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Modern Art and the World of Appearance

By ADRIAN LAWLOR

IN its more authentic manifestations, modern art is a direct return to tradition—not an atavistic return to this or that painter or school of painters; but a return to the fundamental creating principle in art, of which "tradition" is, of course, the unassailable record and standard of reference. Creative art is the art of men who are alive in every normal faculty, and whose prepotent energy informs those faculties with a power of exuberance in expression beyond the power of men who are merely normal. It has very little in common with academic art, which naively supposes that it is continuing the tradition when it is, in fact, only copying the dead shapes of that tradition.

Academic art (if, by the way, there can be such a thing) is the very antithesis of that imaginative energy which creates in its own huge delectation a form that contains the strange and dilating ecstasy that begets it. Where academic art goes back, creative art goes forth. An academician with nothing to say can command the applause of all but the most fastidious simply by making gestures—the larger and "nobler" the better—that vaguely recall this or that effect in the art of the past. A true artist never does this, except, of course, in his nonage and journeyman days; when he must play the good and sedulous ape to others before he shall have found out what he is himself.

Now, when you look at a Cezanne you can think of nothing but the world that Paul Cezanne experienced. Nobody ever represented the common world, the universally valid and agreed-upon "world of appearance," in that way before Cezanne did. But nowadays we can say of a painting: "How like a Cezanne!" and nobody will take us to mean: "How like a good Cezanne!" for that could only be said of a painting that was in fact unlike the style of that master. "How like a Cezanne!" The modern academic has got into his stride; he has another goal to aim at, another strength to aim with; that is all. So far as his limitations will allow him, he is bent on making his pictures as like as possible to those lovely Cezannes that haunt and terrify his imagination; for he sees the world of visible appearance through eyes that have been bewitched by those most strange and potent works. There is no other way for him to see it; unless, having acknowledged his Cezanne he is also able, like Picasso, to dismiss him and proceed to the creation of a new "world" from the "appearance" of this one.

It must not be supposed, though, that in the process of making his new interpretation of the world, the artist is in any sense turning his back upon tradition. He is tradition: he is something older even than that: he is the contemporary embodiment and manifestation of that will to expression which began, according to our scant historical evidence, in the caves of Altamira; but which must have been at least an incipient or ancillary urge in our consciousness when we were mere anthropolites.

To say that the artist of to-day "scorns" his great forerunners (for one constantly hears it asseverated that modern art actually abjures tradition) is to conjure up some such spectacle as that of a lighthouseman who has gone suddenly mad, killed his father, blown up the whole structure and

dashed himself to pieces upon the immutable foundations of the "light" whose flame it has been his work, and the work of his fathers in generations before, to tend and maintain. But there is this difference between the existence of a lighthouse in the

phenomena of the actual world and the one that figures in my simile: that the inherent composition of the element and indeed the whole *modus operandi* of the actual light, has been radically and progressively changed by mechanical science. Not only is it no longer the same light; it is in every way a better one. Whereas the art of painting is still, as it always has been, an art of representing the visible world; and it would be in the last degree absurd to suppose that you could make better pictures than those of the great masters. Nobody asserts this more emphatically than the artist who is described as "modern." Compared with your academic painter, whose whole experience consists in a vague, synthetic and essentially sentimental condition of reminiscent pastiche, your modern artist is passionately alive, here and now, to all modes of apprehension, including, of course, that of understanding and rejoicing in the work of whatever artist, of whatever time and place, that was ever himself "modern," alive—and kicking at that— in his own day.

It was necessary to attend for a moment to the drama of these two conflicting modes of experience, for it is in the spectacle provided by that conflict that we are enabled, according to our critical discrimination—or still better, the divinations of our psyche—to sort into some semblance of order our own sufficient bag of perplexities. Not that one needs any great shakes of erudition (if erudition would do it!) to help one to a decision as to which of the contestants—the obviously triumphing modern the obviously chagrined academic—shall receive one's applause.

We have, on one hand, the 'crested and prevailing" figure of the one that welcomes difficulty and laughs at the sozzled and nodding hands that would oppose, if they could, the heaviest of penalties—sleep—death upon the "error," the madness," even, of being alive and kicking. And, on the other hand, we have the other, a merely flaccid and anachronistic attitude, a sort of shrunken apotheosis of feudality, that retreats, inch by grudging inch, from its threatened "vested emotional interests," emitting certain "backward mutters of dissevering power," with much indecorous falsetto sniggering thrown in by way of camouflage or smoke-screen. It's an old story, and will be older yet before it's finished!

And the bone and essential crux of the whole contention is—not what the artist "sees"; for there is no difference between an artist's optical experience and that of the ordinary spectator—but the entirely unpredictable and surprising manner of his telling us what he sees. Being an artist (whether Classical or Romantic, Realist or Surrealist, Primitive or Neo-naïf, is no matter), being a creative artist, he sees the world with a vision which is at once heightened, peculiar and normal." And although (leaving the notion of a subsumed normality out of it) both Guelph and Ghibelline would be in tacit agreement upon the question of the heightened awareness, it is a truism that the artist's "peculiarity"- all very well so long as he keeps it, like a secret vice, to himself—is a quality that he will not exhibit without affronting some part at least of the populace. But an artist does not keep his vision of the world to himself: it is part of his business to fashion a vehicle for the very communication of that vision: having painted or carved or composed to some purpose, he must publish, he must exhibit. He makes the world his beneficiary. And this, of course, is where the fun begins; for, as between the act of origination, the impulsive or conceptive act, of the artist and the spectator's completing moment of expressive reception, a work of art is, in the final sum of the process, a piece of public property. It belongs almost as much to the spectator, however he may hate or repudiate what he supposes it to mean," as it does to the artist himself, who "knows" what it means.

Now between the creative masculine mind of the artist, whose originating impulsion is necessarily unpredictable in its aesthetic activity, and the feminine and as it were virginal mind of the spectator, there is an immediate gulf which will only be bridged by the work itself, by the continued action of that work's existence. Familiarity will breed a sort of acquiescence, if nothing better, in that strange quality in the work which the spectator had at first, perhaps, found so repellent. It is not for the artist to give in; the spectator must do that; as he will when he has come to understand the inner necessity for that integral and organic distortion, that mysterious strangeness, that inheres in the connective tissue and contributes to the total form of the work.

That crucial word "distortion," like a discord in the music of an advanced composer, still carries with it a slightly shattering impact upon our senses; and it would be no exaggeration to say that in the mouth of the plain man its virtue as a term of extremest disapprobation is not yet by any means vitiated. In plain circles, indeed, the word "distortion" seems to be subject to a merely casual differentiation from the word "abortion".

But the artist is not born, nor ever was, that could make a masterpiece that had not some strangeness in its form. It must be obvious that qualitative proportion—what we call form—does not exist in nature. A mountain, Mont St. Victoire shall we say, is undoubtedly an impressive shape; but it has no form until it is subdued and organised by a Cezanne into that definitive rhythmic totality of which his picture is the only expression.

And if it is true for the writer's art that style is the man, it is also true that a painter is known by his distortions—those recondite summations in form of the world's dimensional objectivity, as perceived by him alone. There is more to it, of course, than what he has perceived merely; for our especial concern here is with a conceptual rather than a visual seeing. A motif exists for the artist only as an abstraction. I "know" that the world exists; but that "knowing" is also the attribute of the non-artist: I must will my aesthetic experience of abstraction into an act of artistic concretion. And as I must do this, not you, not another, I must create in my own terms—the style, which is my style, the form, which is mine—a communicable symbol of that innate self in me which informs all my apprehensive, or abstract, experience. It is obvious that the formal expression of that apprehension will preclude any reference —except a comparative one to the work of another. The experience is mine alone, as also is the uttered symbol of that experience.

What we call distortion is bound to inhere in the identity of a symbol which is the expression of an experience in itself unique. Admittedly there is the question of a logical and coherent, as distinct from a capricious or merely inept, distortion. El Greco and Cezanne are triumphant and conclusive exemplars in this former kind; and one need not at this time of day extend oneself either in anathema or expiation where they are concerned. "Correction" here would mean annulment. There is no way out: either you accept these works in their whole aesthetic entirety—in which case you have the immediate freedom of two glorious cities of the mind—or you sedulously put them right," and reduce the whole world of spiritual values to an insane condition of Mumbo-Jumbo worship.

Now, without wearying you with a categorised enumeration of all those artists whose works are familiar to fame, may I remind you that the sculpture of the ancient world—except in its periods of decadence is quite frankly distortionate in intention: that

Botticelli's divine rhythms take their own revenge upon the proportions of the human form: that whereas Titian distorts light—the shadows thrown by the figures in some of his pictures moving centrifugally to give a lateral equipoise to the composition—we see in the giant action of Rubens and Michelangelo a sublime disregard for that niggardly approach to a world that must "stay put" before it can be painted: and that in Leonardo, whose vigour of emphasis was not so much that of a great artist as that of a great man who was insatiably hungry for curious human experience, we have a master of the subtlest effects in distortion: while Raphael's distortions are so obligingly conventional in intention—like the melodies in Mozart—that we are ravished into accepting their formal ideas as mere ideals, beyond all appraisal; for there is, indeed, little strangeness in the proportions of their beauty: a profound and deliberate distortion is in this case aimed at flattering our sense of anthropomorphic perfection.

Modernist distortion is, as you are aware, more arrestingly 'ugly,' certainly more exhibitory, in its formal displacement than anything of the kind that the Western world, at any rate, had seen for centuries; and it would sap the vitality of my argument if I neglected this obvious fact. Cezanne—the arrow, as Braque says: "an arrow of longing," to borrow Nietzsche's phrase—has flung new riches into the lap of the world; for the revival of everything that is good in painting has made, during the last half-century, a very sensible contribution to our endowment in aesthetic consciousness. It is difficult at this point in time to determine whether we are merely derivative or whether we really are bowling along, as we prefer to believe, on the perilous wheels of transition. In the latter and definitely more desirable case we do at least know that, however we may crash or sink into an occasional rut in the road, there is assuredly no turning back for us now. We are committed to an art which must never abjure its representative function; and we must on no account ask our paint to pretend, for an instant's pretence, that it is not paint. We are bound by the utter necessity of transliterating the continually perishing flux of appearance into the logical fixation of form. One must at once embrace and turn one's back upon the visible identity of the objective world. One must ruthlessly seize the swimming shape of things and both fuse and fix it with one's own imaginative will. It is easy enough to say this, easy enough to visualize the doing of it; but what is involved in the actual performance is nothing less than the hegemonic subjection into one harmony of all the disarrayed forces of one's spiritual and sensual experience. Now there is only one way to do this, however we may dispose of the subsidiary issues of it, and that is the way of creative distortion. The artist that boggles at this can never hope to make what I should call a significant impact upon the aesthetic consciousness of the future. We - artist and spectator alike - must acknowledge and submit to this condition or lie in the ditch of mediocrity.

To descend from these generalisations, let us glance for a moment at the almost insuperable (but entirely incumbent) problem of building in two dimensions to convey by sufficient implication the sense of a third. One's first and final consideration in the struggle with this technical teaser is to maintain with unabashed singularity of intention one's insistence upon the concoctive nature of the medium. One's particular pride, since painting is not sculpture, is to create an equivalence of deep space by the very means with which the surface of the canvas is affirmed and ratified. Obviously, one's only course (apart altogether from one's delight in the surface for its own intrinsic sake) is to devise a vehicle by which an essential apprehension of depth will be given the dual gratification of satisfaction, in a physiological or tactile sense, and excitation, in the sense of arousing in the intelligent spectator an immediate, intuitive perception of the

aesthetic means whereby one's problem has been worked out. Having decided, for instance, to construct a still-life study in two dimensions, I find that a given object in my material (say the plaster cast of a head, as in a Picasso still-life) can be made to correspond, in exclusively two-dimensional symbols, to my experience of three-dimensional recession by making a coalescence of the solid and its shadow, so as to form a sort of binate unit. So, shoving the solid shape and its equally solid shadow about until I have it as I want it, as the necessities of my problem demand, I find that the best modus of rendering my experience of the head (in these terms) will be a cunningly distorted representation of its metrical proportions. Now, I shall have made just as much, or as little, success of this tough and characteristically 'modern' job as I should have done in similar circumstances three centuries ago, working in the mode of my own time and place. If I happen to be a Picasso (whether of that time or this) I shall have painted to some purpose indeed!

The last consideration that I submit is that of the virtue of "ugliness" as an element in modern art. In the vocabulary of the plain man, "ugliness" is as often called upon to do the work of "distortion" as "beauty" (that major-domo of a word) is with a large gesture called up when the menial "Prettiness," or that unnoticeable "innocuous" would more fittingly have served. But, granting for argument's sake that certain distinctive elements in modern expression are in fact ugly, there remains the engrossing question of the functional value, the active virtue, even, of this peculiar attribute. You will have come to the wrong shop if you are looking to me for any extenuation of what I may describe as the homeopathic modern practice of curing "ugliness" of its distemper by dosing it now and again with a little Art.

It will be understood, I hope, that I am using the word "ugliness" here in a strictly conditioned and relative sense. I am as much the enemy of absolute ugliness—the ugliness produced by ill-kempt minds or the ugliness of a vulgar aesthetic taste—as anybody could well be. I do not agree, that is all, that your plain man necessarily knows what is ugly and what is beautiful in art. I was recently engaged, for instance, in public controversy with a writer—the reviewer, as it happens, of a book on modern painting—whose cast-iron opinion was that the work of Modigliani is ugly. Modigliani! In his uninformed attitude and general gross absence of ideas this writer—a typical "plain man"—represents what could be shown to be, I am told, the consensus of popular opinion concerning (in this instance at least) the positive and most expressive beauty of the work of a modern artist. It is extraordinarily difficult to imagine the condition of mind of a man who could exclaim, "Gosh, how hideous!" when confronted with any of the portraits of Madame Zborowska, or any one of those incredibly lovely nudes. But the instance will very well serve to illustrate the utter incapacity of the plain man to see even obvious "beauty" until the terms and modes of its expression have been thrashed by repetition into a submissive and vitiated convention.

One word more. As music is, historically speaking, the organised conquest of "noise," so is art the organised conquest of "ugliness." In other words, our aesthetic estimate of ugliness is continually being revised and modified by the erosion of art. Conquered by art, some particular in "ugliness" becomes—perhaps by the fact of this or that master's having turned it to characteristic use in his idiom—it becomes by the adventitious magic of such an association a very thing-of-beauty and joy-for-ever. When the recognition of this by now "artistic" particular begins to circulate in the general consciousness (and centuries—witness El Greco—may elapse before that happens), an artist may be said to have come into his kingdom. He has imposed the ultimate penalty

of his will upon the world: we accept even his "ugliness" with gratitude: for he has shown us that this ugliness, no less than this beauty, was for him—as it has now become for us—a conditional, and certainly an acceptable, phenomenon in the world of appearance.

About the author:

A mercurial figure in the first half of twentieth-century Australian art and writing, Adrian Lawlor (1889-1969), was an artist, writer, critic and broadcaster.

Born in London, he migrated to Australia in 1910. In 1921 he began writing literary articles, poetry and stories which were published in a variety of journals including the *Bulletin*, *Vision* and *New Triad*. Having achieved some minor success as a writer, he took up painting in 1929 and after brief periods of study at the National Gallery School and embarked on a vigorous and prolific decade as an artist. He moved rapidly into prominence among Melbourne modernist artists. During the 1930s, he studied at George Bell's Bourke Street school and was a frequent visitor to Bell's studio; over that decade he held eight exhibitions in Melbourne and became an office-bearer in Bell's Contemporary Artists Group. Along with Sidney Nolan, Lawlor was singled out by Bell as an artist who 'dared to think for [himself]'. From 1930-40 he held eight solo exhibitions and showed over 500 works. Lawlor and George Bell strongly resisted the proposal to form an Australian Academy of Art in 1937 and next year set up the opposing Contemporary Art Society with Lawlor as secretary. His book, *Arquebus* (1937), and pamphlet, *Eliminations* (1939), dealt brilliantly with the controversy. He was a guide lecturer at the 1939 *Herald* Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art and spoke on art at public meetings. After a relatively unsuccessful exhibition in 1940, following the destruction of his house and nearly all his paintings in the 1939 bushfires, he gave up painting and concentrated on criticism for the Melbourne *Sun* and *Art in Australia*; he continued with his regular Australian Broadcasting Commission session 'Art Front' (after 1945 'Art Review') in which he championed the cause of progressive art and culture. Source: The Australian Dictionary of Biography.