

Cover page

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As a professional, "do we have a moral obligation to support work that reveals sensitive material?"

The following essay discusses examples of work that contain sensitive material, and this also explores whether or not we have a moral obligation to support any work that involves such material. These sensitive materials potentially include, but are not limited to, nudity, physical and psychological abuse and mental health issues. The primary practitioners that are researched in this particular essay are David Nebreda, Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso and explores how the sensitive nature of their respective works affects their viewers, in particular, in different ways.

Pablo Ruiz Picasso was a painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramicist, stage designer, poet and playwright. He became famous from his artwork as a painter creating artworks of nude women in a sexual composition, such as "Two nude women." (Fabre,1978) This body of work, a printmaking piece, shows the outlines of two naked women. It is made up of two abstract women that are disproportioned and unrealistic. It demonstrates a mockery of the human body and is an example of Picasso exploiting women with his view on their physique.

On the other hand, Picasso has an abstract eye and shows women as they would like to be viewed, such as curvy with a small waist and large breasts. The male gaze is evident here, and it pushes the boundaries of how women are represented in art. It is, therefore, down to the viewer whether or not they can agree or disagree with this presentation of the nude feminine body by Picasso.

Another Picasso painting, 'Weeping Woman 1937', shows a woman, Dora Marr, at a fragile point in her life which further exemplifies the weakness of a woman during a moment of suffering, while also using her moment of vulnerability to display his personal misery. This portrayal of sadness is evident through the emotion he openly shows by creating this painting.

"He [Picasso] is working on a painting or sculpture about making love the intensity of his sensation which makes it impossible for him to distinguish between himself and his lover, just as he portrays women, women are often self-portraits of himself found in them, ...as he daily hears the news from his own country." (Berger,1980)

This quote is evident, showing his personal life as a serial womaniser by trying to portray himself as a definite lover and appreciator of women.

The Weeping Woman piece by Picasso is set in a portrait style, painted with vibrant colours and includes textures from the different brushes that he used while creating the painting. The woman is crying due to an unclear tragic event, and the art was inspired by the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War that was going on at the time. (McNeese, 2006, p. 79) The piece is created in an abstract way, which includes thick black lines alongside some that thin out and overlap; which is a further display of Picasso's mockery of women as a further exaggeration of the expectations of the female body. The facial expressions of the woman allow us to establish that the subject is under an intense amount of stress and sadness, and this can have a knock-on effect and make the viewer also feel the same emotions of the Weeping Woman.

The painting of 'Les Femmes d'Alger' was one of the inspirations behind the Cubism movement. (Pablo picasso organisation, 2009) The painting itself can be compared to

Cezanne's 'Nude Bathers' as a similar composition and another motivation behind the Cubism movement, although subtle. (Art wikipedia, 2019) The campaign allowed men, such as Picasso and Cezanne, to show women nude and dis-formed and therefore created an unrealistic feminine standard. Cubism itself was born in 20th century Europe and this significant movement saw the power behind the painting and allowed artists to challenge the normal structure. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* displays a brazen disregard for the conventional rules of art. The start of the Cubism movement inspired Picasso to create his most well-known bodies of work, such as 'The Weeping Woman 1937' and the painting of 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon 1907.' With the techniques acquired from the Cubism movement, Picasso was expressing a degrading nature against women. It could be argued whether or not this was his intention, it can be seen that his paintings were ill-judged and mishandled.

The '*demoiselles*' women, which depicted in the painting, are prostitutes. One view of the piece is it celebrates prostitution, during a time when the attitude towards prostitution was changing. The overt sexuality expressed through primitivism demonstrates that these women are objects, to be used, sold, and abused. They are not treated as human beings. It can be theorised that most of these women were not there by choice. Societal circumstance has forced many of these women here through poverty, emotional and physical abuse, and lack of opportunities, this can only be speculated. The accepting nature of a painting which can be seen to demonstrate a positive attitude towards prostitution is deeply disturbing. These women may have been here through sexual exploitation and abuse. How, as a society, can we condone a piece of work which degrades human beings to mere objects for the pleasure and satisfaction of men? Picasso was a serial womaniser having multiple mistresses throughout his life; one might argue that Picasso his self see women as mere objects for his pleasure and gratification. (Bazan, 2016) *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is Picasso's way of demonstrating this through his artwork.

Overall, Picasso was a prolific narcissist, abuser and rapist. His actions towards his fellow men are despicable and revering his artwork in such a high regard disregards the hurt, pain, and anguish caused by Picasso throughout his life. From certain points of view, his artwork should not be admired and forgotten to history due to his personal matters above his professionalism.

The painting, 'Bedroom in Arles', by the Dutch post-impressionist painter, Vincent Van Gogh (Lassaigne, 1973), displays a simple if strange, subject matter. The painting depicts a disproportioned view of Van Gogh's bedroom, which utilises a limited but vibrant colour scheme, which displays a wide range of shades of blue and yellow. The painting itself has a coarse texture almost as if it was drawn on a modern-day 'etch a sketch'. The rough structure of the depiction implies a rushed, forced approach. This is backed up by the perspective, and disproportioned nature of the subject matter. Each line and object have a different perspective, which creates a jumbled, disjointed, mess of a painting.

Van Gogh's health issues throughout his life are well documented. (Cascone, 2016) Although experts have never reached a consensus onto what exact problems plagued Van Gogh, and which aspects may or may not have contributed to his suicide in July 1890. Van Gogh experts have proposed his suicide was due to a wide range of unnamed psychological issues, most of which can be attested to in his works. Experts have discussed at length what these issues could be, possible mental disorders that he suffered from were, in no particular order; epilepsy, bipolar disorder, Borderline personality disorder, Ménière's disease, Lead poisoning, and Acute intermittent porphyria. (Cascone, 2016)

The disjointed manner of the subject, may be down to his mental state at the time of painting. Vincent Van Gogh had frequent depressive and manic episodes which in turn could have led to the rushed feeling and jumped perspective of the painting. (Scott, 2019) Vincent Van Gogh also frequently suffered from hallucinations; there is an argument that Van Gogh, himself, painted the room as he saw it personally, a vision in his brain, projected through his eyes. In which case, this painting demonstrates his state of mind at the time of painting.

Van Gogh frequently spoke of seeing and feeling colour (Taggart, 2016). Today, this phenomenon is well known and documented as Synesthesia. Synesthesia is the result of where the stimulation of one cognitive pathway, leads to a response of one or more cognitive pathways. (Psychology today, Unknown) People with the condition, frequently describe seeing or tasting colour when hearing different sounds or eating certain foods. The limited colour palette, in 'Bedroom in Arles', maybe down to Synesthesia. Van Gogh may be physically seeing everything in a yellow and blue hue and thus has painted it as such.

Vincent Van Gogh was not recognised as the "*great*" artist he is today during his lifetime. His fame and recognition came after his death, due to a self-inflicted gunshot, in 1890. (Franciswell, 2017) Through his honour and prestige, we are, celebrating his suffering. Vincent Van Gogh led a tortured life; he suffered from poor mental and physical health and maimed himself by cutting off his ear. It is almost as if initially, his reputation, came from people feeling guilty for the terrible life he led. We are playing the sympathy card and giving him special treatment. Van Gogh's led a depressive and tortured life, but this does us allow him to provide any special treatment. Mental health suffers should not be treated differently due to their condition; they should be compared comparatively to their own peers, removing any special treatment they receive – this treatment Van Gogh did not receive during his time period due to the stigma around mental health and the treatment of it at the time.

Another artist, whose work was based significantly around his mental health diagnosis was David Nebreda. Diagnosed at age 19 with Schizophrenia, the young David Nebreda created, the somewhat disturbing "Autoportraits" (Nebreda, 2000), which allowed others to publish his work after death, enabling his legacy to continue. His work can be considered as having a distressing subject matter which on viewing, can be debated as to whether his work is art or mismanagement of the mind.

Schizophrenia presents itself between the ages of 16-30 years old. One percent of the population is diagnosed with Schizophrenia, and approximately 0.7% of the United Kingdom's population (14.5 in 1000 people) have the disorder. (www.nice.org.uk,) Schizophrenia presents itself through multiple symptoms such as hallucinations, disorganised speech, delusions, disorganised behaviour. Through viewing Nebreda's pieces, his mental state and Schizophrenia are expressed, through his very raw and explicit work.

One of Nebreda's final images 'Untitled' from the book 'autoportrait', shows his final breaking point. This subject matter is disturbing. It shows his final moment, which is a skinny, grotesque body: Nebreda's death bed. The portrait frames consists of stages before Nebreda's death. His body is laid on a white bedspread with white bedsheets covering his legs and face. His body is still covered in bloody cuts all across his chest, from self-mutilation. The subject matter is uncomfortable to look at and mentally hard to grasp. He did not see the outcome of the work he had created as he knew that his health was declining and there was a no chance of him recovering, the mental state of him was too far gone in his opinion. Through the progression of 'autoportrait', you can see, his work becomes cruder. His decline in health and acceptance of his fate are clearly seen.

The question of why such a painful and uncomfortable subject matter is put on a display is a difficult one. One theory is to demonstrate how tortured Nebreda's final moments were. (Taggart, 2019) This collection of raw photography shows the pain of a person's mental health acceptance and a frankly frightening side of mental illness, and how you can decline rapidly. Continuing on this thread, his pictures can be used to show how psychological health issues can take a dark turn. This in turn demonstrates how far people can go, to force people into seeking help before it goes too far, this was a possibility of one of the outcomes Nebreda wanted when his photography was released to the public. It is almost to scare people until seeking help. The deeply disturbing nature of the subject matter will demonstrate to people what mental health can do to people, to distort a human being into a husk of a person, a shadow of their previous self.

The reasons for displaying and revealing his work are open to interpretation. They are down to the viewer; the reader themselves might have their own opinion. Art is meant to provoke and question, which David Nebreda's work certainly does, as it makes the viewer think and question their own mentality and stability. The reason for displaying the works is unknown and itself is open to interpretation. Whether or not we can morally support David Nebreda's final works is questionable and open to debate, each person can have their own opinion when viewing the works.

Finally, David Nebreda's work is incredibly striking. Although it was done without a purpose in mind, (Mejia, 2017) it serves as a visual representation of mental health issues and how they affect you physically and mentally. The person you knew can become a shell of a human much like David Nebreda. His work can be utilised as a teaching tool to shock and demonstrate to people how mental health can affect people. David's Nebreda's work should be supported, but not in a traditional sense. Through utilising his work as a teaching tool, it can hopefully, although for a better understanding of mental health, and inspire people to talk about their problem and issues. Generally, it is the hope that his work may save lives.

In conclusion, I feel personally the support of artists which reveal sensitive material should be discussed on a case by case basis. It depends on the context of the artwork and the people who created it. The answer is ambiguous and is really up to the viewer of the artwork to support in the way they feel fit. From a professional standpoint the question, "do we have a moral obligation to support work that reveals sensitive material", depends on the artist and subject matter within a discussion of context. An example of this is shown throughout the works of different artists such as Pablo Picasso's artistic legacy that is continued to be celebrated and revered after his death, despite the horrendous acts committed during his lifetime. However, on the other hand, Van Gogh's work is beautiful, even more, so considering the tortured life he led. Van Gogh demonstrated to everyone that no matter your circumstances in life, you can achieve anything if you follow your passions and apply yourself. His artwork should be celebrated, more than it is currently. The question as to whether we have a moral obligation to support his work is open to interpretation.

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Figures



Figure 1: David Nebreda - 'Untitled'



Figure 2: Pablo Picasso - Les Femmes d'Alger



Figure 3: Pablo Picasso