

Bleak Enchantment

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Illustration

Word Count: 1645

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## Introduction

The exhibition will showcase portraits from British painters that express intense emotions for and within their work, enforcing a deeper connection with the viewer. These paintings include: *Boy in a Yellow Jacket* by Laurence Stephen Lowry, *Black Painting with Lilies* by Shani Rhys James, and *Self Portrait* by Gwen John. As the French symbolist painter, Odilon Redon states: “while I recognise the necessity for a basis of observed reality...true art lies in a reality that is felt” (The Art Story, 2020). Additionally, philosopher, H. Naar signifies the importance of intertwined art and emotion. He demonstrates the ‘paradox of fiction’: the reasoning behind strong emotional connections often associated with art. Viewers are thought to experience genuine feelings towards work they can derive some sense of realism from; however, if not, they appear to formulate this perception of existence themselves to force a deeper relationship (2020). Alan Paskow initially suggested the ‘integrated world’ theory: a concept that the viewers emerge themselves in illusion to bring truth to fictional characters to eliminate distrust in art (Worth, 2005). This is further highlighted by the philosopher, S. Schneider that claims that to inflict the viewers with “tears, anger, horror”, they need to thoroughly believe that “the people and situations in question really exist”(2020). Thus, a more immersive atmosphere will be formed around these paintings, making it easier for the viewers to indulge in the ‘integrated world’ theory.

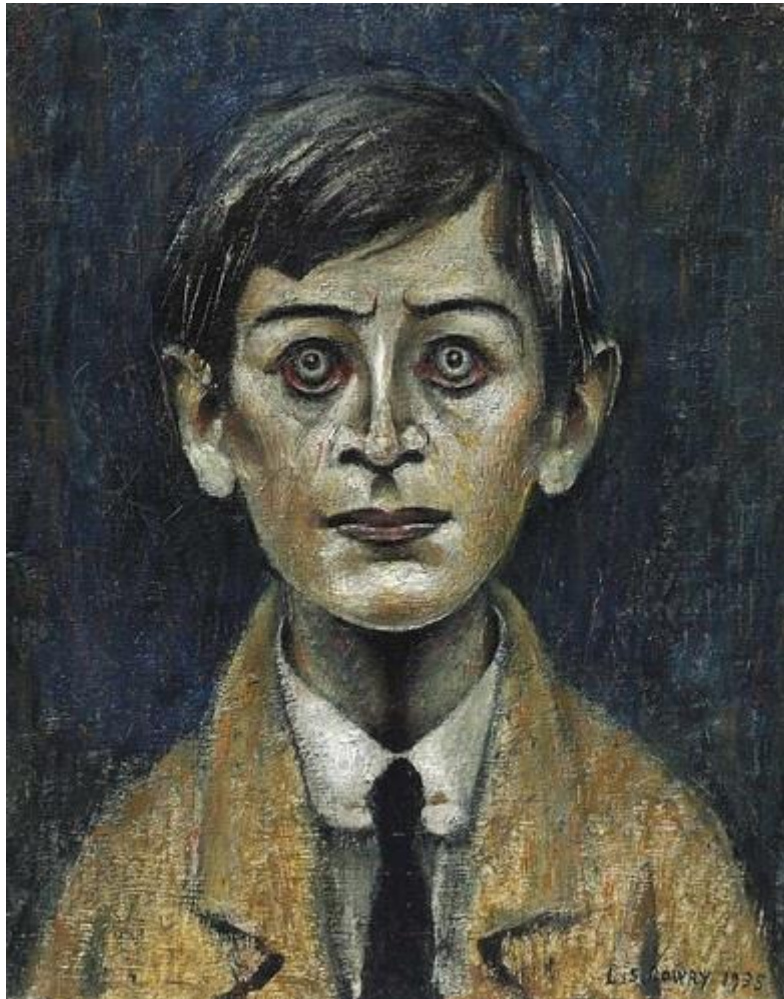
## Curation-theories and history

The denotation of the word has evolved; originating from the Latin word *curare*, meaning to take care (Obrist, 2014). Obrist also writes of medieval priests that claimed the term, later passing it onto those who cared for artifacts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the modern interpretation of the word is to “preserve, in the sense of safeguarding the heritage of art”, as Obrist insists. Professor Dholakia reinforces this concept by stating curation has only become more social in the ways in which it impacts society and the media (2013). Reinstated by the historian, Chaniotis’ impression of a well-

constructed exhibition, one that both highlights and heightens the chosen image. Consequently, reinventing the specific topic in the eyes of the public (2017). Therefore, it is critical that a carefully assembled exhibition space and curation of selected pieces is performed.

## Artworks

**Figure 1**



*Boy in a Yellow Jacket, Laurence Stephen Lowry, 1935*

L.S. Lowry commonly illustrated the “bleakness and loneliness” of industrial life in England; however, this painting holds a deeper meaning, even without context (Britannica, 2020). The initial presentation of the character’s facial expression is enough to stun the viewer, entrapping them in a similar sense of discomfort. The use of colour is extremely useful in conveying contagious thoughts (Gage, 2006). ‘Yellow’ is usually associated with joy, symbolising happiness and brightness, juxtaposing the dull representation of the colour in the painting. Possibly, illuminating a loss of hope or a sense of desaturation in life.

However, it is more impactful to consider the background information. Just two years prior to this painting, his father died, leaving his considerable debts and his heavily dependent mother for him to manage by himself (My Daily Art Display, 2011). The source emphasises the tremendous amounts of responsibilities Lowry had to cope with during this period, eliminating time for his art. Thus, eventually deteriorating his own health and impacting his abilities to care for these issues. Therefore, this painting may be a product of his internal anxieties and mental decay. It was said that the artist's mother was very controlling, demanding and rarely expressed affection to him; possibly explaining the overwhelming feeling of worthlessness this painting exudes.

Figure 2



*Black Painting with Lilies, Shani Rhys James, 2015*

The artist declares a strong “desire to produce powerful, emotional paintings” (AxisWeb, 2006).

James needs to be “emotionally and mentally taken over by their paintings”. Highlighted by the art critic, Sue Hubbard, “The domestic face of femininity is contrasted with a fragile, empty self that needs to be filled by art in order to exist” (2015). The figure is dissolving into the background, potentially suggesting a loss in identity. Once again, emphasised by Hubbard’s perspective: “wife, mother, home-maker are juxtaposed with the empty vessel”.

A deconstructionist would announce the strong, dark void of the background as a reflection of the character’s troubling mentality, slowly engulfing the figure as it impacts their physical state.

Complimented by the white lilies, symbolising funerals and thus, death. Hubbard continues by

insisting the symbols refashion “19<sup>th</sup> century tropes about feminine psychology”. Contradicting elements of purity and corruptness will leave the audience conflicted and intrigued.

**Figure 3**



*Self Portrait, Gwen John, 1902*

The artist struggled in an “industry still largely dominated by men”, fighting for “recognition” and approval within society (TATE, 2019). Figure 3 demonstrates an intimate portrait that was said to have gone through “intense self-scrutiny”. Appearing “serene and troubling” as the character is stationed accordingly to confinement (The Guardian, 2018). Most likely illustrating how women were controlled and overlooked within this period. Reinforced by John being “overshadowed” by her more famous brother, Augustus.

This portrait can be interpreted as a passive and submissive woman, with a loss of hope portrayed by John’s iconic use of subtle colours. The diluted palette may represent the unconscious

persona illustrated. Possibly referencing the artist's own life. Her brother wrote about their family home: "I was living in a kind of mortuary where everything was dead" (Ironside & Jenkins, 2004).

Suffering with the loss of their mother at a young age, the siblings yearned to heal their "emotional wounds", which certainly were neglected by their uncaring father. The artist became "hermit-like", leaving her sensitive, isolated, and empty. Much like what is projected in Figure 3.

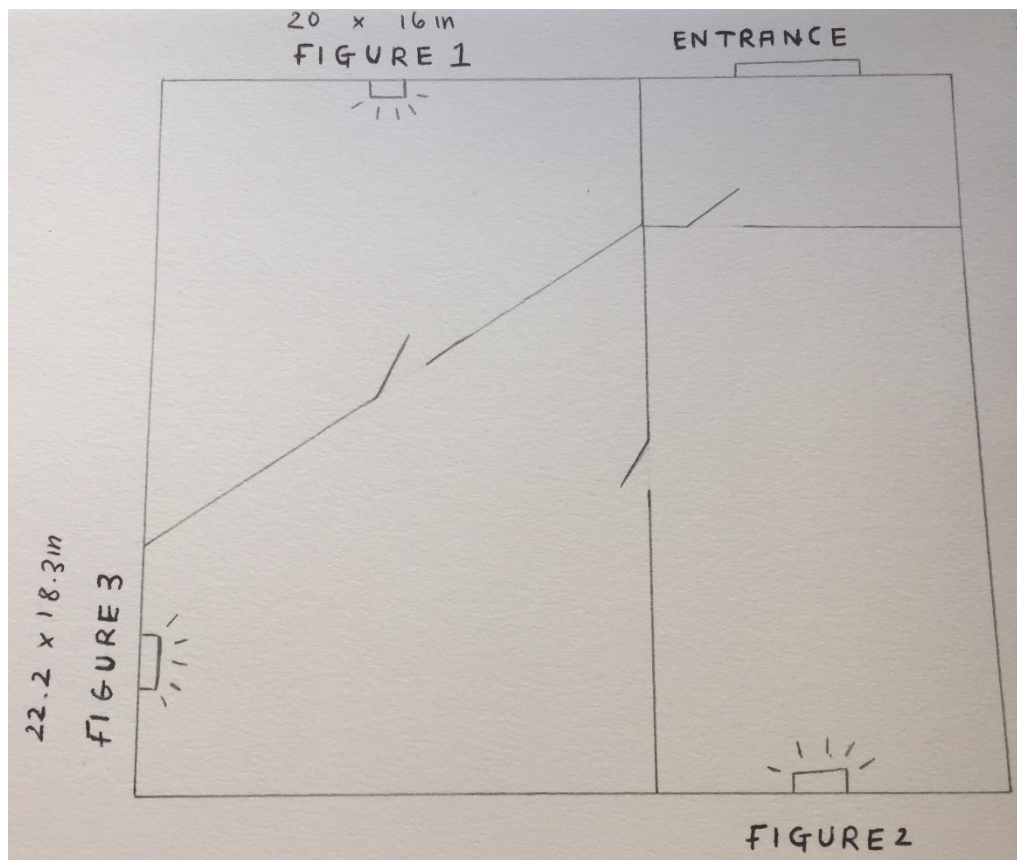
### Exhibition space

Most people have had passionate encounters with art, impacting their viewpoints of life. Thoughtful networks with any piece can inspire and humanise spectators. Whether this be the careful selection of colours or “communicating symbols that work on a subconscious level” (Pencil Kings, 2020), art is designed to convey a message. Moreover, as Philosophy Professor A. Neil demonstrates in Levinson’s ‘The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics’, the value of art depends “at least largely in the value of its expression of emotion” (2005, Abstract). Indicating that the true importance of a piece relies on the extent of emotional impact. Furthermore, the philosopher portrays the ‘Expression Theory’ to further explain this uncontrollable connection. An interpretation to ‘The Theory of Art’, Leo Tolstoy the proponent, insists that “expression is understood as a matter of transmission of mood from artist to audience via the work of art”. Emphasising the “sincerity and individuality of feeling”; becoming infectious to the viewers, influencing their perceptions (para. 3). However, there are discrepancies of this theory. The philosopher conveys the inappropriate notion of consistently responding correctly to art. Often over-joyous embodiments appear irritating in contrast. Therefore, reflecting the opposite of the emotions initially targeted (para. 4). Although, the theory still stands strong due to the countless exhibits of powerful pieces of art throughout history (para. 5). This exhibition will aim to overcome these insecurities by selecting applicable pieces of work that shall not overpower the audience and conflict their views.

The decision to select only melancholy paintings is due to depressing interpretations of life appearing more effective in evoking a response from the audience. In addition, the Expression Theory discredits over-joyous work as it may inflict frustration instead of happiness (Neil, 2005). Sorrow is an efficient emotion that is much less likely to be over-complicated in this type of way. Furthermore, the common theme of portraiture confronts the audience directly, being very relatable due to the common appearances of human subjects. Lastly, the use of British artists is due to the exhibition being held in Wales. Welsh and English artwork may resonate with the viewers better

than other work, as pre-existing bonds may already be in place. This may be due to certain lifestyle elements featured in the painting that could correlate to the viewer's personal history.

Figure 4



Exhibition floor plan diagram

A simple, small, and contained space signified by Figure 4. Each room needs to be intimate enough to submerge the viewer into the world of the given painting, ensuring they will concentrate purely on the emotion it radiates. Furthermore, doors will be substituted by archways, so the viewers are less likely to struggle moving from room to room. In conjunction, all three rooms will be in complete darkness, with the only source of light coming from the lights above each of the paintings. These lights will only be bright enough to illuminate the painting, but not enough to light up the room. The darkness will also ensure the audience will focus solely on the artwork presented, helping them to connect their response and experiences towards the piece, impacting them greater. No distractions, as Professors, Bal and Burke declare: “art is not a representation of life, but belongs to it, illuminates it and helps us cope with it by sharpening our senses” (2017).

Moreover, the dimensions of all but one painting are available. Despite this, all paintings will be placed at average eye level, to immediately confront the viewers and intrude on their thoughts. Therefore, 60 inches from the centre of the painting to the floor will be appropriate on the 8-foot high gallery walls (Brenner, 2017). The dimensions of the paintings and where each painting is placed is reflected in Figure 4. Figure 2 is the first painting to greet the viewer, being the most chaotic in nature and colour scheme, it is effective at grabbing their attention. Of which will surely prepare them for the following exhibition.

It is essential that each room be empty and isolated, not only ensuring pure concentration on the artwork but will also emphasise that sense of loneliness common in all three portraits. To help enforce this concept, a limit will be put on the number of visitors allowed at a time. As the rooms are smaller than the average gallery space only three people will be able to spectate at a time.

Likewise, the abnormal shapes of the rooms will help to disorientate the viewers in the dark, potentially making this experience more discomforting.

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