

Curation Essay

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For my gallery space I would like to curate an exhibition of illustrative works presented within a classical art centre. The works would depict colourful cartoon animals mimicking high art conventions and elitism and hopefully in turn make the viewer think about what defines high and low art and how does culture, religion and society reflect aesthetic ideals and themes throughout history. Curating a gallery space with contrasting ideas should also make a strong impression on the visitors as Charles Saatchi himself has mentioned that when galleries are “inspired (with) ...juxtaposition” they can become “completely unforgettable”ⁱ

Artistic movements change in accordance to the cultural, historical and religious situations of the time the works are created; for example, Donatello’s *David* depicts a sensual, idealistic and youthful sculpture of the biblical character. The sculpture conforms to the ‘perfect’ human anatomy that dominated renaissance art due to its deep desire to escape the imperfections of the dark ages. Furthermore, sculptures depicting nude figures hadn’t been culturally acceptable since ancient Greece, as the Christian West viewed “the body was seen as a road to corruption and not to be celebrated”.ⁱⁱ The early renaissance returning to classic antiquity’s admiration for the human form shows how cultural acceptance of certain themes can be reintroduced into societies. Donatello being commissioned to sculpt the character of David overthrowing the powerful Goliath wasn’t just because the people commissioning the piece thought it would suit the Medici garden; the people of Florence in the 15th century projected their own victory over Milan onto David’s victory over Goliath, and this sculpture embodied this victory, showing how political events can greatly alter the relevance of artworks. Also, we can see how technological advancements have directly affected art movements. Picasso’s cubist paintings for example could be seen as a response to invention of the camera and rising popularity in photography art, and how he reinvented the way we value art, as seen in paintings such as *Demoiselles d’Avignon*. Furthermore, works by Fernand Leger applied heavy focus on man’s growing relationship with industrial and technological advancements, as shown in his painting 1919 *The City*. As with the renaissance’s desire to escape the memories of the

dark ages, the cubist movement could be viewed as an escape from the tyranny of realism and the 'outdated' themes of naturalism.

The exhibition will be held at the Bargello art museum in Florence, Italy. I have chosen this place in particular because it itself has been repurposed over time due to societal changes. Originally used as a building to house the magistrates and other council officials, the Bargello was home to countless executions and torture until the practice was abolished in the late 18th century. It later became a prison and was home to the chief of police. The Bargello went from being a place of iron rule and sadistic punishment, to a place of security and order, and finally, to a place of art and beauty when it was re-furnished and re-opened in the latter half of the 19th century as the art museum we know it as today. All of the changes made to the Bargello, whether they were architectural or to do with how the building was used, were made in accordance to the political and cultural needs of the city at the time.

When visitors of the gallery enter the Bargello, they will first be greeted by tapestries and decorative wall pieces depicting the whimsical cartoon characters re-enacting the historical and cultural events originally depicted in classical and renaissance artworks. This will then lead them to the grand courtyard, where there will be sculptures dotted around some being parodies of the existing works and additional original sculptures, as well as parodies of the coats of arms which would be usually mounted on the walls. For example, instead of Vincenzo Gemito's *The Fisher Boy*, there would be a sculpture of a cute bunny in dungarees clutching onto their newly caught big-eyed rainbow fish flopping about trying to escape back into the river.

As you continue to the main room in the museum, the theme of the two previous rooms continues. Where Donatello's *David* would usually stand, there will be a new sculpture in its place. Instead a proudly standing mouse with a wide grin would be David's counterpart, and the beheaded Goliath would be a big bully of a cat.

I would also like to use the space to my advantage to stimulate strong aesthetic appreciation for the artworks that I would be displaying. For example, placing sculptures of the whimsical cartoon characters mimicking the poses and situations of the sculptures that are usually there are doing will provide a great contrast. But I think it will also be important to consider the placements of the sculptures and paintings to fully capitalise on the effect it could have on the viewers. Having these humorous takes on renaissance and classical art is one thing, but placing, for example, sculptures of this manner in the building's courtyard would have an even stronger impact on the viewer.

Displaying artworks in a space where hundreds of executions and public speeches by people of great authority were held adds a completely different dimension to the regular pieces in the courtyard, let alone the ones I intend to use. So, by manipulating and warping the meaning of the sculptures (by making them cartoon characters), and placing them in the courtyard which has undergone and changed its purpose over the centuries, but will forever hold its bloody and violent past, should be a powerful experience for the viewers.

The works themselves as I've mentioned will be almost like parody pieces of classical and fine art pieces. They will be based off pieces created during the classic antiquity, gothic, renaissance, baroque and neoclassicism eras, essentially keeping the works Eurocentric and classical. The purpose of this is to make the viewer really consider the line between high art and low art. All of the themes that I just listed are considered high or fine art movements, and are associated with people of knowledge and culture, who are usually well educated and of higher class in society. In stark contrast to this, the characters which will be depicted in this way are going to be extremely cartoony. Bright yellow bunnies, hot pink teddy bears and pastel purple ducks will inhabit the paintings, whereas the sculptures will still be completed in lightly dyed marble and smaller ones crafted in resin. The tapestries and wall decorations will also follow this theme, with the cartoon characters adapting themselves into the works. The whimsical, boarder line gaudy, styles of work have a completely different target audience. As seen in works by artists like Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, art of this manner is usually associated with commercialism, intended for the masses of society, commonly

used for cereal box mascots and children's cartoon characters. For example, taking Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* but recreating the scene with a ludicrous duck character standing in the place of the goddess and being surrounded by other silly cartoon characters while maintaining the textures of the old masterpiece is the general idea for the works. Combining both of these two vastly different aesthetics should blur the line, or possibly make the line more visible, between how we value art, which is completely dependent on the individual viewer. Inspiration from artists such as Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara who create gallery pieces that combine both fine art and pop. Murakami stated in an interview "I started to...compare manga to contemporary art".ⁱⁱⁱ These concepts helped me shape my ideas for pieces to exhibit as both their styles reflect the ideals which I'm trying to convey throughout the exhibition.

As Murphy and Potts state "We may merely copy what we have inherited and try to preserve the advantages of old society, but this is doomed to failure..." as it can only create art that is "patently ill-fitted to our social reality".^{iv} With my exhibition I have tried to address this statement and use a range of different elements to try and illustrate this point. I feel like combining the pieces of art works that I intend to display, along with the historical context of the art movements they are influenced by, with the historical context linked to the gallery space and the way how all of these elements have adapted and changed to fit the societal expectations of their times would make for a successful exhibition. My exhibition could also be seen as an attempt to continue the idea of adapting works to make them acceptable for society's aesthetics and interests, as "destruction of tradition forces artists to invent a new aesthetic"^v as stated by Jacques Ellul. And in essence this is the ultimate goal of my exhibition.

ⁱ Saatchi, C. (2009) *My Name is Charles Saatchi and I Am an Artoholic*, Phaidon Press

ⁱⁱ Smarthistory (2011) *Donatello, David* [video] available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kUUJJV_MNA [accessed 15 April 2020]

ⁱⁱⁱ Murakami, T. (2010) Takashi Murakami By Alison Gingeras *interview magazine* [online] available at : <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/takashi-murakami> [accessed 2 may 2020]

^{iv} Murphy, A. Potts J. (2003) *Culture and Technology*, Palgrave Macmillan

^v Michaelcmichaeldo (2006) *high art : low art* [video] available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lz_UVfNdUV4&list=PLWRjAeDodBDN_ZMYB2EkMHqdPAIINr65k [accessed 15 April 2020]