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BA Fine Art – Studio Site & Context

Ways of Perceiving

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An exhibition on embracing uniqueness and natural beauty

Art is wrapped up in aesthetics and the ideas of beauty. Philosophers and artists have questioned whether art should be beautiful and have explored beauty in a social context. We are increasingly putting pressure on ourselves and each other to look a certain way, with consumerism and the use of social media have propelled certain ideals and an unnatural perfection. We are continuing to turn away from nature and the natural to a new form of manufactured 'beauty'. It is damaging for us all mentally, even physically and has hindered growth and acceptance of communities. We need to own our individual interpretation of beauty through expression on our own terms. This exhibition looks at beauty and accepting and embracing the natural in a perfectionist world.

Dave Beech states in *Beauty: Documents of Contemporary Art*, "There are two contradictory conceptions of beauty: one is the conviction that is purely private, subjective experience; and the other is the notion that it is always, inevitably socially inscribed" (2009). Societal influence is inevitable however – with the rise of social media – our own opinions are being altered. We are constantly being told what is beautiful and society has more control than ever before. We must strive for a healthy balance in favour of the individual not the societal. Society has manipulated beauty to fit a narrower idea, focused on the ideal and perfectionism through advertising and media. Over time, our internal ideas have been overtaken by these manufactured images which created certain standards, especially for women. Society has produced a certain type of beauty that for many is unattainable and has generated the expectation for people to conform to this narrow idea of what is beautiful. Our "subjective likes and dislikes as unintentionally but inextricably caught up with social codes and social divisions" (Beech, 2009), therefore acceptance and self expression of race, gender, sexuality and disability has been restricted and communities have been left out. In this current society, it is important to have a balance towards the subjective and to encourage society to be more inclusive.

Immanuel Kant suggests beauty has some kind of order, balance, which makes it rational to us why we find it beautiful. Kant also argues that beauty is within nature but nature often doesn't have this kind of order and suggests that it's the sublime. The sublime is irrational beauty and can't be easily explained. (DavidsonArtOnline, 2020) This is a deeper form of beauty and appreciation built on emotional connection, understanding and openness to the unknown.

Wabi-sabi originated from Japan is a mind-set and "can in its fullest expression be a way of life [and] at the very least, it is a particular type of beauty." (Koren, 2008) Wabi-sabi is an appreciation of the natural; the imperfect and simple beauty of the everyday. Leonard Koren states that through wabi-sabi "unprepossessing simplicity took on a new meaning as the basis for a new, pure beauty."

(Koren, 2008) Wabi-sabi is the appreciation of the natural that is needed now in the western world. However, wabi-sabi is even being threatened in Japan showing how far this balance has been shifted towards perfectionism. Wabi-sabi is a symbol of anti-perfectionism and an appreciation of humanity, errors and imperfections included. We are not robots that need to conform to one 'perfect' ideal. Instead, we can redefine beauty by taking it back to individuality and subjectivity. Wabi-sabi does not only embracing but highlighting imperfections is a striking statement that empowers its viewers and encourages us to own our own imperfect beauty and thoughts on it as individuals. We are now looking to question what is beautiful through art.

This exhibition brings various artists together to question our perceptions of beauty through nature to look at our natural selves. The pieces in this exhibition have limited colour and most are black and white to showcase an appreciation for simplicity. The monochrome style of the pieces highlights the

idea that while beauty can be found in simple things, beauty itself is not easily defined – there is no black and white simplicity when it comes to recognising and understanding beauty.

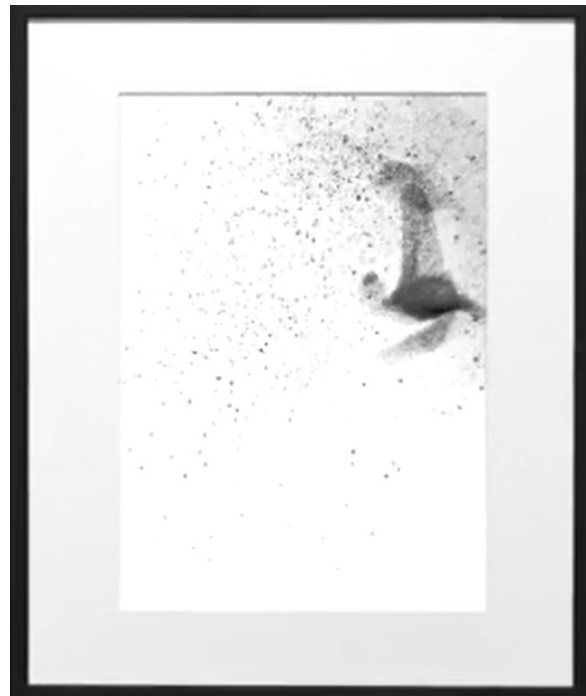


Figure 1: Adam Chapman, *The Starling Drawings* [video still 0:15] (2008)

The first piece in this exhibition is *The Starling Drawings* (2008) by Adam Chapman in video form.

This video is made up of multiple drawings that capture the natural phenomenon of starling murmuration patterns that puzzle researchers as to how and why they do this. This piece shows a unique moment in nature made up of many individual birds often represented simply as dots. It is up to the viewer how they interpret this phenomenon: is it a battle, a fight to lead, while the rest conform? Or is it as a perfectly choreographed dance where the birds work together in harmony? Or is it pure chaos, finding beauty in letting things happen by chance? Each time these create unique patterns “revealing beauty in the mechanics of a mysterious world”. (Kopeikin Gallery, 2011)

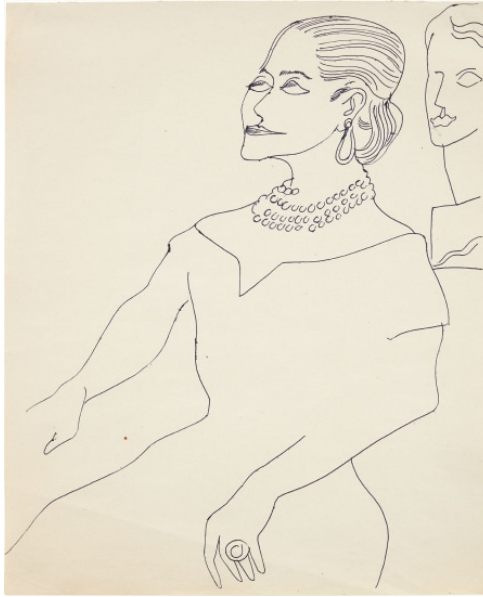


Figure 2: Andy Warhol, *Helena Rubinstein*. (1957)

The next piece is a drawing by Andy Warhol with the subject being Helena Rubinstein; a beauty cosmetic company owner. She believed in enhancing and embracing natural beauty but also was a part of creating beauty standards for women through commercialisation of makeup and skin products throughout the first half of the 20th century. Helena Rubinstein was also the victim of her own beauty standards, often having her photographs edited to make her seem younger and thinner. (Klein, 2014) Similar to the previous piece, it can be seen as there being a conflict to conform to societal standards or to embrace the natural. Warhol's imperfections or wonky-ness in the lines contradict the perfectionism around beauty. These lines are also an expression of her. Rubinstein commissioned several artists to paint her, so she got to see how other people saw her and found beauty in being captured in artworks, when traditional aesthetics were being questioned in the mid 20th century in contrast to the classical sculpture in the background of the drawing. Warhol's work was often focused on commercialisation and somewhat the battle with beauty and perfection. Warhol represented self-expression individuality and the LGBTQ+ community with expression of the individual over commercialisation.

"If everybody is not a beauty then nobody is." – Andy Warhol (Tate, 2021₁)



Figure 3 & 4: Anya Gallaccio, *preverve 'beauty'*. (1991-2003)

The piece in the middle of the exhibition is a site-specific piece presenting thousands of flowers decaying over the duration of the exhibition. The artist Anya Gallaccio “employs natural materials [...] to create installations that are perhaps more like events” (Tate, 2021³) or performances of an often natural process. This piece is *preserving 'beauty'* (1991-2003) questions aging and beauty. The colour of the flowers becoming dull overtime can be a metaphor for beauty but questions whether that's the case through the title. Beauty being displayed and admired but what's our relationship with it when it 'loses its beauty'.

Furthermore the gerbera flowers are 'mass produced' all year round due to them being popular in flower bouquets and 'unnaturally' grown. Although each flower is unique, they are grown for aesthetics, with consumerism manufacturing and taming nature to make it perfect. The real beauty is shown through the natural process of decay. Richard Moran writes “of beauty alongside its relation to time and destruction, which is also part of thinking of it as essentially fleeting, eluding one's grasp, impossible to possess.” (2012)



Figure 5: Zanele Muholi, *Quiniso, The Sails, Durban*. (2019)

The following piece is a striking self-portrait by Zanele Muholi whose work as a visual activist promotes LGBTQ+ people in South Africa. This photograph “explore[s] themes including labour, racism, Euro-centrism and sexual politics” (Tate, 2021⁴) and showing people who have been marginalised, feared and worried about expressing themselves openly. *Quiniso, The Sails, Durban* (2019) is a bold image of self-expression and black pride. Muholi said “In my world, every human is beautiful, it’s the kindness and what comes from within that is beautiful. It’s not the outer layer.” (Tate, 2020¹) Their work provides a platform for LGBTQ+ people where there is a lack of representation freeing up opinions around gender and sexuality. Accepting and expressing who they naturally are and finding their own individual beauty, when society has created a specific idealised people to follow.

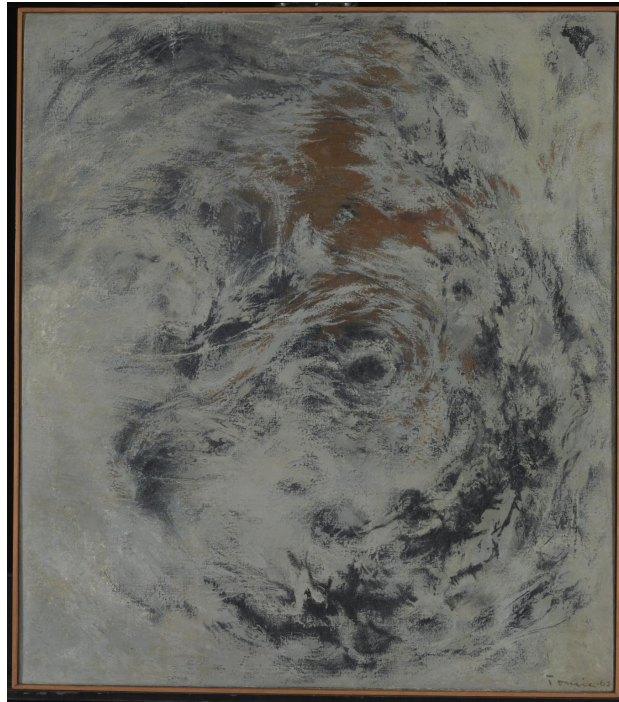
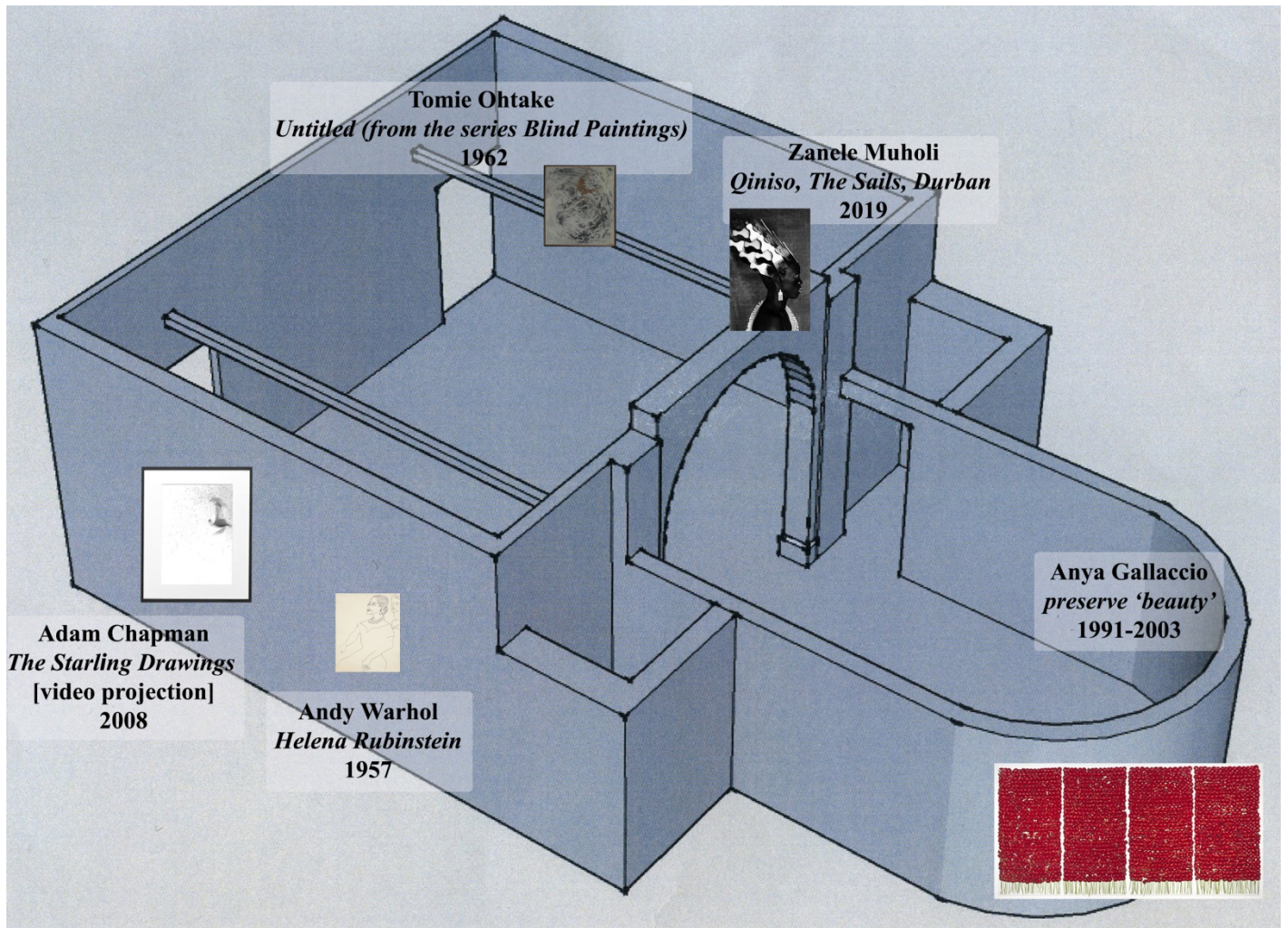


Figure 6: Tomie Ohtake, *Untitled (from the series Blind Paintings)*. (1962)

The last piece in the exhibition is *Untitled (from the series Blind Paintings)* (1962) by Tomie Ohtake. Ohtake's work is inspired by phenomenology and inspired by Japanese Zen Buddhism by "allow[ing] natural rhythm to infuse her compositions [creating a] cosmic phenomenon" (Tate, 2021s) resembling a galaxy or cloud formations. Ohtake states "one need not make too much effort for things to happen every day, naturally they just happen." (Quoted in *ibid.* p.64.) (Tate, 2021s) The artist's process is a certain state of mind not focused on aesthetics and creating something natural rustic look, layered and complex. The middle of the 20th century saw artists experimenting with what art can be and questioning its aesthetic value. For Ohtake creating is a human process and creating something natural and unique.

Exhibition Layout in the Mission Gallery, Swansea



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Figure 2: Warhol, A. (1957) *Helena Rubinstein*. [Drawing] Available at:

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Figure 3 & 4: Gallaccio, A. (1991-2003) *preverve 'beauty'*. [Installation] Available at:

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Figure 5: Muholi, Z. (2019) *Quiniso, The Sails, Durban*. [Photograph] Available at:

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Figure 6: Ohtake, T. (1962) *Untitled (from the series Blind Paintings)*. [Painting] Available at:

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