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What Is It About Painting?

As an artist and an avid museum-goer, I had been hearing the whispered rumors swirling around about it for years. It seemed that painting was dead. Alas, how could this be true? The museums and the galleries were still be full of them and judging by some of the record setting prices for masterworks being sold at auction and reported on in the news, it looked like the consumer market had not lost its taste for the medium either. Endowed in a moment of optimism around the issue, I chose to turn a blind eye to the matter and go on about my painterly business. Then as a newly anointed MFA student, I was introduced to the critical debates around this very issue in Douglas Crimp's 1981 article *The End of Painting* and in Thomas Lawson's 1985 article *Last Exit: Painting*. In each article respectively, the authors go after the validity of the medium at length, and from many complex and, to me at least, obscure angles, with Crimp stating at one point:

[D]uring the 1960s, painting's terminal condition finally seemed impossible to ignore. The symptoms were everywhere: in the work of the painters themselves... allow[ing] their paintings to be contaminated with such alien forces as photographic images; in minimal sculpture, which provided a definitive rupture with painting's unavoidable ties to a centuries-old idealism; in all those other mediums to which artists turned as they, one after the other, abandoned painting (75).

Lawson echoes the sentiment in a similarly dramatic way, writing about the practice of painting while under the umbrella of modernism, when he states, “From being a statement of existential despair it disintegrated into an empty, self-pitying, but sensationalist mannerism. From being concerned with nothingness, it became nothing” (145). So, it seemed to me, that with that, *the rumors were true*. Painting as an effective art form was indeed dead, and apparently it had been *for a very long time*; or at least it was from the critics’ perspective.

In truth, painting had been having an identity crisis ever since the advent of photography. Now no longer needed to document history or in portraiture, it was clear that painting as an art form needed to change in order to stay relevant. As the French painter Paul Delaroche purportedly and famously said in 1839, “‘From today painting is dead’ ... when faced with the overwhelming evidence of Daguerre’s invention”¹ (Crimp 75). Although, this may have been the case, it wasn’t until the 1970s that photography was truly accepted as a serious art form by the public and critics alike (Crimp 76).

There are times when I struggle to understand some of the critical theories around the concept that “painting is dead,” and I wonder why it really even matters. After all, there are many artists out there at this very moment happily ensconced in their studios, busily painting away; and they always have been, regardless of the critical debate. Indeed, I follow literally hundreds of painters on Instagram, and any cursory look at my Instagram feed will provide the evidence needed to prove this. Even Douglas Crimp, after giving ample evidence of the demise of painting, admitted this when he stated, “But even though that death warrant has been

¹ Louis Daguerre was the French inventor (in 1839) of the Daguerreotype, which was one of the first publicly available photographic processes. See Louise Daguerre. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 6 Jul. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Daguerre. Accessed 30 Aug. 2018.

periodically reissued throughout the era of modernism, no one seems to have been entirely willing to execute it” (75).

To be fair, my ambivalence around the issue could stem from my naïveté as a student who is new to critical theory or it could just be the defensiveness of an artist (whose chosen medium is painting) justifying her art. But ultimately, I really do want to understand the issues through the lens of art history and to think about them in a reasonable and critical way. And this interest has led me to look to other perspectives regarding the matter and to the movements from which they took root.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and all of the new technologies (including photography) that sprung from its progress, people were no longer restricted to the confines of their class or location (Staniszewski 204). From these cultural and technological changes, a “modern popular culture” developed along with a taste to consume the new ideas and products that emerged. In the early twentieth century, these ideals and technologies became tools to the artists who were just starting to experiment with abstraction, and with these new ways of creating art the “artists literally began to look beyond the limits of a painting’s frame” (Staniszewski 206).

From this new cultural environment emerged Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso’s revolutionary strides in pushing the medium forward with their creation of Cubism and its imagery from multiple perspectives. Unfortunately, from all new inventions, unintended consequences arise; and with Cubism it was no different as it “challenged the single most important criterion for judging an artistic contribution: the ability of the individual artist to invent

a unique, original, and ‘signature’ style” (Staniszewski 207). This new way of thinking about creativity would shake the foundations of the traditional art world.²

Around the same time, Marcel Duchamp started to push the boundaries even further when he produced his first ready-mades. By combining mass-produced objects together to make art objects, Duchamp was also acknowledging that when an artist creates it is because of “ways of seeing and knowing that are outside of oneself,” that all forms of representation are based on a “cultural language.” (Staniszewski 218-219).

As many artists at the beginning of the twentieth century started to question the traditional ideas behind the creation of “fine art” and the institutions from which this type of art was born, they also started to see their role as artists within the framework of modern society as something that could bring about important social change, and they formed groups that combined to become what we now know as the “international avant-garde” (Staniszewski 227). There were many schools rooted in the avant-garde, with differing viewpoints and stylistic voices, but they all had in common a belief that they could use the tools from the newly formed “mass media” to reach people with their messages of creative change (Staniszewski 242).

Unfortunately, the utopian ideals of the early avant-garde never came to pass, and following World War II these artistic ideals radically changed from ones of optimistic cultural reform to a more ironic and physical form of creation (Staniszewski 255). In the United States this took place under the rubric of Abstract Expressionism, and while this style of creation was

² In an interesting side note, Mary Anne Staniszewski claims in her book, *Believing is Seeing: Creating the Culture of Art*, that contrary to popular opinion, Picasso’s great contribution to modern art wasn’t Cubism but instead was collage. “Collage marked a momentous break in the tradition of western painting. The organic integrity of oil and canvas was disrupted by the incorporation of mass-produced materials, and the sanctity of pure painting was destroyed.” Destroyed along with the myth of the artistic “genius” (210-212). While Picasso was universally considered to be an artistic “genius” in his time, you could argue that he was the last great artist to be called this and that this may be directly linked to his development of Cubism and its perceived attack on the traditional academy art system and its hierarchical way of teaching art and labeling artists.

considered by many to be something totally new and original and therefore the “climax to the history of modern art,” it was actually a stylistic recycling of what had already been explored by artists before (Staniszewski 256).

After this, it appeared to be all downhill for painting. Even Pop Art seemed to be a stylistic reexamination of Dadaism; and everything else since was considered to be work that stayed within “the prescribed aesthetic system” of the increasingly more powerful art institutions (Staniszewski 256-260). A mere painting was now no longer as thought provoking, anxiety inducing, or revolutionary. Painting had lost its punch. The critics, the arts institutions, and the public needed to sink their teeth into the next big thing. Furthermore, a painting just hanging on a museum or gallery wall no longer fit the bill because, now stripped of its novelty and innovation, it could not keep our attention or entertain us enough. It also appeared that people were no longer interested in the ideas or “questions of aesthetics” behind the works themselves, but instead in the consumer aspect of the exchange (Staniszewski 260). It seemed, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan’s famous quote, that the *medium* that was painting, was no longer the *message* (Staniszewski 306)³.

Personally, I think painting has gotten a bad rap. But I think David Joselit states it the most succinctly in his 2009 article *Painting Besides Itself*, when he wrote, “As the most collectible type of art, which combines maximum prestige with maximum convenience of display (both for private and institutional collectors), painting is the medium most frequently condemned for its intimate relation to commodification” (132). So it seems, that even painting’s positive attributes—collectability and convenience—would turn on it.

³ See McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. Bantam Books, Inc., 1967.

The debate seems to be continuing to rage on well into the twenty-first century, which raises many questions. For example, what does this mean to all of those industrious artists that I mentioned earlier; the ones today who are happily painting away in their studios? How can we keep on painting and remain true to the spirit of the original pioneering avant-garde? Is there anyway to resurrect painting from the dead by applying a new relevance upon it, and to lure back the public's distracted attention?

Maybe what painting needs in order to resurrect it from the dead isn't a radical new style or ideal to force progress, but instead a different *voice* and therefore *perspective* to cause—at least some—of the revolutionary shift needed.

Indeed, artists of varied races, ethnicities, and genders outside the traditional patriarchal stronghold have been projecting these differing voices out into our culture through their work for ages; but has anyone really been listening? Obviously, critics such as Carol Duncan⁴ and Linda Nochlin⁵ have been debating this from the feminist perspective for years. Could it be though, that maybe in the current climate of the #MeToo movement in which society is suddenly willing to finally listen to the voices of women and other marginalized minorities on social issues, that the art world is now finally willing to listen too?

This is anecdotal, however I do think there have been noticeable shifts along those lines. I have perceived an increase in the number of women artists profiled in the Arts Section of *The New York Times* over the last few years, which culminated in their Sunday magazine doing a long cover story on the feminist artist Judy Chicago in February 2018. And *The Washington Post* devoted much of their Sunday Arts & Style section from April 15, 2018 to a long article entitled

⁴ See Duncan, Carol. "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," *Art Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 171-178.

⁵ See Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Women, Art and Power*. Westview Press, 1988, pp. 145-178.

Exhibiting [I]nequality, in which they featured the shows of multiple female artists including (to name just a few) the retrospective exhibitions of Joan Jonas at London's Tate Modern and Sheila Hicks at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

This all leads me to wonder if, when we start to look at painting as a medium that is revolutionary again *because* of these differing perspectives, then maybe we will see cultural progress. After all, we are just now really starting to see and hear these new perspectives. As the co-chief art critic for *The New York Times* Roberta Smith aptly puts it, "And something else greatly reduces the chances of the death of painting: too many people—most obviously women—are just beginning to make their mark with the medium and are becoming active in its public dialogue."

As for how all of this debate will affect my painting practice, I do not anticipate too much changing there, although I will always allow room to learn and to add to my creative practice. Ultimately, I am a painter who is very interested in the process of creating art objects, as well as the stimulus that goes into the creation itself. Regardless of what the current critical opinion may be, I am aware that I do not need to justify what I am doing, and for me it might be enough to just get my work and my unique creative voice out into the world.

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