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Research in Practice

Exploring How Eyes Have Been Perceived and Portrayed Throughout a History of Art

A Dissertation Proposal

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Introduction

The area I have chosen to explore for my dissertation proposal focuses on 'Eyes'. Eyes are relevant to my work as an artist and are a key feature of the portraiture of my current practice. The proposal explores the areas that reflect eyes and their importance to art. The areas I have outlined are 'Culture and Era', 'Gaze', 'Symbolism and Semiotics', as well as 'Eyes and Empathy'.

This research will take inspiration from theoretical and philosophical works and thinkers such as Saussure, Bradley, Mulvey, and Spinoza. It will also consider artists and works from the art movements of the Renaissance, the Dutch Golden Age, Cubism, Contemporary, Surrealism, Photography and Installation

'Culture and Era'

Eyes are a very intimate and reflective aspect of a portrait. Through exploring the eyes you are able to gain an understanding of the artist and consequentially an understanding of the thoughts, styles and what constitutes the norms of the culture that they were working from. Not only in a metaphorical sense but also in a literal sense, the style and medium of an eye is indicative of the time period of its origin. As Plato discussed with his theory '*mimesis*', art is an imitation therefore the eyes depicted in a work are an imitation of that era (Britannica, 2011)

'Eyes' throughout 'Culture and Era' are reflective of the norms and style of an era. Through highlighting the depictions of eyes through key time periods we can ascertain insight into the promotion and preservation of the dominant culture.

During his time as a practitioner of Renaissance art, Da Vinci assigned quite a prominence onto the features of eyes. The eyes within his sketches are arguably the strongest feature. Through mastering the use of negative space for light, he created what photographers describe as 'catchlight', "a gleam of reflected light in the eye of a person" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Through this technique, Da Vinci captured an aspect of humanity and embedded it into his portraits. (Light Club, 2018). This is particularly highlighted in his incomplete sketch '*Head of a*

girl' (1483). Within this portrait the irises are unfilled, and the empty space acts as a contrast to the pupil which evokes a sense of light being reflected.



Figure 1: *Leonardo Da Vinci 'Head of a Girl' (1483)*

Surprisingly, despite the prestige of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the lack of these 'catchlights' in the eyes, create a soulless gaze, almost appearing cold in comparison.



Figure 2: *Leonardo Da Vinci 'Mona Lisa' (1503-1506)*

In investigating the Dutch Golden age, there appears a more masterful depiction of eyes. With a greater understanding of the science behind perception and a real focus on its emotional side, the Dutch masters precisely depicted the eyes within their work through strong uses of light and shadow. Caravaggio in particular, skilfully portrayed eyes through his work '*Head of Medusa*' (1597). "Medusa in Caravaggio's painting is portrayed at the moment of self-recognition. Realising that her head and body were no longer one, and that she was still conscious, Caravaggio depicts the horror in her eyes" (Totallyhistory, 2012). To me Medusa's eyes portray a sense of shock and anger and a subtle hint of sadness. It is the recollection and association with the story of Medusa that informs the viewers response to the work, eliciting an understanding and sense of empathy. It is through relating this understanding to philosopher Spinoza's theory on perception, that we inform our reactions and emotive responses due to associations formed through external forces. The works of Caravaggio and Spinoza highlight how we associate emotions to different depictions of eyes based upon the experiences we have had.



Figure 3: Caravaggio *Head of Medusa* (1597)

It is post World War 2 that we see the tempo of art progressing so rapidly and the change in subject and portrayal reflecting the more darker and tragic themes that society was coping with. The norm of art almost shifted from the iconological symbols of religion, monarchs and mythology to reveal more expressive and contemporary depictions and works. From exploring Dali's *The Eye* (1945) and M.C. Escher's *Eye* (1946) in the 1940s, through to Picasso's cubist portrayals and onto modern artists such as Chuck Close, it appears that eyes have continued to reflect the thoughts of artists as culture has progressed to the current day. Despite the fact that there is no clear form of an eye, in Chuck Close's 'Arne' (2020), through the use of tone and carefully made marks, enough of an eye is suggested for us to form a connection with the portrait.



Figure 4: Salvador Dali *The Eye* (1945)

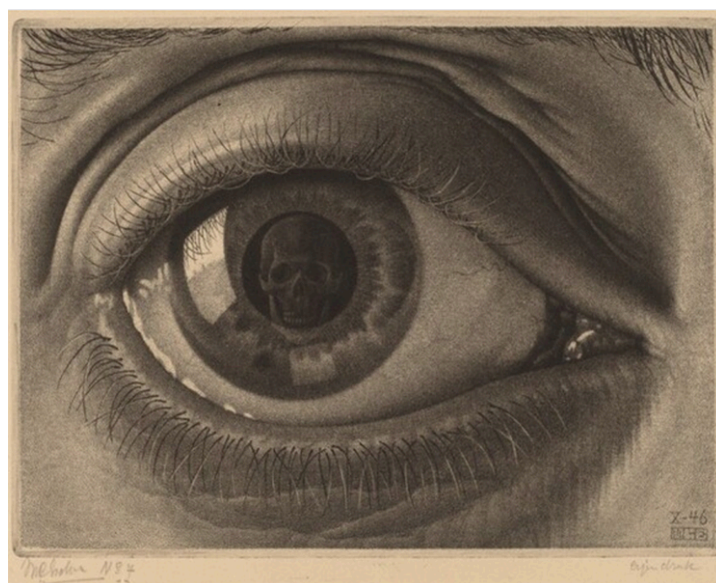


Figure 5: M.C. Escher *Eye* (1946)

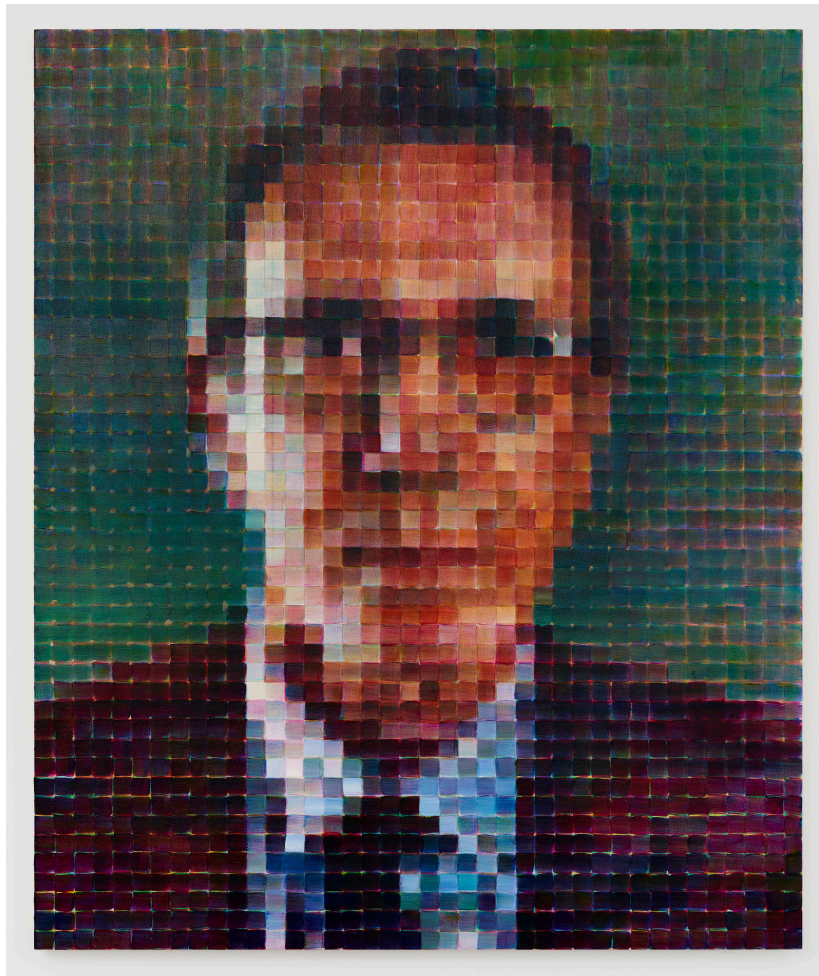


Figure 6: *Chuck Close 'Arne' (2020)*

Because style has been so expressive and expansive from the 1940s onwards, the way in which the eye is portrayed has not remained consistent. Throughout styles , “Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Abstract art, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and Social Realism” (Signé Magazine, 2020), the form of the eye can be radically different. However through these eyes you still get a sense of the artists intentions. In many of Picasso’s cubist works, the eyes feature the basic signifiers of an eye but due to the cubist abstraction of their form, it creates a mental distinguish from how we normally perceive eyes and takes away our ability to relate and empathise with them traditionally. They feel emotionless as there is no light reflected and therefore no humanity.



Figure 7: Pablo Picasso's *Femme au béret et à la robe quadrillée* (1937)

'Gaze'

When addressing the question of gaze and its relation to the eye, it is s about cultural perception, the biases of the artist and whether the gaze is on the viewer or the portrait. Gaze is “the way we look at a subject, and how a subject looks back at us” (Artsy, 2014).

The impact of gaze within the work can ultimately dictate the viewers perception of the work. The direction of the subject's focus within a piece, controls the tone of the work. A head-on figure evokes a strong confidence and has impact, as opposed to a figure whose gaze is focused in profile. As questioned by Portraits Inc, “if Leonardo da Vinci had painted the Mona Lisa gazing off to the side, away from the viewer. Would she still be as well-known and as captivating four centuries later? “ (n.d). Another angle to consider, is the gaze of the viewer.

In unearthing the origins of the male gaze, I discovered the theory that was popularised by British film feminist Laura Mulvey in 1973 when she coined the term male gaze in her essay 'Visual pleasure in narrative cinema'. This outlined that in mainstream media, women are objectified and portrayed through a 'lense' of male perspective (Vanbuskirk, 2021). This theory applies to all media depictions of women both in current and retrospective tense.

Relating this back to theorist Spinoza, with the mainstream history of art being male dominated and focused on the male gaze, it is almost a given for our eyes to perceive this angle. If the male gaze elicits certain imagery, then the female gaze often evokes a drastically different take. "Women artists are more inward-looking, more delicate and nuanced in their treatment of their medium" (Nochlin, 1971). This 'female gaze' came about as a direct result of Mulvey's term. "The female gaze is the way that women are portrayed through the eyes of a woman instead of a man. Through the eyes of a woman, women are seen as people with feelings and intelligence. The focus isn't necessarily on what the eye can see but on what the heart can feel" (Ayala, 2020)

'Symbolism and Semiotics'

In relation to the exploration of perception, I intend to question what is implied by the eye. What connotations are formed from variations in its standard depiction? Linking the work of Saussure, I will investigate how semiotic theory relates to both the perception of an eye and eyes as a symbol.

Saussure's "study of signs and signification" (SAGE, 2004, p.181) aids us in assigning meanings through information we have learnt or been exposed to. In our minds, we each have stereotypical views of eyes. We also have a series of differences in that portrayal that evoke certain emotional responses. For example, if an eye is teary, it evokes a response of sympathy or empathy. In contemplating the meaning of what an eye represents, they "are often associated with focus, truth, clarity, light, vision, prophecy, awareness, and observation" (Craypo, 2022).

In Rene Magritte's *'The False Mirror'* (1929) eyes are presented as a portal and a reflection of both our internal and external worlds. It is through this piece we see the juxtaposition between a blue, cloudy sky which signifies life, light and energy and the matt black pupil which almost invokes a sense of lifelessness. The iris is the scene and the pupil features no reflection. The iris itself feels removed from the rest of the eye almost like a separate piece in the background that we get to gaze through but the lack of any light in the eye creates a very inhuman feeling. It is the light reflected back at us through eye contact that creates the perception of human intimacy. According to Bradley's work (2016) on denotation and connotation, we assign light as a connotation for life, therefore the lack of light within any element of the eye, elicits the implication that this eye is 'soulless'.

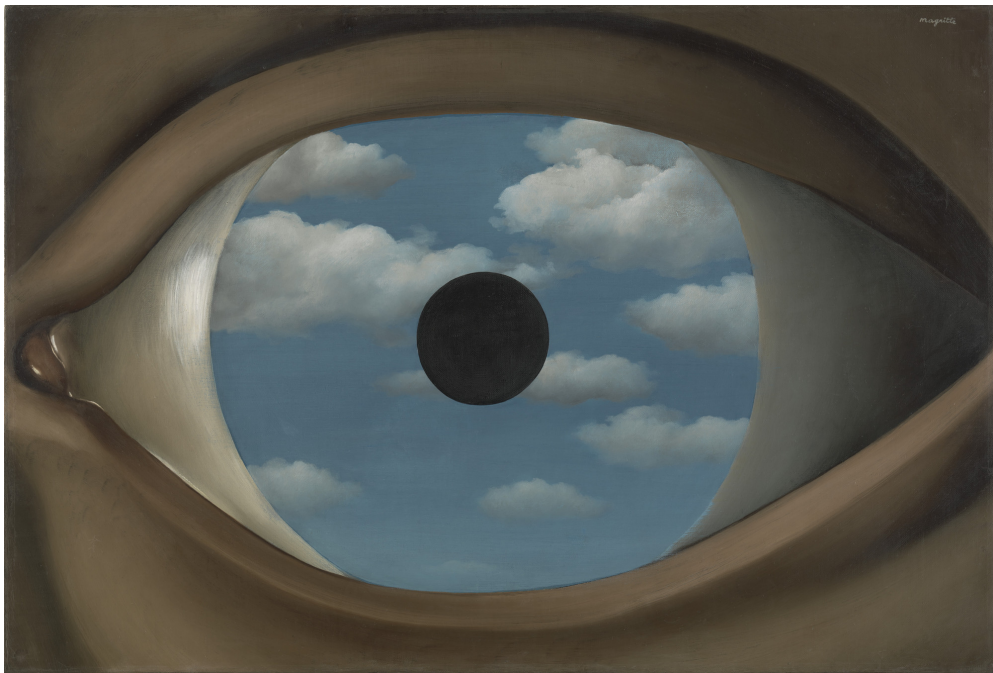


Figure 8: Rene Magritte's *'The False Mirror'* (1929)

When the eyes are obscured and we are unable to form that 'human' connection, it evokes an ominous and imposing aura that creates a separation between the work and the viewer. In a sense it becomes its own presence and less the by-product of the viewers gaze. In my opinion, an example of this can be seen in *'Madame Kisling'* an oil on canvas work from 1917 by Amedeo Modigliani. An image description on the National Gallery website describes how the 'almond-shaped eyes are nearly blacked out" (n.d) reinforcing the idea that the lack of detail forms a disconnect as the aura of this work is incredibly eerie.



Figure 9: Amedeo Modigliani 'Madame Kisling' (1917)

'Eyes and Empathy'

In understanding how eyes can highlight empathy towards the subject matter, I explored Alfredo Jaar's *'The Eyes of Gutete Emerita'* (1996), Alexandre Cabanel's *'The Fallen Angel'* (1847) and James Nachtwey's documents *'Reflections of the Rwanda genocide'* (1994). Whilst exploring these works alongside the saying that eyes are 'the windows to the soul', the emotional weight that they hold can not be ignored.

Jaar's work captures the tragedy reflected in the eyes. Emerita's family were murdered in front of her and after hiding for 3 weeks, these photos were taken during the aftermath. Jaar's premise for the work was to challenge the apathy of people by almost forcing eye contact with the

subject, challenging them not to feel empathy. How can you look into her eyes, know her story and not be moved in some emotional aspect?

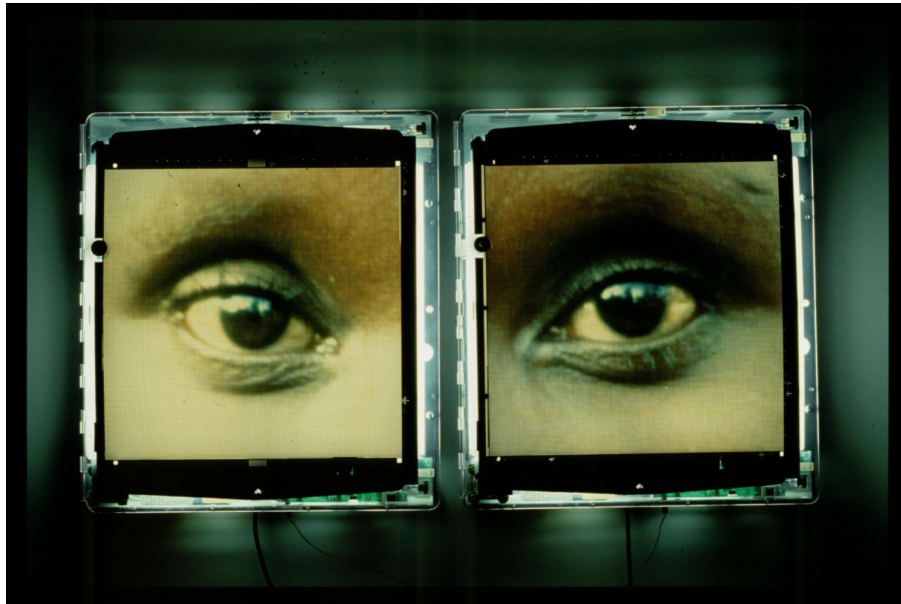


Figure 10: Alfredo Jaar's *'The Eyes of Gutete Emerita'* (1996)

Nachtwey's work also challenges the viewer to address their humanity. His photo journalism of the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, documents the figures within the environment and as a result you see emotion reflected through the eyes. In my opinion, the subjects eyes are often captured as averted, widened or staring right back and seem to symbolise a sense of disbelief, detachment or pleading. All depictions of the eyes captured are of negative emotions. The gaze of these eyes onto the viewer, elicits a sense of guilt and empathy which I believe were the artist's intentions.



Figure 11: James Nachtwey *'Reflections on the Rwandan Genocide'* (1994)

Cabanel's piece stands in contrast to these photographic elements, Through depiction alone there is a strong sense of emotion within the eyes. The sense of sadness and also quiet rage is conveyed through his use of tone and colour, reinforcing the connotations of anger. The tear compounds the sadness. These are a pair of eyes you can relate to on your worst day. Eyes that reflect and encapsulate the stereotypical negative emotions reflected through the gaze.



Figure 12: Alexandre Cabanel 'The Fallen Angel' (1847)

Eyes “express all the emotions and states of the mind and body. They soften in love, harden with anger, widen in fear and horror, narrow in suspicion, roll in exasperation, glaze with boredom, weep in sadness or joy.” (Synnott, 2022).

Conclusion

Eyes reflect meaning in various ways. Whether through intent or light or essence, they communicate through the work. The eyes of the artist influences the work, whilst themes of the viewer gazes upon those intentions. The meaning of the work is a result of what is witnessed through culture and era as well as bias, such as gaze. However a constant remains, being that

eyes are almost symbolic for life and the absence of them or obscuring of them leads to a disconnect between the viewer and their empathy.

I have always been fascinated by eyes. Eyes can be incredibly truthful. They reveal and reflect intent and being able to 'read' them tells you a lot about a person. As of recent, eyes have become a focal point of my work especially through the comparison between 'natural' and 'artificial' eyes.

Through composing this proposal, I have identified that the recurring themes of light and life were very prominent in my exploration of the eye. Going forward into my dissertation, my current intention would be to explore and evaluate the relation between 'Life, Light and Eyes' within art.

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