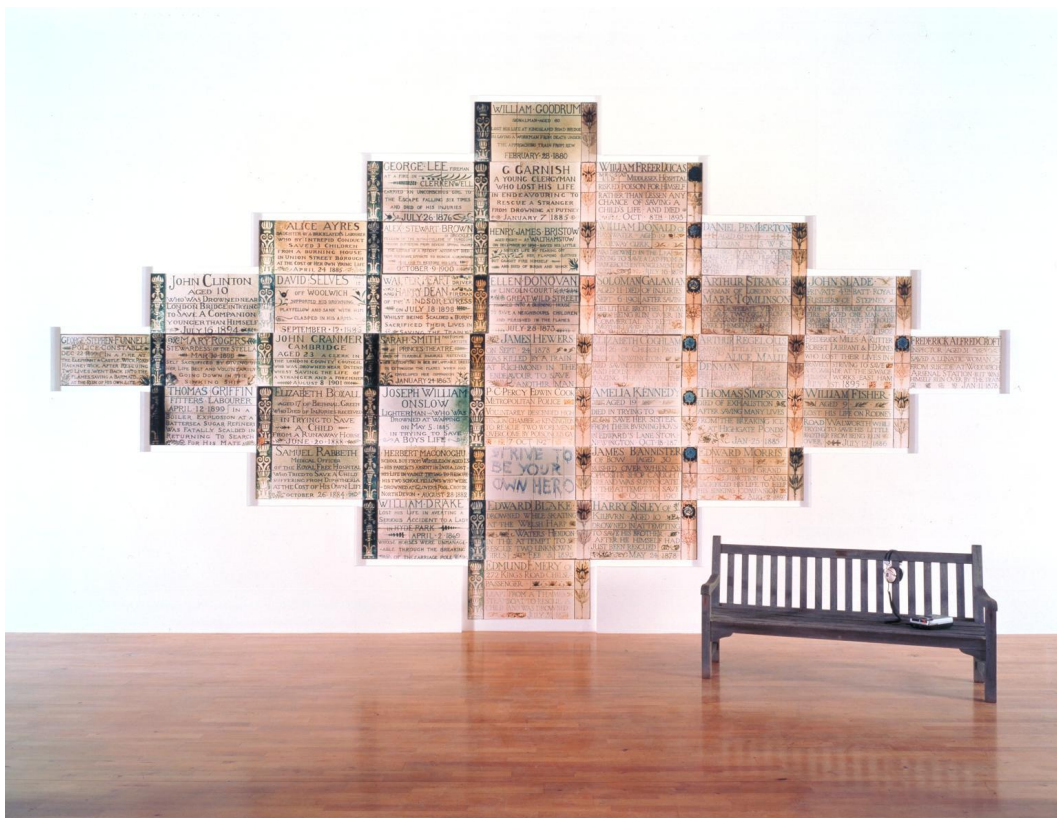
For Salcedo, the materials she uses are not just aesthetic choices, but are also an essential part of the conceptual and emotional impact of her art. By carefully selecting and

working with materials, Salcedo is able to create works that resonate with viewers on a deep level, often evoking feelings of sorrow, loss, and remembrance.

She eloquently explains this in her own words: "The way that an artwork brings materials together is incredibly powerful. Sculpture is its materiality. I work with materials that are already charged with significant, with a meaning they have acquired in the practice of everyday life. Used materials are profoundly human; they all bespeak the presence of a human being. The handing of materials in each piece is the result of specific act. It is an act of everyday life that gives shape to the piece" (Basualdo et al., 2000).

Susan Hiller

Hiller's art often deals with the idea of the material world as a site of memory and cultural significance. She often incorporates found objects, such as photographs, postcards, and other ephemeral materials, into her installations and multimedia pieces, using them as a way to explore the ways in which these objects can function as carriers of memory. In many of her works, Hiller seeks to highlight the ways in which the material world can act as a kind of repository for our collective experiences, memories, and histories. Hiller focuses her artwork on events that occurred in the past and had an impact in people's lives but were forgotten or overlooked (Searle, 2019).



Susan Hiller, *Monument*, 1980. (Fig. 6)

She used the concept of the materialising memory to create an installation titled "Monument" (Fig. 6), a beautifully crafted diamond shape of 41 photographs. The

photographs were of memorial plaques found in Postman's Park, London. The park is known for its Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice, it features a series of plaques that commemorate ordinary people who died as heroes and heroines. Each image in Hiller's diamond shaped instalment perpetuates the memory of the person who died while performing a heroic act. The instalment was presented in 1980-81 and featured a bench for the viewer to take a seat on and use the cassette player to listen in to Hiller's voice flowing profusely to tell the heroic stories of the people commemorated in the plaques. However, Hiller wanted to leave the freedom to the viewer whether they would like to participate in this artwork by listening in to it, and becoming a temporary part of the piece. Using audio as a medium serves to further revive the memories and allows the artist to represent what she could not in the photographs (Tate, 2004).

Susan Hiller, in her conversation with Barbara Einzig, explains about this installation and that its existence is linked to the things that surround it, the place, the seat, and the sound. All these materials combined are part of this artwork, and must be related to the photographs and the viewer. Further into the conversation Hiller went on in length at how these plaques caught her attention and by photographing them and transforming them into a new material gave them a new form of significance. She notes that the plaques had been "invisible" to the people who passed them every day, but her act of noticing and photographing made them visible.

Following the photographing of the plaques, Hiller decided to arrange the images and form them in different and interesting ways, until she reached the diamond shape. Hiller notes the importance of finding the correct form to fit the material and have it illustrated in a realistic way. She states after reaching the desired hierarchical shape: "It would have an almost physical impact, because the photographs would be so illusionistic, they would look real" (Einzig, 1996). The final piece is larger and more dynamic than the original plaques, making it clearer and more eye-catching, and thus can be argued to have a stronger effect on the beholder. When Hiller counted the number of photographs, she became convinced that each photograph represented one year of her life, and the memorial became a form of self-representation through art. Through "Monument", Hiller explores the ways in which materials are used to preserve and construct memory and history.

Do Ho Suh

Materiality is a central concern in the work of Korean artist Do Ho Suh. Suh's art often explores the relationship between physical materials, space, and memory. Suh often uses materials such as fabric, resin, and steel in his work, creating delicate and immersive installations that invite viewers to engage with the spaces and objects he creates. In many of his works, Suh incorporates elements from his own personal history, using materials and objects to create complex and multi-layered narratives that comment on issues of identity, displacement, and belonging. There is a central theme of longing for the places where Suh grew up in his works, as well as the places he moved to during the stages of his life, from Seoul, to New York, and finally settling in London (Belcove, 2013).



Do Ho Suh, *Rubbing/Loving*, 2016. (Fig. 7)



Do Ho Suh, *Rubbing/Loving*, 2016. (Fig. 8)

During the later stages of his career his relationship with materials used to construct his pieces took on a more psychological dimension. Instead of using fabric, the prominent piece of material used in his earlier works, he opted instead to experiment with different types of materials to embody the intricate details of the New York apartment he had lived in for eighteen years. Suh sought to intertwine his emotions and memories about this familiar space with greater accuracy in his 2016 "Rubbing/Loving" project (Rose, 2017). Suh

achieved this by adopting a new method using coloured pencils to colour in and cover all parts of the home (Fig. 7), from surfaces and corners to the keys in door handles (Fig. 8) and light switches. A tedious and complex process with the purpose of signifying the emotional importance of the home.

His "Rubbing/Loving" project represents a significant shift in his artistic practice, moving from the use of fabric to a more psychological approach that allows him to express more intimately the complex feelings and memories associated with his home, something that fabric did not fully achieve in his earlier works. Do Ho Suh expanded the rubbing technique to other materials by replacing the coloured pencils with pastel, in addition to his fingers to rub the whole space for two years (Suh, 2016). This new artistic method of "rubbing" created layers in the work that embody the passage of time and memories.

Conclusion

Art and materiality are deeply intertwined and multi-faceted. The material constitutes an essential and important element in the artistic work, each material used and the way they are used can significantly impact the form, content, meaning, and significance of the piece.

This has been demonstrated through the examination of the work of several artists who have used materiality to powerful effect, including Michelangelo Pistoletto, Edgar Degas, Doris Salcedo, Susan Hiller, and Do Ho Suh. These artists have all used their materials in unique and impactful ways, such as Pistoletto's reuse of materials to comment on consumerism culture, Degas's masterful use of materials to depict a criticism of French society, Salcedo's poignant use of chairs to reinforce the emotional weight of her themes, Hiller's transformation of everyday objects into material photographs, and Suh's colouring of his home to blur the lines between the physical and emotional longing, allowing the viewer to feel the materials.

In essence, materiality of a work of art is a critical element in how successful it is in channelling its message. The materials used in the creation of a work of art not only serve to create a visually striking piece therefore, but to also imbue a powerful message within the chosen materials. By carefully considering the way an artist uses the materials of their work, a deeper understanding of the importance of materiality in art can be gained.

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