

The Psychology of Artistic Creativity: A phenomenological approach to the act of painting

Dr Daniel Shorkend

ABSTRACT

In the essay I assess the creative drive in say painting as a psychological reality that includes the philosophical concept of a molding of matter to conform to form that is motivated by the will, a primary faculty preceding intellect and yet while prediscursive and instinctual also transcends the self, the ego and instincts. In this regard, I briefly outline creative flow as a synergy between states of consciousness that are indescribable as well as reflective (and analytical). This is further described, in painting at least, as related to the visuality of painting, a language that is inspired by sight, which is on the one hand, aloof and on the other hand, highly emotive and transfixing. Nevertheless, the movement away from the eye as it were in postmodern theory and practice, has tamed the eye and derailed its effective power so that only aesthetic surfaces remain with no obvious meaning or intent.

KEYWORDS: art; will; creativity; psychology; visuality; form; language; post modernism

1. INTRODUCTION: DESCRIBING THE PROCESS

In this essay I will describe the process and act of painting itself in terms of its creative expression. I take as a point of departure the already established idea of “action painting” as developed by the theory surrounding Abstract Expressionism as expounded by Greenberg. This idea describes the act of painting as an immersive one that is not simply illustrative, technical and subservient to other extra-aesthetic aims (such as religious or political agendas), but rather describes a process that is free, individualistic and indeterminate in practice.

In this regard I develop 4 concepts that inhere in such a process, namely, the operation of will; the manner in which matter assumes form (in the intuitive sense, rather than as representational); how the process is one of creative flow and how in terms of this discussion, visuality is a profound sense, a bearer of meaning as a sign, but also a language that precedes verbalization and coherence being one of revelation and somewhat instantaneous.

The primary finding is that the act of painting is a deep psychological innervation, whose mode of doing initiates layers of thought and power to mold and form, as well as to picture something, is to embrace that thing, and it is particularly the abstract language that transcends literariness and psychological superficiality, and delves within the unknown, the numinous.

2. WILL: THE HIGHEST FACULTY?

When one is in the act of painting, one is expressing one’s will. That is, the hand moves according to a faculty proceeding intellect like an instinctual desire. Yet, it is not simply a movement from the lower half of self but motivated by one’s free will. In fact, it is an act of will. Making a line emanates from self and if one is within the act of painting, certainly as one is absorbed therein, the compulsion emanates from the will.

Will is a statement of existence. It is the psychological state of been aware. Yet herein is the paradox: at one and the same time of self, of ego, there is a certain inspiration that follows from a design beyond one’s own will. One succumbs to one’s will only to lose oneself in a higher will.

I use the will not simply as a statement of the phenomenological reality of the act of making art or psychological description of the self so involved, but as a mechanism where the statement of the “I” is at the same time something that goes beyond the self. In kabbalistic mysticism, the will or crown, is that power, force or capacity to direct the self – mind, eye, hand, breathing. It is the very substance of the self whose existence is expressed through artistic endeavor.

Art has potency in this world precisely because it is the concretization of the will in some form and expresses both the state of mind of the artist and the spirit of the times. Hence the material culture of any civilization is the most accurate indication of the philosophy, politics, aesthetics and directives of that particular society at a certain time and place. One could define art as the fire of that age solidified as form or to put it in other terms, as will materialized.

When Cezanne or Picasso for example deconstruct art and rediscover new structural possibilities (in art, in nature...) they are perceiving the underlying will –the inherent forces in nature – and given formal embodiment of that through their painting innovations. It is an act of will through which will itself becomes manifest, and the energy that pervades nature is rediscovered in the harmony of an artistic piece, like Matisse that found compositional unity even amidst a war-torn world. When Newman made his “zip” or Rothko his shimmering color fields, they were stating the very presence of the elements of art as bearers of meaning, a proclamation of the enduring will that directs atom, cell, planet and star, an abstract realm that pierced further than mimetic and naturalistic notions of the power of the image in art and in particular painting. This capacity for painting to encapsulate the underlying will through new modes of expression and imagery, captures the parallel psychological will for order and pattern that is at the heart of both intellectual endeavor and for finding formal harmony and pattern. This is why art is also thought to be therapeutic and beneficial to individual’s and societies, a remedy to psychological ills, even if it also means coming to terms with the shadow and that which vies against the easy expiation of the will through artistic play.

3. ENERGIZED MATTER: ASSIGNING FORM TO MATTER

Ancient Greek philosophers had already argued for a distinction between matter and form, with the definition that matter is disorganized (and therefore not functional) while form is designed (and therefore performative) allowing for the making of meaning, just as letters in a certain order may produce a word. The psychological desire of the artist is to impart a language, to communicate something, and therefore use matter (paint, canvas, and so on) in such a way as to produce form and thence semantic meaning.

While art may not state this intellectual concept by virtue of a clear proposition, it is rather imbued with this proto intellect or energy quotient that one can call the artists will, and it is this power that shapes and molds matter accordingly. Just as one may not know why one feels pain and simply shout some non sensical sound, not yet formed as a word, so art emanates from this preverbal modality, yet through the elements of art, may forge a meaning. Hence, we find in the history of art the intellectual game of categorizing art styles, iconographic elements and subjects, the train of artistic movements and so on – so that indeed this inarticulate, even psychologically subterranean will or desire, actually over time forms a coherent language. In this sense, matter is not mute or dumb, but emanates signs. The theory and history of art runs parallel to its praxis.

It is important to note, though, that it is not just the abstract sign or symbolism that is significant, but the manner in which it is articulated, its sensual embodiment, its gestural quality, its dexterous performative skill, the physical reality of the sign itself.

To the extent that we can see from “within”, so the embodiment of meaning is more potent or in other terms, so the will is actualized through form, its material substrate. In this sense I would like to equate “embodied meaning” with “will to form” and in so doing maintain that art can be understood as transforming matter into content or meaning through organized form at once a product of art’s institutional relations both pertinent to art itself and with reference to other non-artistic practices, as well as the exhibited, aesthetic properties that give rise to both “present” and “absent” meanings. By equating “will to form” with “embodied meaning”, I wish also to express what Hegel (1993:111) says of aesthetic beauty, namely “the pure appearance of idea to sense”. In this sense, one is not equating idea with form which I suggest may even be dangerous or erroneous, but simply expressing that there is some kind of relationship that may or may not correspond depending on such factors as historic moment, ideological bent, social context, art knowledge and personal psychology.

4. FLOW: THE CREATIVE PROCESS; EMERGENT PROPERTIES

Prominent for the psychology of creativity in art, the sciences, and sports has been the theory of the “flow”, put forth by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1990), who argues for an immersed tension of consciousness. “Awareness and action are merged” in an “almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness” (190: 110). Creativity requires that this tension of consciousness be directed towards an inherent joy of discovery and a both active and receptive stance of letting the problem, challenge or task evolve while confronting it instead of having

it at hand in a preset way, and then reflecting upon it. Experience is of perfect control, while nevertheless spontaneity and creativity are paramount. Consciousness enters a “perfect balance between challenges and skills” (1990: 111), so that even “the sense of time becomes distorted” (1990: 113) and “self-consciousness” and all ego-reflexiveness disappear.

It is easy to see that this famous and ~~often~~ somewhat-confirmed theory offers seeming paradoxes: How, indeed, can self-consciousness, and hence what René Descartes and with him current Theories of Mind would define as consciousness as reflexive ego activity, vanish in an utterly conscious experience and furthermore, how can this conscious experience then embrace reflection?

This problem becomes further complicated, when considering one of the affirmations of Csíkszentmihályi’s theory in the neuroscientific works of Michael Weisend, who in the training of snipers reduced the activity of the prefrontal cortex by the use of electrodes thereby artificially inducing flow experiences, a fact that, however, does not account for, but even contradicts the reflexive quality of flow in creativity. Moreover, he also reproduced what Csíkszentmihályi observed as the distortion of temporal consciousness and even lack of memory. This clearly speaks for a lack of mental representation of the actions executed during a flow experience which, in turn, however, would speak against all the mental representation necessary in the creative exploration of possibilities in both art (and sports).

From this we can deduce that the experience of “flow” does, indeed, account for one part of creativity and helps better understand concepts of the creative “je ne sais quoi” or the “genius” unable to explicitly account for where their inventions came from (c.f. Kant). Yet we are also led-into a conundrum, since “flow” appears to bluntly contradict other, more planned and more thought-based aspects of creativity. It rather makes us suspect that “flow” might describe correctly one tension of consciousness involved in creativity, and therefore might be what philosophers call a necessary condition for it; yet it is evidently not sufficient and requires a different state of consciousness too. Such a state would paradoxically evolve at the same time and therefore contradicts all Cartesian and post-Cartesian notions of consciousness as one often container metaphor is used, speaking having something in mind or simply of thoughts as content. Rather we have to assume at least a possible co-presence of different tensions (or ‘states’) of consciousness simultaneously.

Phenomenologically speaking, this assumption is not as peculiar as it might seem especially with regards to fluent, seemingly automatized actions, for which, at the same time, however, we do have an intrinsic feel and hence awareness, while at the same time reflecting upon different things. For example, riding a bike and paying attention to the traffic, but also reflecting on our shopping list. These, however, unlike the flow experience, are low tensions of consciousness (or creativity) that do not reflect the intensity and the immersive traits of flow experience. Nevertheless, they do have the fluency aspect to them too – the fluency of motor activity is not disrupted by the co-present reflection upon the shopping list. In any event, the idea of flow and the co presence of awareness and lack of self-awareness, is such that at higher orders of creativity, the act of painting emerges out of itself, it evolves and generates and is fluid enough to allow for innovation, even when errors appear to disrupt the flow, and in that totally absorbed space, the act of painting is a highly immersive psychological environment, which at the same time transcends self.

5. VISUALITY: THE AESTHETIC; PRIMAL SOURCE

It is precisely the aesthetic embodiment as a visual item to sense that provides the initial point to perception of the work of art. In that visual form, it either attracts or repels, it either produces pleasure in the creator of the work of art and viewer or it does not. This reveling in sight, of what the eye can see, the revelation of aesthetic form, the attraction or repulsion of bodies in space – this “hits” the retina as one of an epiphany, much like a prehistoric man may have come upon a saber tooth tiger. Only art tames nature, drawing underlying patterns and visual laws, representing what has been perceived or what is imagined in the form of an artwork – producing cultural control of nature and psychological ease even when nature appears to overwhelm or inner turmoil brews.

The will to form and the use of matter in a certain way to bring that about appeals to the eye. But the eye is distant from the object so that psychologically the visual arts are remote from the heart and understanding. One may see something and without context have no clue what one is looking at. On the other hand, it appears immediate and obvious, a scene that can be grasped as a whole in one instant. This duality: on the one hand been disconnected from what one sees and on the other hand been united with it, as it were, means that the visibility of art is both intensity superficial and intensely meaningful and imbued with content.

This reflects the great disjunction in art between the high seriousness of abstract expressionism and the power of the artist and the emphasis on surfaces and emptiness that characterize the style of pop art. This in turn reflects the paradigm shift from the modern to the postmodern, and the movement away from a culture of the eye to that of the ear. This means that the visuality of art has lost its claim of supremacy, the end of the object as a portal to worship, idolatry, and the psychological reality of the objects of art as cultural symbols, the visuality been but a deceptive trace. Yet material culture is visual and replete with signs and symbols. Art is but one avenue in which a certain game is played out, but it no longer represents a god, a pharaoh, a Ceasor, an Emperor, only a lost idea of beauty or a personal biographical note.

6. CONCLUSION: THE PROCESS IS ONGOING

The act of painting has been described as one where one molds matter to produce form inspired by the essential will which is considered free, and thus expressed in “flow”, a creative dynamic whose process unfolds indeterministically, required altered states of consciousness, a dissolution of ego, and in the visual arts, the capacity to forge a language through the very elements of art and the natural disposition of self as existing, as living.

It is precisely this psychological reality that sets in motion an ongoing creative process consuming time at the canvas and time without regard for art, and then in the presence of the canvas (or whatever) performing acts of the will that include both one’s psychological state and the dielectric between life and art on the other hand. It is a dynamic process and at times represents not simply subjective and personal will, but collective and universal codes of meaning. This is rare. The history of art is perhaps a narrative that argues for an evaluation of art and its effects within societies in different time periods and in relation to various paradigms that appear to dominate at those junctures of history. In a real sense though the movement from modern to postmodern paradigms alters one to the mere play of surfaces where it is unclear how the psychological process embedded in art making and objective truths about the world may be assessed, and language itself is a system and code of meaning in the first place whose binary modality precludes the sense of oneness and unity indicative of will and inherent in visuality, the power of sight and creative innovation.