Lauren Rees (2204075)

Ways of Thinking (ADAD4018)

Gwenllian Beynon

Ways of Thinking - The Consideration of Lowbrow Art

(ADAD4018)

Wordcount: 1,391

Lowbrow Art, or what is also known as *Pop-Surrealism*, is a genre of art that arose in the late 1960's. It can be recognised by its dream-like, visually cluttered qualities, and is often depicting cartoon and illustrative figures in satire, nonsensical yet impressively intricate compositions. *Lowbrow* originated in Los Angeles as a more underground movement. Even before its name was coined by American artist Robert Williams, the early roots and influences were seen in *Kustom Kulture*, hot rodding and *Punk. (Kordic, 2016)*

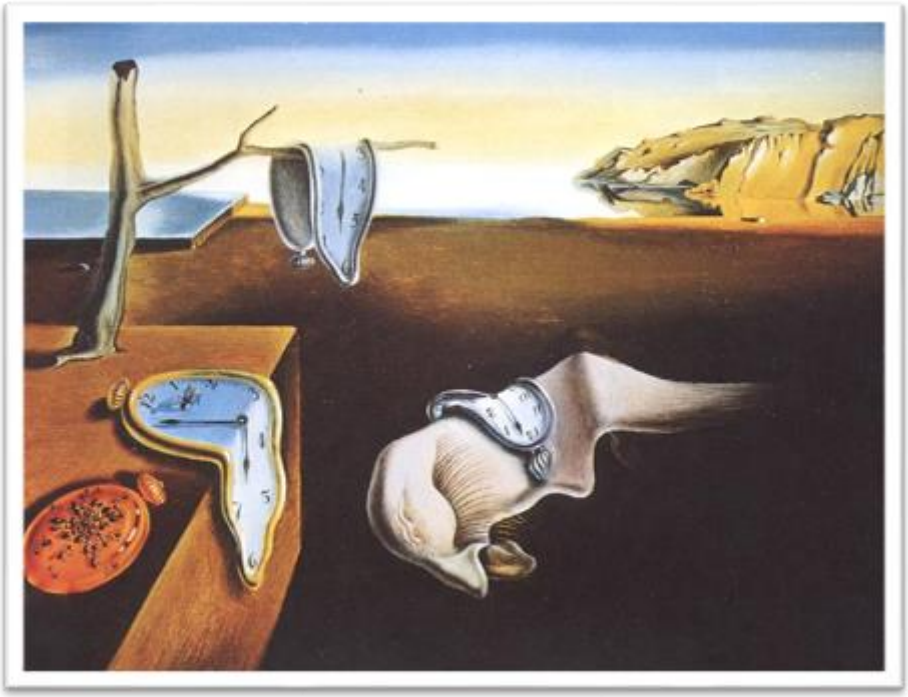
This essay will discuss how this movement's purpose was to broaden people's ideas of what art can be and that meaning can still be derived from symbolism within the art no matter how nonsensical it presents itself as.

❖

This movement was also seen as a rebellion against the elitist, 'intellectual' and uncompromising attitude of the *'highbrow'* artists and its industry. Many artists were tired of having their surrealist concepts and modern artistic skill turned down by galleries and schools, whose ideas on what art could extend to were very conservative and traditional. Even the term *Lowbrow* – despite being coined by an artist involved in this movement – was used by the high artists as an insult. Being *highbrow* referred to the educated higher class, as it used to be thought that the higher someone's brow, the more intelligent they were likely to be, whereas *Lowbrow* referred to the uneducated and 'inferior.' Therefore, even in its title, *Lowbrow* is a movement of rebellion as it was reclaimed by these artists who turned it into their own defining art genre despite its original derogatory intention. (Lowey & Prince, 2014, p.161-76).

One of the art world's most notable surrealists was Spanish artist Salvador Dali, who joined in with the movement of *Surrealism* in 1929. His earlier works are more in line with observational drawing and closer to realism in contrast with his most known works. 1923 was a significant year for the artist, as it was a "Sophisticated introduction of dislocated space and abandonment of perspective" (Ades, 1995, p.16), suggesting the beginning of his surrealist works. Many of his works feature animals with eerily long and skinny legs yet looks very realistic. When you try to decipher what he has painted it is sometimes unidentifiable and distorted beyond immediate comprehension like a dream. You can occasionally pick up the common shapes of a figure, but it is unlike anything you have seen.

His most recognised piece of work is *"The Persistence of Memory,"* (Dalí, 1931) which shows clocks in a soft, liquid-state. The background feels barren and empty. Perhaps the clocks melting away is Dali trying to represent the inevitable passage of time and how it is fleeting. It feels very dreamlike but carries a weird raw sadness with it.



The Persistence of Memory

(Dalí, 1931).

Dalí was one of the major surrealist artists of his time, but in terms of the later emergences of *Lowbrow* and *Pop-Surrealism*, American artist Mark Ryden is known as ***"the godfather of***

Pop Surrealism." (Speetjens, 2013). Ryden's artwork is recognisable from its cutesy, pastel exterior which poses as a front to mask the darker and grotesque symbols and situations in each painting. He paints his figures like porcelain dolls, with big innocent eyes and disproportionately large heads, despite them being described as ageless. There are many repeating motifs in his work like meat and flesh, furry creatures with uncanny stares and rubber faces, historical figures like Abraham Lincoin and even religious imagery.

Just like the Lowbrow artists of the 60's onward, Ryden has also been able to relate to the relentless nature of the high art world.

Ryden has said in one of his statements "It is only in childhood that contemporary society truly allows for imagination" *(Wondertoonel, 2004)*
Which is likely reflective of his own experience from childhood to entering the art scene.

He has spent his career destigmatising and putting a positive spin on concepts like 'Kitsch' which he says is *"[...] commonly used in a pejorative sense [...]" (Ryden and McKenna, p.12)*. yet describes what he loves and wants to see in artwork and in his influences.

❖

In various interviews, Ryden has discussed his love for both the high and the low in art. He does not appear discriminative or fixated on the status-quo. His inspirations stem from a variety of sources. In Ryden's "Diversiform" exhibition he talks of:

"[...] going to a museum and appreciating a classical masterpiece painting but also a little cheap toy from a vending machine or something that you can get inspiration from both of those things." (Diversiform, 2016)

Showing that he is influenced by the old masters and seemingly insignificant everyday objects. Ryden's interests are unique in the fact that he enjoys what is often overlooked by a lot of people, yet he manages to turn them into the most confusing, intriguing, and visually stunning works.

His paintings can also be looked at as intricate collage work of objects he likes to collect such as books, photos, stuffed toys, and various other typically vintage items. This is mentioned in his "Wondertoonel" statement about his fascination with these objects and how Ryden is also infatuated about what we coexist with, which could explain why his paintings also seem to have these humans, creatures, and objects all squeezed into one overwhelmingly busy

composition. He has stated that his work does not have fixed singular meaning. He wants his viewers to have their interpretations, so maybe it is simply a passionate reflection of what he finds compelling.

Ryden carefully picks out his subject matter and visuals from his immediate collection of items and from what he has recently observed. Also, because of pop-culture's influences in general and its tendency to be in favour of intertextuality, it has become normalised for multiple unrelated things to crossover, hence Ryden’s paintings having Abraham Lincoin and Jesus in the same space as a sentient stuffed toy.

❖

The Tree of Life

(Ryden, 2006)

In Ryden's series of paintings *The Tree Show,* some insight from Ryden is revealed. Within this series it is hinted to that the trees represent life and reality. Especially in *The Tree of Life,* which depicts a powerful monarch-esque girl holding a baby sprouting antlers sitting in a tree. Antlers are often said to symbolise spiritual superiority in the same way as a crown, so the girl and the baby could represent some kinds of higher beings connected to this tree. Additionally, at the base of the tree are two figures; a human king and a woodland creature on its hind legs. Since they are standing at opposing sides of the tree this is likely an indication of how different

animals and humans are, but the fact that the creature is on its hind legs imitating a human's natural stance could simultaneously be countering this argument, suggesting we all co-exist on the same earth and experience both nature and life as mortal living beings.

Tree of Life drawing

(Ryden, 2006)

Ryden's intentions and thought process is further revealed through his initial sketched plan for this painting. We see multiple diagrams and annotations referring to astrology, quantum physics, the elements, and the concept of 'reality beyond the 5 senses'.

Looking back closely at the finished painting, there appears to be what resembles a divination dice made of wood; a practice which used to be used to determine decisions and future

outcomes. This strengthens the possibility that the girl in the tree is a symbol for life itself and as Ryden says in one of his essays, "*an echo of how reality is shaped"* (The Tree Show, 2007). She has a great deal of control over everything else that appears in the composition, even depicted with a glaring source of light behind her much like a religious figure does in older artworks.

❖

In conclusion, despite Lowbrow art being defined by its random, dreamlike qualities, and the higher-up elitists attempting to discredit their efforts, these artists' practices and the subtle symbols and visual implications they slot into the limited blank space in their compositions carry great significance. The artistic movement of Pop-Surrealism and Lowbrow only presents these artist's flexibility to be open minded and reach beyond areas of inspiration that many do not think to look for.

Bibliography

Kordic, A. (2016) *What Is the Lowbrow Art Movement? When Surrealism Took Over Pop.* Available at: *https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/lowbrow-art-pop-surrealism* (Accessed: 22 November 2022)

Prince, S. & Lowey, I. (2014) *The graphic art of the underground: a countercultural history.* London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts

Ryden, M. et al. (2011) Mark Ryden: Pinxit. Cologne: Taschen
(Includes *Wondertoonel* & *The Tree Show* essays)

Ades, D. (1995) *Dalí.* London: Thames & Hudson.

Speetjens, P. (2013) *Mark Ryden – The Godfather of Pop Surrealism.* Available at: https://www.plastikmagazine.com/interview/mark-ryden (Accessed: 22 November 2022)

GEISAITV. (2016) *Mark Ryden Interview*
「多様形態」マーク・ライデンの希少エディション展　作家インタビュー
("Diversiform" An exhibition of rare editions by Mark Ryden). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81nXq3CI4Bc (Accessed: 22 November 2016)

Images

Dalí, S. (c.1931) *The Persistence of Memory* [Oil paint, bronze]. The Museum of Modern Art: New York.

Ryden, M. (c.2006) *The Tree of Life* [Oil on canvas] Exhibition: The Museum of Contemporary Art: Los Angeles.

Ryden, M (c.2006) *Tree of Life – drawing* [Graphite on Paper]