

Abstraction Art and Criticism – Clay: Views from Contemporary Eyes

All art consists largely of elements that can be called abstract including elements of form, color, line, and texture. Prior to the 20th century these abstract elements were employed by artists to describe, illustrate, or reproduce the world of nature and of human civilization—and representation dominated over expressive function.

Abstraction developed in the early 20th century with such movements as Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Futurism. Abstraction continued to flourish between the two world wars, and after the 1930s it was the most characteristic feature of Western art. After World War II, Abstract Expressionism emerged in the U.S. and had a great influence on European and American painting and sculpture.

Abstract art uses a visual language of form, color and line to create a composition, which may or may not exist with a degree of independence from visual references of what we know. Abstract art is not an accurate representation of a form or object. There are three forms of abstraction that are noted: “Cubism”, “Neoplasticism”, and “Abstract Expressionism”.

Abstraction indicates a departure from reality in the depiction of imagery in art. This departure from accurate representation can be only slight, or it can be partial, or it can be complete. Total abstraction bears no trace of any reference to anything recognizable. In geometric abstraction, for instance, one is unlikely to find references to naturalistic entities. Figurative art and total abstraction are almost mutually exclusive. But figurative and representational (or realistic) art often contain partial abstraction. Nonfigurative art, nonobjective art, and nonrepresentational art are loosely related terms as well.

Abstract art that does not depict recognizable scenes or objects instead is made up of forms and colors that exist for their own expressive sake. Herbert Read (British poet and critic, who throughout the middle third of the 20th century was virtually unchallenged as his country's foremost advocate and interpreter of modern art) gave the following definition: ‘in practice we call “abstract” all works of art which, though they may start from the artist's awareness of an object in the external world, proceed to make a self-consistent and independent aesthetic unity in no sense relying on an objective equivalence.’ Abstract art in this sense was born and achieved its distinctive identity in the decade 1910–20 and is now regarded as the most characteristic form of 20th-century art.

Western art from the Renaissance up to the middle of the 19th century was underpinned by the logic of perspective and an attempt to reproduce an illusion of visible reality. By the end of the 19th century, abstract art encompassed the fundamental changes taking place in technology, science and philosophy. The

sources derived from certain individual artists, for example, the most famous Cubists were Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. One of the best examples of Neoplasticism was Piet Mondrian. Two of the most famous examples of Abstract Expressionism were Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock whose theoretical arguments were diverse and reflected the social and intellectual preoccupations in all areas of Western culture of their time.

The abstraction movement had a great impact and marked the shift of the creative center of the modern world of Western art in the 1950s. Abstract Expressionism itself is generally regarded as having begun with the paintings done by Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning in the late 1940s and early '50s. The movement comprised many styles but shared several characteristics, abstract and emphasized freedom of emotional expression, technique, and execution; they displayed a single unified, undifferentiated field, network, or other image in unstructured space; and the size was large to enhance the visual effect and project monumentality and power.

Looking at the history of abstract art in subjects, it can be seen in (I) the reduction of natural appearances to radically simplified forms, as in the sculpture of Constantin Brancusi ('abstract' is to summarize as well as concentrate); (II) the construction of works of art from non-representational basic forms (such as simple geometric shapes), as in Ben Nicholson's reliefs; (III) spontaneous, 'free' expression, as in the Action Painting of Jackson Pollock.

Many of the leading artists of the 1890s—notably the Symbolists—stressed the expressive properties of color, line, and shape rather than their representative function, and the major movements of the first decade of the 20th century—notably Cubism, Expressionism, and Fauvism—took this process further. However, abstraction was invested with a moral dimension as an embodiment of Western freedom of thought. Thus, in the USA particularly, support for abstract art could be regarded almost as a form of patriotism. Abstract Expressionism represented a great watershed in art and many later developments were evolutions from it.

Picasso became intrigued with ceramics as a creative medium in 1947. In working with clay that challenge became a possibility and led to his limited edition. Although ceramics are often deemed as a craft, for Picasso the plates, jugs, vases, and other vessels that he created were a form of canvas. With a sense of liberation he experimented with the play between decoration and form, between two and three dimensions and between personal and universal meaning.

Henry Moore says sculpture for me, must have life in it. By creating a vitality and life within a form and meaning is to keep primitive power with humanist content. Henry Moore (1898 - 1986) is perhaps the most influential public sculptor of this century. Moore created original and truly modern sculptural forms. Abstractions of organic shapes were his primary motif. His seated, standing, and reclining figures

comprise an enduring vocabulary reflecting the universality of the human condition.

Dorothy Hafner's aesthetic and sense of color exploits her interest in design issues involving pattern and color interrelationships that reveal a late twentieth – century concern with ornamentation. Sleek forms and motif assemblages are additional factors of the postmodern synthesis.

Peter Voulkos has often been dubbed the father of the American Clay Revolution, known as the Craft-to-Art movement. In 1954, Voulkos's hefty clay sculptures broke through the boundaries and constraints of utilitarian ceramics. His clay constructions began to embody the gestural spontaneity and visual momentum of Abstract Expressionism along with the Zen-like acceptance of imperfections that characterizes the Japanese tradition of pottery.

Bennett Bean is known for his pit-fired white earthenware vessels. His works are a visual representation of personal intellectual concerns which nearly always involve dualities: space inside and surface outside; traditional ceramic decorating techniques and non-ceramic methods; form in dialogue with form; and focus the viewers' experience of a three dimensional object.

Born and raised in Japan, Jun Kaneko moved to the United States. His painting background is evident in his ceramic work. Working primarily with graphic, lines and dots, his rhythmic designs are analogous with the Japanese Shinto concept of the "Ma", which loosely translates into "attachment through space".

Khaled Ben Slimane was born in 1951 in Sousse, Tunisia. He explores time, the universe, the infinite space in reutilizing traditional ways and material. He challenges the balance of perfection and fragility, the gesture of intensity, uncluttered and accuracy.

As a Chinese individual, having lived in the United States for many years and teaching at Indiana State University, I share my own artistic experience as an artist and art educator. I am linked to the traditional oriental background as well as to modern industrial and technology of Western society. This experience has led me to a deeper understanding of art criticism in art education.

Description, interpretation, judgment and art theory are often connected and confused in criticism. I think that interpretation is the most important critical element and activity in criticism, if one fully understand a work of art, judgment becomes secondary, and may not be even be necessary. Judgment without interpretation and understanding the artwork are irresponsible to the work itself and the artist, especially, if one of criticism's goals is to pursuit of a rational basis for art appreciation.

Good criticism is careful and engaging argumentation that furthers dialogue about art and the experience of life; unclear statements of good or bad judgment can be negative to fruitful critical dialogue and argument. Positive criticism involves the experience of art through language to interest and inform the audience, and to increase the public's thoughtful appreciation of art. Criticism must very carefully articulate the responses to art and communicate to the audience. This communication includes critic's own voice and reaction to it. For example, when I look at old art or traditional art work, I ask what it might have meant to the viewers in the past and what was the art originally made for.

A variety of critical voices also are healthy for artists as well as for the audience to learn and grow. Thinking about works of art allows them to identify and formulate their own voices.

In critique, interpretation is very often given by the artist whose work is being discussed. Then the critique is based on internationalism and, specifically, the artist's intent. The focus of a critique is usually and predominantly the judgment of how good or bad the work is and how to make it better. Often the judgments are based on the artist's stated intent. I always encourage my students to create experiences, and to work with challenges, to remain true to oneself and honesty is a mark of potential. The result of these efforts should be looked at with great fondness and evaluated for what it is and what potential it might bring. This brings a breadth of experimentation for new and different inspirations for my students.

"Mother and Child" - from tradition to contemporary, as from realistic emotional expression to abstraction, from East to West, abstract forms based on value and aesthetic to the expression of feelings toward my mother. I value form, space and line between internal and external – one cannot exist without the other. Mother and Child is a connection over space and distance with my mother. It is a measurement in feelings through my own personal experience, presenting movement, energy, love, relation, honesty, and integrity. It is a dialogue. It is a vocabulary of visual communication. The composition of gestural abstract forms is effected strongly by the spaces between forms. The energy comes from the point where the pieces touch. Also, I believe that the content of my sculpture to be an emotional connection between form and materials. My work is my language of communication that crosses the boundaries of culture.

The 21st century of modernism and post modernism with the idea of the contemporary is characterized by pluralism. Art expression through the material - clay connects cultural influences from the traditional to the contemporary. Critical thinking must be continuing to be developed as a maker, an artist and art educator.

" Abstraction Art and Material – Clay: Views from Contemporary Eyes" provides an important mission that explores historical, cultural, educational, communicational, and constructive ways of the professional artistic aesthetic. It also has unique

characteristics, which describe its value and process. Using aesthetics through education empowers the materials and stirs up emotions and creativity to share among ourselves, which in turn is shared within the artistic community.

I continually seek to refine, strengthen and challenge myself and my ceramics work, and am willing to share my artistic and technical abilities, my culture, my serious intellectual and critical exploration of ceramic art and ceramic sculpture with the international ceramics community. My vision and expectation brings to the professional environment energy and a new sense of purpose. It also enables myself to open more and to communicate a higher level of intellectual and creative endeavor. I will do my best living in an accord and harmony with the principle to pursue a more successful life experience, to be a fine educator and an excellent artist.