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Since Kandinsky: The Unspoken Language of Abstract Art

In the so-called age of information, it seems that we are more connected than ever. A plethora of texts, videos, memes exist for the purpose of communicating something- something that will bring us closer to understanding one another, our thoughts and emotions.

Visual information in its least-objective, most ambiguous form can bring deep pleasure to the spectator. It is said by many that art connects us with our “souls”, whatever it is inside us that can be considered “spiritual”, immaterial, indescribable. This exhibition has been designed to take you through more recent applications of abstraction and Kandinsky’s notions of spirituality, harmony and inner space in art. In particular, the paintings of British artist Fiona Rae from the 2000s and the less-recent sculptures of Dame Barbara Hepworth.

At the start of the 20th century, Kandinsky proposed that the most potent way of invoking spiritual experience through art was through non-objective means. He created a new language of visual art through abstraction. He believed that if art could be discussed and understood that way then it was inferior. This indescribable ineffable nature is key to abstract art, as the purpose of it is to be vague enough to be deeply personal and affirming to many people. By removing the objective, the subjective connections and connotations of colours and forms are realised. The viewer may find something in the art that represents a part of themselves they may have forgotten about.

Perhaps this is nostalgia from early childhood- a time where the meaning of objects wasn’t understood, and the world really was just shapes and colours.

Kandinsky is a Russian born painter and art-theorist (1866-1944) who is famous for being one of the first creators of purely abstract art. He believed that art was inherently spiritual. In his 1911 book, “*Über das Geistige in Der Kunst*” aka “*Concerning the Spiritual in art*” he wrote about how he was against the notion of “art for art’s sake” which, in his words produces a “neglect of inner meanings” and instead saw a potential for a language of colour, line and form, creating a deeper inner meaning as opposed to pure aestheticism. He had a great interest in music and regarded it as the “most transcendent” form of non-objective art and this was a large motivator in his move away from objective representation in art. He believed it was the indescribable emotions that gave art its meaning. He wanted to, and regarded by many as succeeded to, create art that created **harmony**.

In his youth, he studied law and economics at the University of Moscow, and later was hired as a professor of Roman law at the University of Dorpat in Estonia. He was 30 years old when he began his studies in painting, focusing on life drawing, sketching, and anatomy, at the University of Munich.

His initial draw towards abstraction was as an adolescent, he later stated. He noticed that each colour seemed to have a mysterious life of its own. He later wrote enthusiastically about the

condition of “Synesthesia” also known as experiencing one sense as another, like music as visual. In his book, he writes about shapes and colours having objective qualities, being innately connected to certain colours or notes, and even conducted studies with his students that supported this.

His devotion to inner beauty was always a key theme to his art, a significant early work named “Der Blau Reiter”, translated as “The Blue Rider” was a significant early work. It addresses his solo journey for spiritual meaning, and the vague form of the rider hints at his future of abstraction



Fig 1: The Blue Rider, 1903

“Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated. Efforts to revive the art-principles of the past will at best produce an art that is still-born.” - Kandinsky, 1911



Fig 2: Wassily Kandinsky, "Composition 7" (1913) 200x300cm, oil on canvas



Fig 3: Study for Composition VII, 1913

The first two artworks I have selected by Kandinsky are the 1913 painting, considered by many to be one of the most important abstract painting of the 20th century and the pinnacle of Kandinsky's

artistic achievement, *Composition VII*- and beside it one of the thirty-plus studies Kandinsky created in the two months preceding it. According to, Gabriele Münter, it was painted in just three days.

It is one of his biggest paintings, as well as *Composition VI* of the same year, and for me perfectly exemplifies his philosophical ideas at the time regarding colour and composition. What I find interesting is how the two paintings, the study and final version, have quite different colour palettes and elements but a similar motion. The study has a much calmer affect of floating whereas the final has a much more demanding pull into the second-from-left quarter section of the composition, giving more height and dimension and a feeling of floating.

““Composition VII” has come to be understood as a concrete embodiment of spiritual purity in art.”

Fiona Rae

Fiona Rae is a British artist born in Hong Kong in 10 October 1963 and rose to prominence as part of the Young British Artists (YBAs) in the 1990s. In an interview with Crane.tv in 2012, she speaks about how spending the first seven years of her life in Hong Kong affected her use of

colour- with it being more “jarring and combative” than what is typically seen in British art.



“Wonderland” by Fiona Rae is a much more quiet, down-to-earth, humble depiction of a spiritual realm.

It is a pink painted surface with sharp decals carefully painted in acrylic, with an explosive array of colours in oil paint in the left portion.

The piece is unmistakably feminine, the baby pink harking to young girlhood and all of the

Fig 4: Fiona Rae, “Wonderland” Oil, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 200491 x 75 in / 231.1 x 190.5 cm

<http://www.fiona-rae.com/paintings/2001-06-font-sticker-pour/wonderland/>

products and aesthetics one is surrounded in in that time. As opposed to Kandinsky's objectification of complex emotion, Fiona Rae thoroughly embraces the subjective and indulges in motifs and aesthetics from her childhood. Small characters like the duck and dog seen in *Wonderland* are somewhat of a signature for Rae's work and are often appropriated from images online or in real life- for example the panda in *Fig 4* was inspired by embroidered pandas seen in a Chinese market in York.



Figure 5 <https://www.we-heart.com/2013/02/04/fiona-rae-new-paintings/>



Figure 6: "OH! I DONT LIKE THEM" Fiona Rae, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 2006, 60 x 50 in / 152.4 x 127 cm

<http://www.fiona-rae.com/paintings/2001-06-font-sticker-pour/oh-i-dont-like-them/>

seem to be more about individual elements co-existing as opposed to all of them forming one whole. Interaction and interplay is key.

If *Wonderland* is a sweet powdery child-like, well, *Wonderland*, then the next painting, "OH! I DONT LIKE THEM" has a bit more of an urban grittiness, like a teenager finding themselves in relation to a big city.

What I like about this piece is the space each element is given. Like a Kandinsky, black lines bring movement to the piece (see Fig 6), however unlike Kandinsky, Rae's paintings



Fig 7: "Two Movements", 1924, Watercolor and Indian ink on paper, 13.3 x 18.6" (33.7 x 47.3 cm)

<https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-457.php>

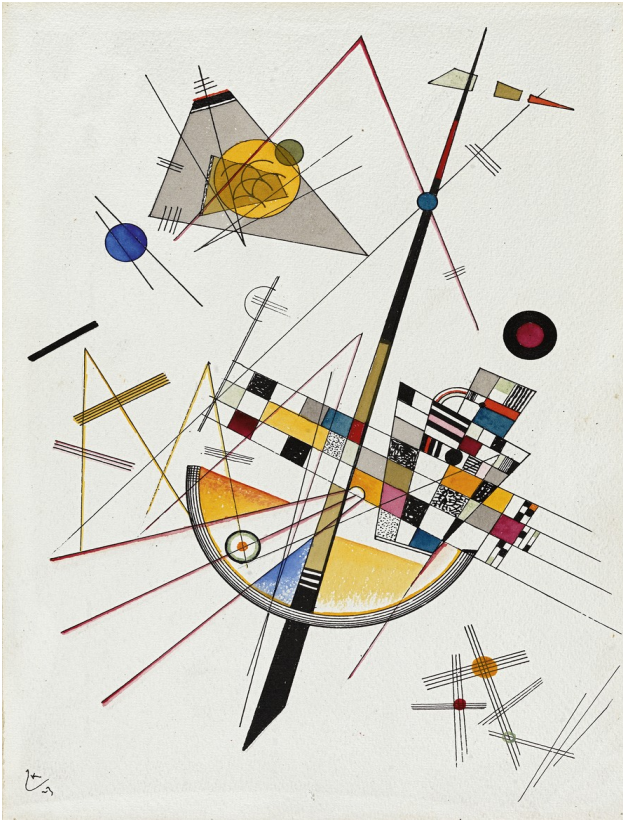


Fig 8: Wassily Kandinsky, *Delicate Tension #85*, 1923, Watercolor on paper, 13.8 × 9.8" (35.0 × 25.0 cm)

<https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-271.php>

On the back wall, a later piece by Kandinsky can be seen. By this point in his artistic career, his melding forms have condensed into geometric shapes and lines. In *Delicate Tension #85*, Kandinsky's almost Mathematical approach of arranging shapes as to evoke specific emotions or relationships is in full-force.



Fig 9: Dame Barbara Hepworth, *Pelagos*, 1946, Elm and strings on oak base, Object: 430 × 460 × 385 mm, 15.2 kg

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hepworth-pelagos-t00699>

At the rear of the gallery, we take a step back in time to 1946 with "Pelagos" by Dame Barbara Hepworth as it sits, illuminated by the light from the three windows above it.

Barbara Hepworth was a British sculptor, who was born in Wakefield, Yorkshire in 1903.

In "Pelagos", which translates from Greek as "sea", Hepworth wanted the tightly-bound strings to express 'the tension [she] felt between [herself] and the sea, the wind or the hills'. She wanted to encapsulate the sublime, a feeling that was described

by Irish Philosopher Edmund Burke as experiences which provoke a state of “astonishment”, a combination of fear and intrigue or delight.

Hepworth’s approach to sculpture dearly parallels Kandinsky’s approach. In 1934 she stated, ““I do not want to make a stone horse that is trying to and cannot smell the air. How lovely is the horse’s sensitive nose, the dog’s moving ears and deep eyes; but to me these are not stone forms and the love of them and the emotion can only be expressed in more abstract terms. [...] In the contemplation of Nature we are perpetually renewed, our sense of mystery and our imagination is kept alive, and rightly understood, it gives us the power to project into a plastic medium some universal or abstract vision of beauty.” Like Kandinsky, her goal with art is to express pure emotion.

I thought it was interesting to compare “Pelagos” with “Delicate Tension #85” as both pieces explore the relationship between line and form and how lines can be used to add tension. In “Pelagos”, the lines seem to both push and pull, just like how the sublime is both an attractive and repelling force.

Layout

The gallery layout was carefully selected so that Kandinsky’s classic painting mirrors Rae’s more modern abstract pieces. Ideally, the gallery space will be painted grey so that the tone is more relaxed and the colours of the pieces stand out more. I believe a calm atmosphere is ideal for letting one’s internal monologue rest and allowing the spectator to more fully sink into the experience of each painting. Below are some mock-ups.

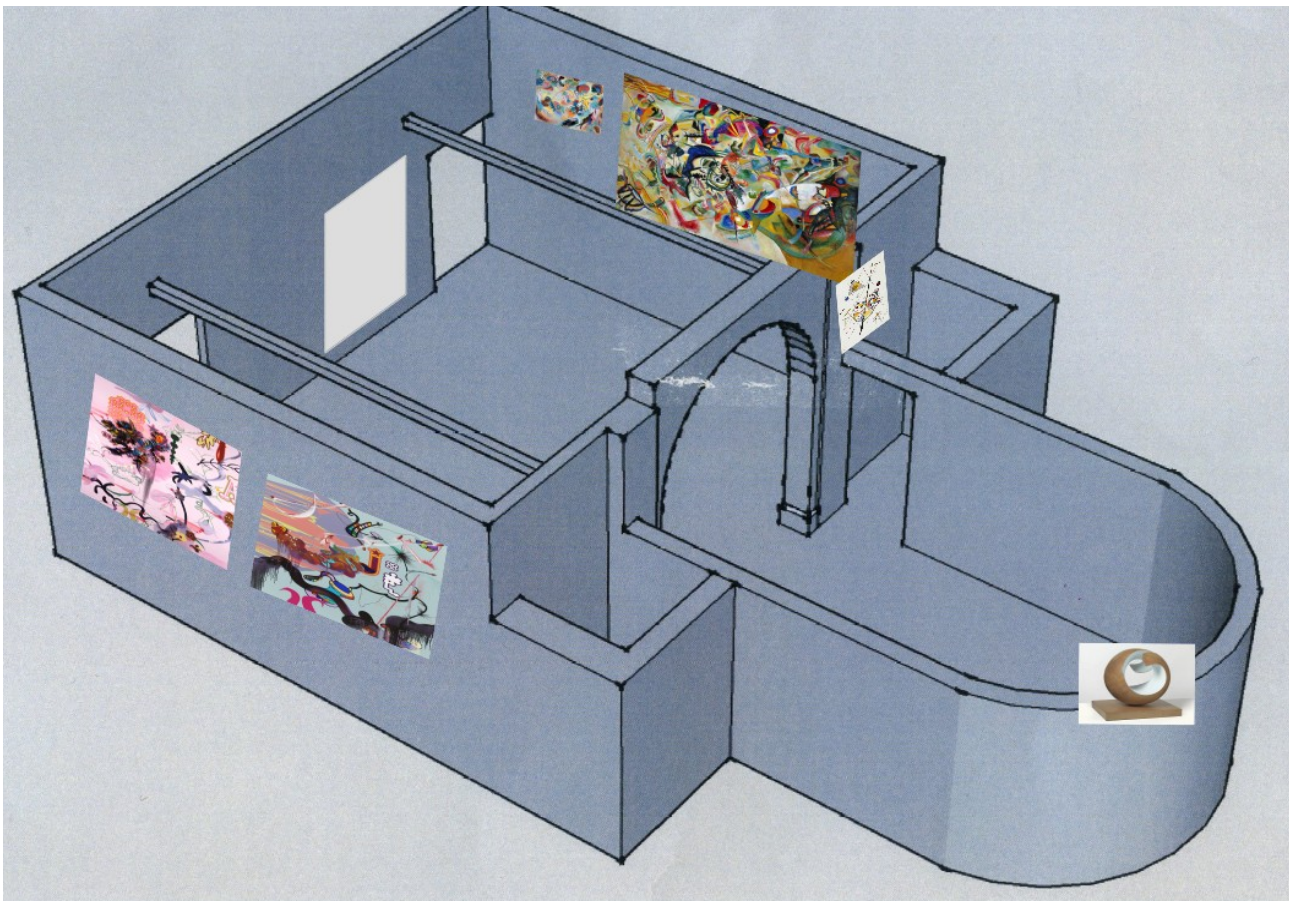


Fig 2: Layout of exhibition in The Mission Gallery, Swansea

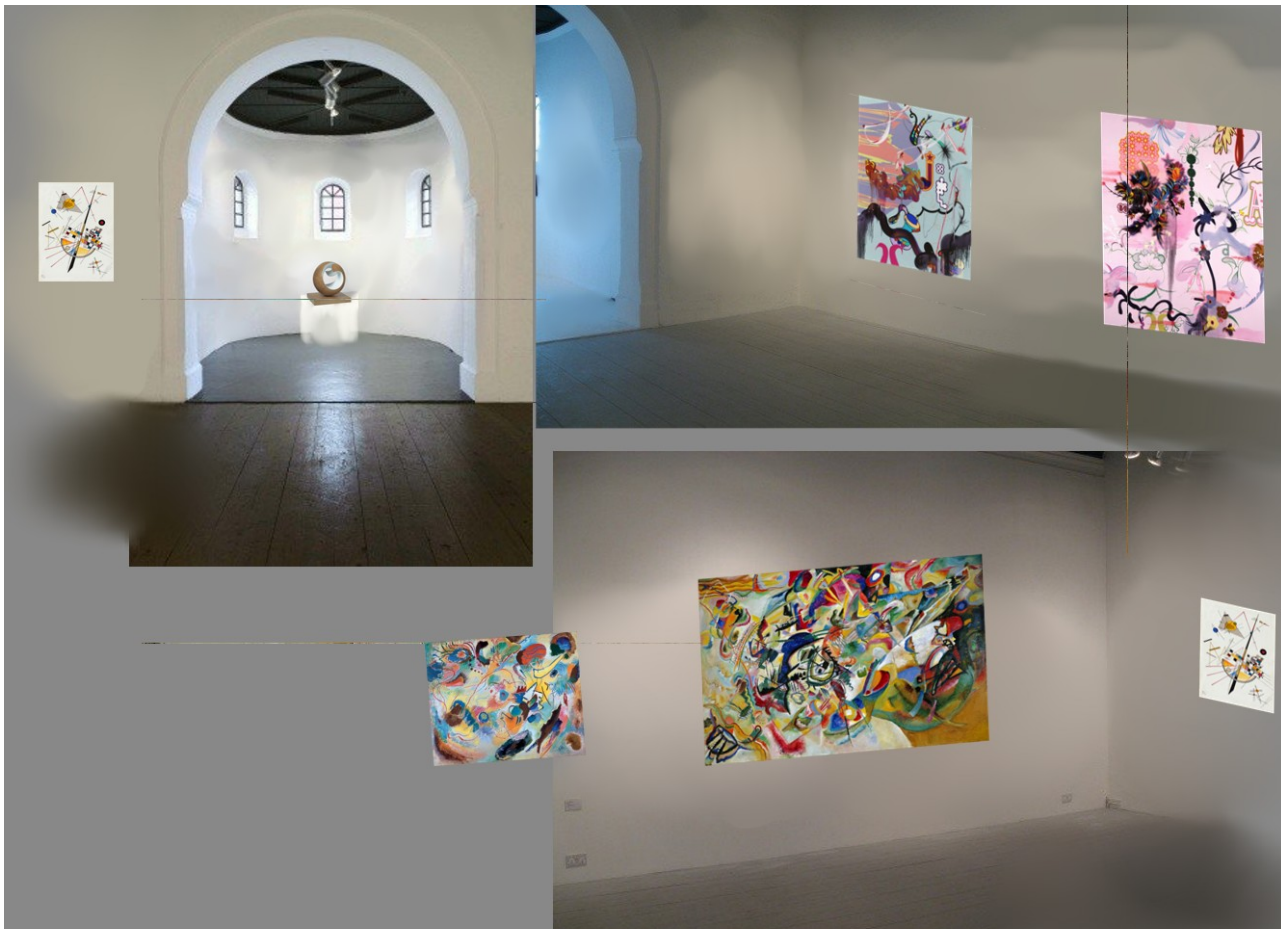


Fig 3: Internal view of Exhibition in The Mission Gallery

Bibliography and references

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

Figure 3: <http://www.fiona-rae.com/paintings/2001-06-font-sticker-pour/wonderland/>

Figure 4: <https://www.we-heart.com/2013/02/04/fiona-rae-new-paintings/>

Figure 5: <http://www.fiona-rae.com/paintings/2001-06-font-sticker-pour/oh-i-dont-like-them/>

Figure 6: <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-457.php>

Figure 7: <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work-271.php>

Figure 8: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hepworth-pelagos-t00699>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/vasily-kandinsky-counterpoint-composition-vi-composition-vii-the-state-tretyakov-gallery/UgKCjKX9MXThIw?hl=en>

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“Why have there been no great women artists?” - Linda Nochlin

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