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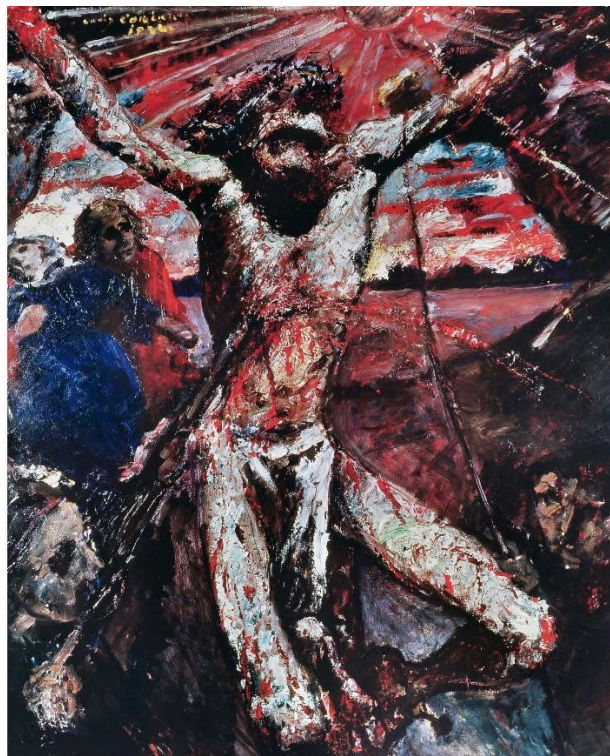
BA Fine Art – Site, Studio and Context

Lecturers: Alex Duncan, Holly Slingsby

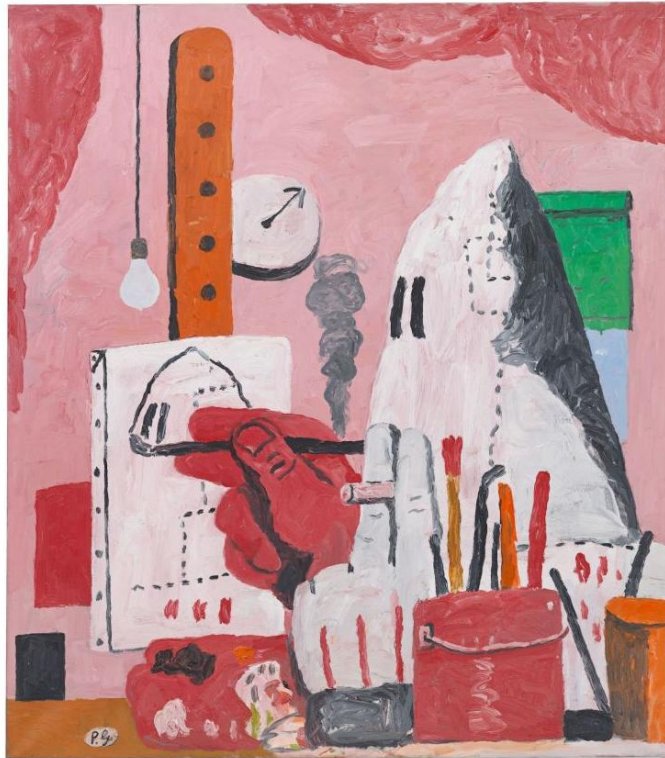
Expressionism's place within 21st narrative of painting

Expressionism has a rich history within modern art however, as other forms of art have risen, expressive painting has seemingly lost its place within the 21st century narrative of mainstream politically charged art, subtlety has taken its place. Nevertheless the need for rawer, visceral art that serves as a response to social and political upheaval of our times is one that shares its roots with expressionism's original intention in the early 20th century, therefore it should be considered one of the truer forms of painting and its current vitality shouldn't be understated.

Up until around the turn of the early 20th century, painting had always had an bourgeoisie elitist aspect to it that didn't provide a direct voice or commentary for those who perhaps needed it, with the post-impressionist movement this ended, painting started to be about the internal rather than the external, application and colour took centrefold and this was further explored by German artists like Otto Dix and George Gracz capturing the political turmoil of Germany after the first world war and this period came to be known as Expressionism and this way of painting gradually became reduced to its fundamentals with abstract expressionism, marks and colour without anything to contextualise the work beyond the artist who made it. These two interpretations melded when in his later life Phillip Guston, who originally was an abstract expressionist, combined the excess of size and paint characterised by the movement he was part of with gloomy, ironic cartoony figuration, pertaining a darker, definitive stance on socio-political issues, his paintings served as statements without compromise from himself or the viewer and his paintings directly influenced the neo-expressionist painters of the 1980s like Georg Baselitz, artists who's movement was characterised by similar elements alongside accessibility, providing a voice from the disenfranchised themselves.



'The Red Christ' – Lovis Corinth (1922)



Phillip Guston – 'The Studio' (1969)

Expressionism's legacy still resonates with painters today however in our current mass-media internet age it's formalism has been diluted by a commercial viability that takes away from the raw energy with where expressionism's origins lay, it should act as a retort when art becomes near impossible for the viewer to relate to and given our current social climate, it's more important to remember the individual behind the aesthetics of an artwork, to express oneself gives personal insight into who made the painting. Expressionism "serves as an antidote whenever art threatens to grow too narcissistic and self-satisfied and reminds us of a shock of the emotional basis of all good art" (Wolf, Norbert p.24). Brushstrokes and colour personalise what otherwise wouldn't be. Something impersonal has it's merits but expressionism relishes in it's style, compulsion becomes permanent and individual. If we all painted traditionally it wouldn't speak loud enough as everybody would be doing the same thing.

Expressionism is still considered important in terms of painting but most often overlooked for forms of art that are sensationalised.

"A painter paints the appearance of things, not their objective correctness. In fact, he creates new appearances of things." (Kirchner, Ludwig). The ability for painters to capture new ways of seeing things beyond a piece's aesthetic quality is something explored also by contemporary expressionist painters of the 80s and 90s but as they came to prominence before the turn of the century they had their share, established artists that garnered success before the turn of the century take most of the market-value. This idea of "new appearances" should be no less relevant now as it was then, painters should seek their own personal trademark. We have strayed from artwork having near as much rough-around-the-edges experimentality or personality, perhaps it's satisfactory for some as a statement about our current culture but individual stories are what matter and are especially relevant now. The meta-modernist stance is one that reinterprets history, we can reinterpret old styles and techniques for a 21st century audience.

The generation of 21st century expressive figurative painters such as Pascal Sender are successful and they do speak on our times, but their work seems to get swallowed up by our social-media zeitgeist, either through perceived accessibility or through censorship, Nicole Eisenman is another artist whom has redefined the movement observing the polarisation of 21st century culture through a queer lens however the rest of the market is dominated by an oversaturation of rehashes, not references. It could be that with what makes expressionism accessible, the number of artists trying to express something immaterial dilutes the market, i.e your generic abstract painting. Art should be inherently political. Perhaps it's lack of explicit sensitivity may serve as a statement in itself however we have strayed from the power of which art has to speak, even the context of the time a piece was made makes it speak. The artists that dare to speak have more success as it stands out.



Nicole Eisenman- 'Drunk Girl' (2019)

Painters that choose not to adopt expressionism may argue the style's origins also lay in a level self-indulgence and directly played a part in the culture that contributed towards the rise of Naziism in Germany. Expressionism was described as having "true German character" by Goebbels' National Socialist German Students League. Artists like Emil Nolde were staunch party members, despite being 'demagogically humbled by the notorious Munich exhibition 'Degenerate Art in 1937'. The contradictory purpose expressionism has is that it acts as an inward/outward plea to convince the viewer of a particular viewpoint or feeling, persuasive, another example being the C.I.A's promotion of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s during the cold war. It forces the viewer to face something raw or intense, persuading the viewer to feel a certain way. The style is introspective but can contribute to wider political narratives

both good and bad. At the heart of it expressionism humanises a painting, daring to challenge the viewer with its subjectivity.

The MoMA website describes it as a movement that 'Encompasses varying stylistic approaches that emphasize intense personal expression. Renouncing the stiff bourgeois social values that prevailed at the turn of the 20th century, and rejecting the traditions of the state-sponsored art academies'. Expressionism abandons rules, one should ask the question why art students aren't taught that it's a wide bracket, anything goes, truer art means truer observations. The artist acts as a critic, censorship is the antagonist of all great art, students exposed to censored art will create censored art.

One can go onto Instagram and behold the phenomenon of thousands 'Basquiat clones' directly appropriating the style of a dead man of colour for likes and clicks, even at times selling them. Is this the standard for expressing oneself? The idea of appreciation or appropriation in art is a very polarised topic and perhaps this could be another reason for the sanitised nature of the art market and lack, fear of stepping on the proverbial toes of one group or another takes away from self-expression, leading to a lack in evolution or innovation when it comes to these respective styles. "An artist must find his expression closely linked to his individual experience or else follow in the old grooves resulting in lifeless forms" (Tobey, Mark)

In terms of looking forward within the contexts of the movement and its history of introspection, one could look to the phenomenon of Outsider art; self-taught art thought of as seemingly naïve or deemed not fit for the galleries but good enough to not fit in the realm of kitsch or pastiche. Inspired in-part more so by folk art traditions, seemingly primitive but indisputably humanised. Outsider artists of the past such as Bill Taylor, the godfather of self-taught art are only now being recognised for what they achieved, and he has influenced many. Van Gogh would have been considered an outsider artist yet he's thought of as one of the most important painters in modern art, and this was due to his reluctant vision.



Bill Taylor - 'Man and Large Dog' (1942)

'Contemporary expressionism' is a term that has been coined to describe the work of Eastern European artists like Ukrainian Kateryna Lysovenko. She 'continues the tradition of Expressionists, using painting to express deep personal and collective traumas, reflecting on utopias tinged with "Neue Sachlichkeit" (New Objectivity)'. ([Valeryia Kaliaha](#). Art-hub, 2024). These artists work being rooted in Eastern European styles and former Soviet states again contributes to the overarching argument that expressionism can illuminate; however, in both Eastern and Western narratives it is more nuanced. And, given Eastern Europe's current climate of war and autocracy, the power this particular form of protest has to help reinforce a message of hope in the face of adversity is undoubtedly important. The power painting has to tell stories and visually discuss matters is something often dismissed or forgotten, this is due to the



Kateryna Lysovenko – 'Migrating Swans' (2023)

The German painter Georg Grosz in describing the piece 'Dedicated to Oskar Panizza' captures exactly what expressionism seeks in its purpose, he wrote "in a strange street by night, a hellish procession of dehumanised figures mills, their faces reflecting alcohol, syphilis, plague... I painted this to protest a humanity that had gone insane". Audaciously showing the perverse nature of being tackles something innately human and shows it. 'Grosz himself used a sociocritical verism, jettisoning expressionist formulate but retaining their satirical and critical impact, so it was no accident that a "humanity gone insane" soon caught up with him, in 1933 Grosz became one of the first victims of the nazi persecution of the arts'. Any art that shines doubt shunned or relegated to a niche, the persecution Grosz faced s similarly faced by artists today though not nearly widespread.



Dedicated to Oskar Panizza –(1929)

The power emotionally charged painting has to tell stories and visually speak is something that's become forgotten, this is most likely is due to personality being replaced by product, with social media being the main culprit. The commercialisation of the self, with it's trends and it's followings, prevents innovation. What's needed is a re-evaluation of what makes art impactful. All it takes is for one to peer behind the curtain and unveil what lies beyond the surface, expressionism at it's core acts as protest, to exploit this idea and run with it. There is no such thing as art that is too excessive and that's what expressionism is about.

If one can buy a cheap mass-produced canvas, some oil paint, some art books and have a level of self-belief, they should end up with something unique and that shouldn't be understated. Art cultivates a misplaced pretention that makes it inaccessible. Where does arts and crafts stop and real art begin? Art is subjective and some of the best art is as simple as that and this is what should be taught.

At its core, expressionism should be shameless, adapt something old for the new, It painters should continue to push their imaginative and stylistic prowess, a handcrafted quality, symbolism and an inherent socio-political stance so that they can relate to the viewer, presenting their critique in an aesthetically pleasing way to speak. We need it now more than ever given the world as it is today.