

# Art

## The desire to produce art

The human desire to create art and the human appreciation of are separate drives, and what is naturally produced by the former may not necessarily satisfy the latter. There are different reasons for these two drives, and I think it may be a mistake to try to understand them as a single drive with a common source and explanation.

The desire to produce art is predominantly a desire for expression and preservation. An artist has something to say – some reaction to his experiences of the world, and art is his way of expressing that reaction and preserving it in some way. This may be in a physical object such as a painting or sculpture, or some other method of conveying the expression to other people. Humans have a desire to externalise their thoughts – to bring the mental world into the physical world. Animals live almost all of their lives physically, but most of human life takes place in the mind. As we are still physical animals, we find it easier to deal with and understand the physical world than the mental world. The physical world seems more real to us.

The resulting desire to make the mental physical leads us to produce art – the drive to self-expression. A landscape painting, although a representation of the physical, is still an externalisation of our *perception* of the world. Furthermore, it is a way of preserving that view and allowing others to see the world as we see it. Since our minds work with internal models of the world, the mimetic nature of art (the tendency of art to form a copy of something) is an externalisation of these mental models (the mimetic nature of our minds). This explains but also expands upon the mimetic theory of art.

In BBC2's 'How Art Made the World' (9th May 2005), it was suggested that artists have used *exaggeration* in the depiction of the human form throughout history. I found this interesting, but it did not feel quite right. It missed an underlying principle. If we are exaggerating, *why* are we exaggerating? It seems to me that it is not exaggeration that art strives for in the representation of the human form, it is simplification; extraction of the basic forms required for our concepts of human form (or anything else, for that matter) to discover what is essential. This may lead to exaggeration of certain features. We are striving for the concept, rather than the image; how the object exists in our minds as a concept; a series of associations, notionally linked forms. We are trying to make in two dimensions or three dimensions, what 'human' is to us.

The production of abstract art is an attempt to crystallise the complex and ephemeral nature of (often emotional) mental structure into permanent physical form – almost to prove that what we are feeling is real. By externalising our thoughts and feelings in this way, we preserve them, and allow them to be experienced by others.

Whether something should be considered as art or not is largely dependent on the intentions of the artist, rather than what is being produced. An artist's intentions are to express (the externalisation of thoughts or feelings), preserve (the commemoration of an event, object, person or view, or indeed the aforementioned thoughts or feelings) or to entertain or enlighten. Nothing, therefore, can be excluded from being art if the creator's intention is to produce art. It should be noted that something an artist claims to be art simply to challenge the concept does not necessarily meet this definition since the intention in this case is not to produce art – to express, but to challenge or investigate semantics (or possibly, when cynically used, the intention is to prove a point).

This should not be seen as an inclusive or exclusive definition of art, but as an attempt to understand the class of things we understand as art, and the universal human activity of producing art, as opposed to producing tools, consumables and so on. What are these things we produce that have no practical use and questionably no intrinsic value? As such it is not so much a definition of artwork as it is a description of the activity of producing art. It says nothing of the value others might place on the art – whether it is considered 'good' or 'bad' art, and it is independent of aesthetics. The purpose or meaning of the art comes from the intentions of the artist. The appreciation of the art comes from the observer. An artist may intend others to experience his work but not necessarily enjoy it (that is to say, the enjoyment of others may not be one of his primary goals in producing the art). To understand artworks themselves and to begin to judge them, we should discuss features frequently present in the production of art – skill, creativity, intellectual content, cultural context and so on, but these cannot be used in a strong definition of what should be considered art and what should not.

## **Art does not have to be post-modern**

I feel strongly that contemporary art does not have to be post-modern to be new, interesting and innovative.

The current on-going obsession with art that is 'about art' – each piece a 'challenge to the concept of art' is not only self-indulgent, but puerile and vacuous. Artists have been producing post-modern work for the past hundred years, and each piece says nothing more than the last. Yes, we get it, art is a difficult concept to define. Yes, we get it, it is hard to differentiate between an object produced as art and an object manufactured for sale as a consumer product. This does not mean there is any value in pointing this out again and again. Neither is it a good thing to exploit this by setting up a money-making machine for producing art. Art does not have to be 'about art' to say something interesting. It does not have to buy into consumerism to hold up a mirror to it to make us question its value or morality.

As time progresses, we add to our box of tools. This is true of art, but also of many other areas of life. This means we can do more and produce a better range of art with our tools. Postmodernism seems to me to be an obsession with new tools. Each new tool that is discovered, and a piece made using it, we should ask, "Is this piece beautiful or interesting,

or is it just showing off a new tool?" We should not confuse the value of a new tool with the value of what can be produced with it.

If a description of a piece of art can produce the same effect as the work itself, it is not art but simply a statement. Such statements should be made in words if possible. I am not against art that has a message, but much of postmodern art appears to be nothing more than the message, and that incoherently expressed. I saw a 'portrait' that consisted of a sample of the subject's DNA cultured in agar jelly. I have described this to friends and I feel they would not get more out of the work if they went to see it. It is simply a statement. It often feels as if the artist is patting himself on the back for coming up with the idea, and implying some inspired insight that they are expressing. If they do have this insight, they should describe it. Simply hinting at it this way is a cheap stunt of self-glorification. I imagine the artist was hoping that the work would prompt discussion. In so much as I mentioned it to others and talked about it, it has succeeded. However, our discussion centred on why exactly we did not like this kind of art. There seems to be a lot of that kind of work about, and it is all expressing the same idea.

It seems that the majority of contemporary art is about post-modernism, installation and video art. Much of the post-modern or installation work strikes me as posturing vanity, and it is not accessible to the general populace – it leaves us cold. I think that post-modernism and video art should be what it is rather than masquerading as art. If you have a comment to make, make that comment – put it into words. Post-modernism seems to me to be semi-formed ideas that the artist lacked the insight or commitment to put into a coherent argument. Much of video art is indistinguishable from documentary, and this type of video art should *be* documentary, rather than claiming art status to allow for its quirky style or lack of clarity or production values.

I think a lot of new artists shy away from producing paintings because it is difficult to get noticed in the art world as just another painter, no matter what you put on the canvas. I think that contemporary art needs a return to painting. This is an art form that has existed throughout human intelligence and is the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of a work of art. This should be a sufficient reason to value it and to continue to use it to explore and reflect the human experience, which in my mind is what art is about. It makes sense to use this technique – applying pigment to a two-dimensional surface – to explore the human experience, since this is how humans have done it throughout human history; painting is something common to the human experience, in a way that producing a range of shoes and calling it art is not.

## **Reply to a letter about dot paintings**

*In 2009, I was sent an email from an Aboriginal Art and Craft Centre Co-ordinator in Australia about the use of dot patterns in some of my paintings. She objected to the use of the phrase "Dot Paintings" (I actually used the phrase "Dot Patterns") as this might suggest they were Aboriginal art. She suggested that I had used motifs from Aboriginal art, amounting to a copyright infringement, as well as being offensive to Aboriginal people. She*

*stated that I did not have permission to use some of the styles and motifs used in several of my paintings. This is my response.*

Dear Amanda,

I was very surprised to receive your email, and I would like to start by apologising if I have caused any offence, as this was certainly not my intention. I feel I should point out that I was very upset by what you wrote, as it amounted to an accusation of plagiarism or fraud, and a prescriptive intrusion into what for me is a very important and extremely personal part of my life.

I do not have any Aboriginal heritage. I have absorbed many artistic influences, indeed I feel this is essential for my work, and I am particularly interested in ancient or tribal art as it is useful in understanding repeating themes in the human experience and highlighting a commonality to us all. You may like to read my comments on this on my website (the article titled "Using the Subconscious and Ancient Art" in the Text section) as it may cast light on my approach to the art of cultures other than my own. I do not consider myself a Western/European artist, simply an artist, and as such I think that any art is legitimate study material.

Before I move on to the wider issues, I would like to address the concerns you have about the two paintings you mentioned.

You indicated that "The figures in the Three Wise Companion piece are significant to the people in the Nth of Australia". This is incorrect. The painting depicts myself and my friends going out to the pub – not, I would imagine, a common theme in Aboriginal art. Presumably you mean that the style of depiction of the figures *looks like* ones that are significant to the people in the North of Australia. This is not surprising, as the figures are depicted in a simple stick-man style that you will see all over the world and in children's drawings. You cannot object to the use of stick figures, as this is simply a natural thing for human beings to do – it is not the exclusive domain of Aboriginal art. I was, in fact, thinking of an African style for these figures, not Australian.

"Two Dancing Figures" is the result of a number of sketches I did of dancing figures whilst thinking of white horses found on hillsides in the south of England, and the Cerne Abbas giant in Dorset; unquestionably my own heritage. Any similarities to Aboriginal figures are, again, unsurprising due to the simple nature of the figures – this is a natural way to draw people that is common throughout the world. The dot patterns used are a result of several experiments I did with the initial sketches – the result is an aesthetic choice not one of mimicry.

Also, you indicated that the title of the gallery "Dot Patterns" could be misleading. I disagree, as the paintings are indisputably patterns of dots. Surely the phrase "Dot Patterns" is not one that is the exclusive property of the Aboriginal community. Your objection might stand if I had used the phrase "Aboriginal Dot Patterns", which I did not.

I understand your concerns that genuine Aboriginal art may be devalued (in monetary and cultural value) by inauthentic mimicry, but I feel that my artwork does not fall into this category. By using dot patterns and ethnic styles, I am not attempting to reproduce Aboriginal art, and I do not claim that this is authentic Aboriginal art. None of my paintings is masquerading as Aboriginal art – they all have personal meaning for me and are a result of my artistic process; they are not titled to seem like Aboriginal paintings, and they are often a mix of styles that is a feature of my painting. I never copy other pictures, and I have not taken any portion of an Aboriginal artwork to use in one of my own. I strongly refute the suggestion that any of my work is plagiarised or fraudulent.

A stick man, a line or field of dots, or a particular simple shape may have a particular meaning for an Aboriginal artist, but it has a different meaning for me, and that is the meaning that is shown in my paintings. As I said, I have not copied any feature of an Aboriginal artwork in my painting, but when using motifs such as simplified figures and dot patterns, similarities are bound to occur. I do not think this means that I should not be allowed to paint what comes naturally to me.

I think that adherence to a set of religious or cultural beliefs should make demands on the believer, not on everybody else. It is possible to show respect for a set of beliefs without having to subscribe to them. Requiring that an Aboriginal artist has permission to use a particular pattern or depict a particular dreaming applies only within the Aboriginal community, and should not be applied to the rest of the world as if everyone shared the same set of beliefs. When dealing with motifs as simple as dots, circles, stick-men and lines, these cannot be considered off-limits to the rest of the world simply because they are recognised features of Aboriginal art. My two-year-old son is fond of filling a page with dots, and I'm sure he will soon be drawing stick men in a style reminiscent of cave paintings. These are universal features of art present all over the world.

Whilst I agree that art produced as a facsimile of Aboriginal art without the authentic content and origin may be harmful to genuine Aboriginal art and should be suppressed, I do not think one should stop people *learning* from Aboriginal art and using what they have learnt in their own creative process, which is what I hope I am doing.

Again, I am sorry if I have caused any offence, either (inadvertently) through my pictures or by this response, but I feel strongly on this matter.

Dr Toby Hazel

## **Using the subconscious and ancient art**

People often think that consciousness is something over and above the physical workings of the human brain. In fact, there is much more going on in our brains than we are consciously aware of; consciousness is just a portion of our mental activity. The mind is a system for representing, predicting and interacting with the world. A large part of what the mind does involves maintaining a model of the world, and this includes a model of the mind itself, and this is what we call consciousness. Analysis of conscious thought can reveal a lot about

oneself and the world, but we can also investigate beyond this to reveal information contained in our minds of which we are not consciously aware. If each of us contains a model of the world, by accessing this we can find out about the world.

A lot of my art is about using the subconscious, as well as primitive or ancient influences to find deeper truths about the human experience. I am very interested in concepts that are common to the human experience – things that we share with our ancient ancestors. In exploring these, I hope to understand more about our place in the universe, and the meaning of human concepts and the lives of individuals.

In studying mythology, one can see common ideas throughout the world. These include gods and divine kings, heroes, an afterlife, an underworld, a great flood, a quest for a great object (often a container of some sort), the fall of a civilisation, a mother caring for a divine child, the son as successor to the father, a trickster god, celestial visitors bringing knowledge and civilisation, celebration of (and deification of) celestial events and the movement of the sun and moon.

Concepts and symbols that appear throughout our history or that have evolved independently in several locations or times tell us something about ourselves – about the way our minds work and about our environment. They are a result of the processes of human thought applied to common features of the world and a human's living environment, and they tell us more about the human race than they do about history. In my artwork, I frequently try to portray concepts that are not simply peculiar to my own subconscious, but archetypes – symbolic concepts common to many people's experiences. These archetypes are a reflection of ourselves and can be seen in the art of primitive and ancient cultures, as well as emerging naturally from the artistic process of using improvisation and instinct to guide the work.

By working in this way (using improvisation, mythology, and psychological archetypes), I hope to tap into a genetic heritage and shared set of memories and ancient conditioning learnt by the human race through thousands of generations of living in numerous conditions and environments. These leave us with an echo of the past within ourselves, which comes to us as mythology, as instinct, as convention and tradition. With this approach, I hope to bring my own life and thoughts into the greater context of the human experience.

In artistic terms, the images tend to be simplified and stylistic in my attempts to simplify and to extract the essential nature of a concept, at the same time as making it universal and flexible in its interpretation. I find the results are often reminiscent of some cave paintings and primitive or tribal art, and this in itself is an interesting discovery. Since much of this work stems from subconscious thought, it is as much a voyage of self-discovery for me as it is a conscious expression of ideas and aesthetics. As such, I am not necessarily privy to an absolute and authoritative description of the meaning and content of each painting I produce. I have to interpret it, like anyone else, albeit from an advantaged position. Art is a way of showing other people how you view the world – what you consider interesting, what you consider important and how your mind works. In so doing, you also elucidate these things for yourself.