

Art Theory Lecture

Imaging the Body/Sweet 2005

Objectives:

Develop an historical context and theoretical language to discuss and analyze the variety of images we'll see and make over the next two quarters: medical and expressive, both 2D and 3D; and to understand the myriad of ways that visual 'texts' communicate to audiences.

These concepts will become increasingly important a foundation you'll use when you develop your life drawings and anatomical projects this quarter, and your own body of independent artwork next quarter.

You'll demonstrate your understanding of these concepts in your discussion of art, your development of your own art work, and your notes from these presentations. **Give a visual literacy quiz?**

Art Theory

Theory appears in the arts in a few ways: (1) aesthetics and (2) design theories that help us develop and appreciate both 2D and 3D works.

I Aesthetics: The Philosophy of Art

Philosophers enjoy attempting to define concepts that are hard to define like the nature of humanity, God, and art.

'Art is something made with the intention of creating an aesthetic experience for the viewer'

This definition requires the existence of the following qualities in order for a work to be considered art:

OBJECT/WORK,
a **CREATOR** with **INTENTION,**
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE had by a **VIEWER.**

This definition gets at the generally accepted, three-prong aspect of art.

It also helps us determine (to a degree) what objects/works should be called art (in a broad sense) and what should be left out. For example, an abstract painting by an elephant would not fit this definition, nor the category of "art" because it could not be proven that the elephant is capable of *intending* a work to provide an *aesthetic experience*.

II Language for Discussing Formal Elements of a work

In an effort to develop a vocabulary for discussing the 'objective' elements of a work of art, it we'll discuss a few formal issues as they pertain to both 2D and 3D work. Please note that some of these concepts can be applied to either 2D or 3D work and others should be used quite rigidly to describe aspects of one or the other.

- **Shape** the words *shape* and *form* are often, inappropriately, used interchangeably. In art, they are as different as 2D and 3D. Shape referring to areas or masses of color or pattern, or enclosed areas circumscribed by line.
(giacometti drawing uses lines to circumscribe shapes; Jasper Johns Target uses colors and shape to suggest a target; andy goldsworthy's body stencils utilize simple shape)
- **Form** refers to 3D mass – a solid or discernable absence of mass that either takes up space or circumscribes space.
(antony gormley's sculptures are forms; abakanowicz's Backs are forms, but they also involve issues of negative space and positive space: concave and convex spaces or forms; heidi fasnacht's Little Sneeze is a form)

*Of special importance to us in terms of life drawing in charcoal over the next several months are **line, value and composition.***

- **Line** linear marks in which length dominates over shape. Line is always 2D, though we may refer broadly to the 'lines' in a sculpture. Lines are also a conceptual invention. They do not exist in the physical world.
(the anonymous parking lot drawing and Kojo Griffin's work both rely on line to convey the images of figures; baskin Hydrogen Man, uses line to create not only contour or outlines but also to create a kind of visual 'web' or texture to indicate form. The curvilinear lines coincide with the musculature of the figure)

Line work in a piece often is most interesting (and least tedious) if varied in weight.

- **Value** often referred to as 'shading' or 'modeling' value refers to the amount of light reflected (or absorbed) in a 2D work. We can discuss value in terms of a range of blacks, whites and grays. We also can refer to the relative value of a color or hue. For our purposes, value will appear most in our charcoal drawings. Works that employ **high contrast** often have stark differences in blacks, greys and whites, whereas **low contrast** works tend to employ a more limited range of values -- either very dark (dark greys and black) or very light (pale greys and white) (two examples of student life drawings indicate both low contrast and high contrast approaches to charcoal)
(student work that is high contrast, student work that is low contrast, and a collaborative charcoal drawing on birch plywood by Allora and Calzadilla)
- **Composition** (symmetrical, asymmetrical, all-over) refers to an intentional strategy to organize a 2dimensional image. A related but more encompassing term is **design** which refers to both the process of organizing visual elements and the product of that process.

Focal Point – the element that our eye is first drawn to in a pictorial or dimensional design. It is often in the center of a picture plane, or may be the largest shape or may be a color that draws attention to it.

There are no absolute rules for interesting/effective design. However there are some principles that can help us analyze the design strategies artists employ. These include:

- unity and variety**
- balance**
- repetition and rhythm**
- scale and proportion**

These principles may not all appear in a single work that is successful or effective

Ida Applebroog uses a stable, centered composition in the first piece – this is related to more ‘iconic’ approaches to composition that developed early in most cultures (like the *Madonna Enthroned with Prophets* by Giotto). The Giotto work employs a clearly identifiable **focal point** the Madonna, in the center of the picture plane.

The second piece by Applebroog, is a more complicated, though still balanced and not centered, design.

Morula I by Terry Winters employs a more ‘allover’ compositional strategy, not tying the primary focal point to the center of the picture plane. [a morula is a solid, spherical mass of blastomeres resulting from ovum cleavage]

- **Pattern** refers to a repetitive ordering of design elements. These may be exactly the same, or somewhat varied to create the sense of pattern.
(*Maternal Caress* by Mary Cassatt employs pattern, Marilyn by Andy Warhol, creates a kind of pattern with repetitious images of Marilyn Monroe, and Gustave Klimt develops a few patterns in *The Kiss*, though they are somewhat less ordered than the Cassatt example)
- **Scale** refers to the size of one thing to another thing
(*School of Pisa crucifix* is very large scale (with respect to other panel paintings of its era). Anish Kapoor’s sculpture entitled *Blood Solid* is especially large compared to a real red blood platelet)
- **Proportion** refers to the size relationship of a part (or parts) to the whole
(*David’s hands* are proportionally large with respect to his body)
- **Illusionistic or realistic** suggests that a work is convincingly represented to suggest a real person or apple or vanity)
- (*Girl with doorknob* by Odd Nerdrum, *frida kahlo* the two fridas, *Japanese Machuka sculpture*, *hans holben, the Machuka sculpture*),

julie speed – adds a little fantasy to her, otherwise realistic work.

- **Abstraction** refers to stylistic, often expressive distortions of otherwise recognizable forms and shapes
(two works by Stanislaw Witkiewicz, one illusionistic the other more abstracted; edvard munch the scream, Cartres cathedral pilaster sculptures)
- **Nonobjective** is a term to know, but one we will probably not be using in this program. It refers to works that have no discernable suggestion of identifiable objects. Much modern art was nonobjective; i.e. Jackson Pollock, Wassily Kandinsky are two examples.

Its important to be clear about the distinctions in abstraction and nonobjective (also nonrepresentational) art. As they are often used somewhat interchangeably, but mean very distinct and different things.