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Proposed question for Independent Inquiry : How can we as makers maintain our integrity whilst portraying the suffering of the psyche?

This essay will explore the three keywords abjection, psyche and suffering, in relation to artists and key thinkers whose works embody this. These words can be said to naturally link together and are entwined. As Gibran says, “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars” (Gibran, 2015, loc.3887) Without experiencing the darkest of feelings how can one understand how to survive in the bleakest of times? This is particularly relevant now with the COVID-19 pandemic. As designers we have a responsibility to convey the truth.

Suffering is defined as “serious pain which someone feels in their body or their mind” (Collins, 2020). Both body and mind are equally important as they tell us that something is wrong and make life challenging. Our ability to think in a rational way is impaired. It is interesting to see how different artists have approached this subject physically and emotionally. Goya’s *The Disasters of War* is a series of 82 prints created between 1810 and 1820 in response to the violence of the 1808 Dos de Mayo Uprising. They were not published until 35 years after Goya’s death due to their sensitivity. “The Disasters of War are meant to awaken, shock, wound the viewer” (Sontang, 2003, p. 40) in a way earlier paintings had not. War was often glorified and celebrated in paintings with work depicting the victorious army such as Uccello’s *The Battle of San Romano* (Fig.1) where the style is engaging. It is celebrating Florence’s victory over the Sianese in 1432. The commander rides a white



Figure 1 - *The Battle of San Romano* (Uccello, 1438-40)

horse symbolizing purity and is richly decorated in a red and gold hat portraying wealth. He is single handedly fighting off three black horses. Black conveying darkness or evil. Sontang says “Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in painting as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people” (2003, p. 38). In contrast Goya’s work shows the horror and the effects of war. The pain and misery of innocent bystanders are clear to see (Fig.2). The victims are experiencing mental and physical torment. Freud says:

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our body, which is doomed to decay... from the external world which may rage against us with overwhelming and

merciless force of destruction, and finally from our relations with other men... This last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other” (Freud, 1989, p. 77).



Figure 2 - *And it Cannot be Helped* (Goya, 1810)

This force of destruction and relations with other men is clearly demonstrated in Goya's work. Violence enacted upon us through another being demoralises the soul and makes us lose faith in humanity. Goya was painting in a world before photography could tell a story. In a modern world an undoctored photograph can show human affliction in an instance. Integrity is everything. As makers we should not be afraid to be honest, regardless of the reaction.

Photos are an important way of capturing mental and physical distress. They can encapsulate man's devastating nature in an accurate way showing our vulnerability. In 2004 a photo (Fig. 3) of prisoner Ali Shallal al-Qaysi held in Abu Ghraib shocked the world as it showed Iraqi prisoners "tethered to dog leashes and electrical wires" (GICJ, 2020) by American soldiers. He had been arrested for peacefully protesting the American invasion. Looking at this picture we are detached, though it appears inhumane we convince ourselves it must be staged. Our senses are to protect



Figure 3 (Anon, 2004)

ourselves from the abhorrent horror that is evident:

Whether the photograph is understood as a naïve object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning – and the viewer's response – depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified (Sontang, 2003, pp. 25-26).

We can choose how to read an image based on our own experiences. People who are empathetic will feel the pain of others and be moved whereas a psychopathic personality would be unaffected. If we have suffered, then we are more likely to believe a painful picture than those who have not. It is easier to believe an image has been manipulated than face the fact that all around the world torture is happening. Innocent people are being abused at the hands of the military who are supposed to be representing us. Nietzsche says "We are all afraid of the truth" (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 26) and this is because it is better to live in an illusion of our own creating than have to confront the reality of things that are beyond our understanding. "It is passivity that dulls feeling. The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anaesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration" (Sontang, 2003, p. 91). We are angry that we are allowing such degrading treatment to happen, but we are not motivated to inspire change. It is our own inaction that leads to our own emotional suffering. If we are willing to show an honest picture, we are helping others. Whether looking at a painting or a photograph, pain and suffering can be expressed in a genuine way that affects the soul.

Psyche comes from the Greek word for breath and soul 'psukhē'. Jung "used the term to designate the totality of mental processes, both conscious and unconscious. [...] The psyche should [...] be viewed as being neither homogenous nor unified. It is also capable of transformation" (Buchanan, 2010). Psyche is the personification of the soul. An artist who portrays this well is Salvador Dali through his surrealist style. His paintings are full of contrasting objects such as a hard shell with a soft inside conveying the psychological notion that we make hard defences around the

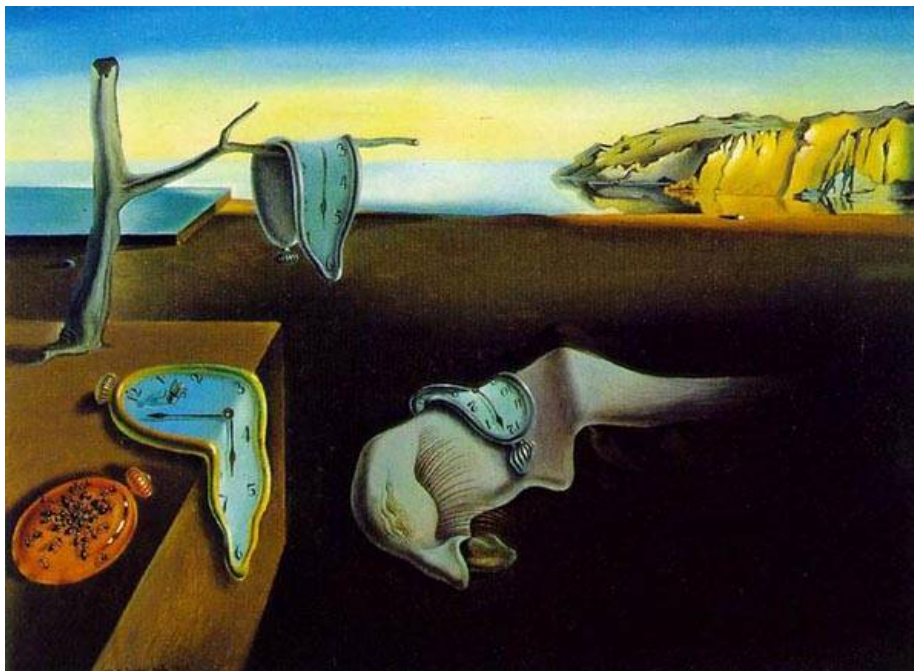


Figure 4 – *The Persistence of Memory* (Dali, 1931)

vulnerable psyche. In Dali's, *The Persistence of memory* (fig.4) we can see an unsettling, barren landscape with four clocks that appear to have melted. Dali is suggesting that in a dream state, time has no value as realities blur, that the way we remember time is not the way we experience it. In the bottom left hand corner are ants crawling over one clock. The ants are

representational of decay and decomposition, again suggesting time is uncertain. Our perception of time is greatly altered by how we are feeling and how engaged in something we are. This is particularly prevalent

now as a nation that is currently in 'lockdown', where days merge into each other. Dali says, "The difference between false memories and true ones is the same as for jewels: it is always the false ones that look the most real, the most brilliant" (Dali, 2013, p. 38). We cannot always trust what we believe to be true. Dali's fantastical scenes help us to understand perception through the unconscious. This approach is important for makers to understand as it is no less real than a literal interpretation of the world because it is sincere.

Joan Miro's abstracted and illusionary works were his way of exploring the psyche. Particularly in Miro's earlier work we can see an expressing of the unconscious. In *Harlequin's Carnival* (fig. 5) Miro is conveying his subconscious and imagination. On the surface it is a jovial



Figure 5 - *Harlequin's Carnival* (Miro, 1925)

painting with dancing cats playing with threads but for Miro this painting was escapism. "If there's anything humorous about my painting, it's not been consciously sought. The humour comes, perhaps, from the need I feel to escape the tragic side of my temperament" (Miro, 2017). Miro was often starving, and extreme hunger can cause vivid hallucinations. It could be seen that he is transposing himself into the painting, as in the centre left is a Harlequin depicted with a red and blue sad face and a hole in his stomach. In Catalan theatre, harlequin is a character often playing the guitar and a victim of unrequited love. A guitar can be seen just behind the harlequin. Miro's painting is deliberately busy which can be unsettling for lovers of traditional art where there is a central focal point. His use of biomorphic organic forms could be said to mirror the psyche as they represent different aspects of a person's mental state. Miro says:

I intend to destroy, destroy everything that exists in painting. I have an utter contempt for painting. The only thing that interests me is the spirit itself... The only reason I abide by the

rules of pictorial art is because they're essential for expressing what I feel. (Miro, 1992, p. 116)

If our psyche has been damaged by traumatic events, then we can create fantasies to protect ourselves:

Illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead. We must therefore accept it without complaint when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality against which they are dashed to pieces (Freud, 2014, p. 10).

This shattering of the psyche happens as the conscious and unconscious meet. When the reality of our protection is broken, the psyche is torn between the truth that it has been eluding and the safety of the dream world it has made. Our sense of self becomes unstable and we shatter. Kristeva describes this as "A weight of meaninglessness... which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). This feeling is abjection. As creators we need to destabilise certainty to get people to see a new truth.

Abjection stems from the utmost horror of human emotions such as pain brought about by suffering. Abject is defined as "that which disturbs the self, by provoking either disgust, fear, loathing or repulsion... the abject is the excessive dimension of either a subject or an object that cannot be assimilated" (Buchanan, 2010). Julia Kristeva was the first person to write about abjection in her essay *Powers of Horror* and her experience of it. For abjection to exist there must be a love-hate relationship between the person and the object/feeling that evokes a violent reaction. For some people this might be the sight of blood from a wound as it reminds people of their own mortality; they are sickened by the sight whilst strangely drawn to looking at what is underneath their skin. For other people it could be the skin on warm milk, as in Kristeva's case, which causes a bodily reaction much more extreme than would be normally be expected—an absolute disgust.

There are artists who use their own blood in their work such as Maxime Taccardi (fig.6) who cuts his wrist and uses that as his palette. "My visions come from my dreams for most of the time, I try to let an open wound between reality and dreams. My Blood paintings are symbolically linked to that idea. I cut my wrists and use the brush directly on my wound" (Taccardi, 2013). His actions cause a revulsion for some people, but he is describing the work speaking to him through dreams. His artwork can be said to cause abjection as his medium is blood. Man "has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object!



Figure 6 – *Even Death is Dreaming* (Taccardi, 2011)

attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk

(Kristeva, 1982, p. 8)". Life and death juxtaposed in a potentially deadly game. Cut the wrist too deep

and his life is extinguished, he is deliberately injuring himself for art. His work is unapologetically shocking. It is brutally honest which creates an awkward truth.

Maria Abramović is a performance artist who causes the viewer to feel uncomfortable. This is especially apparent in *Rhythm 0* (Fig.7). Abramović allowed herself to be subjected to anything the



Figure 7 – *Rhythm 0* (Abramović, 1974)

audience wished for six hours. In that time, she sat motionless on a chair with a table of 72 objects. The audience were invited to choose objects from the table and interact with her in any way that they felt like. The whole notion of placing herself at the mercy of others is inconceivable for many as it could potentially become life threatening, which in this case it did. She was forced to hold a gun up to herself. Arbus says "the shock of immersion in experiences that cannot be beautified, the encounter with what is taboo, perverse, evil" (Sontang, 1979, p. 43) is disturbing. Some people were spectators wanting to see the how the performance would unfold, believing themselves to be absolved from responsibility by doing nothing. They are just as guilty as the people who abused Abramović. They could have confronted the violence. It is the split in a person's psyche at these moments that cause abjection. "The gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look. Those with the stomach to look are playing a role authorized by many glorious depictions of suffering" (Sontang, 2003, p. 38). Even when witnessing pain first-hand there is a detachment, but the soul is haunted by what it has seen and does not forget. Abramović is reduced to the status of an object whilst she is still and silent. "The abject is the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 15). In other words, the spectator is grieving for Abramović whilst feeling unsettled in their own skin for their own contrasting passivity. Abjection literally places oneself beside an uncomfortable truth, provoking an intense physical revulsion which causes suffering. As designers we need to awaken the audience from its apathetic view.

It is clear to see that suffering, psyche and abjection are intrinsically linked. “Abjection, whose intimate side is suffering and horror its public feature” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 149), cannot exist in isolation because it is a product of the psyche suffering. For each word there is a physical and emotional response. As artists and designers, we have an important role to play in how we portray these things in an honest and responsible way. Truth is painful but as Jung says “Real liberation

comes not from glossing over or repressing painful states of feeling, but only from experiencing them to the full” (Jung, 1981). We need to find a way to help people who are struggling with deep turmoil and not contribute to it. An example of this is designing weapons of mass destruction only to then feel appalled by the devastation caused. Oppenheimer, the leader of the wartime Manhattan project to create an atomic bomb, experienced this. In witnessing the Trinity test explosion he was reminded of a line in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (Temperton, 2017). Sometimes we do not realise the implications of our creations until afterwards.

Everyone should be held accountable in the aftermath. Social media has a huge impact on a person’s psyche and often self-worth. We can hide behind a screen and say and do things we would not dream of doing in real life. We create a persona which masks our own fragility. We become “Doomed to our own image, our own identity, our own ‘look’, and having become our own object of care, desire and suffering, we have grown indifferent to everything else” (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 131). People have become self-absorbed whilst destroying their own psyche. Abject art seeks to confront passivity and our ego whilst evoking an emotional response. If there is no reaction, then the work has failed. As artists we need to create work that is integral to our core beliefs. So, the research question I ask for my Independent Inquiry is: How can we as makers maintain our integrity whilst portraying the suffering of the psyche?

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