

Abstract Art is my Awakening”

by Philippe Benichou

The understanding of abstract art is based on two main ideas. Prior to its birth, art represents subjects and objects that are familiar and recognizable. In a sense, painters painted man and his surroundings within various styles, atmospheres and aesthetic periods. From 1910 on painters in Europe, and later in the US, started to paint the expression of life and color as the “new subjects.”

“When I no longer see an object that I recognize in a work of art I am expressing more than I am representing.” Philippe Benichou

For instance, when I am happy, I experience no consciousness of having a private or separate self; I seem oblivious to my personal identity and I become transparent. Conversely, when I am unhappy I am very conscious of my feelings, as I feel out of sync with the whole. When I creatively process my unhappiness I reconnect with the whole.

Abstract art: the self-based art. Abstract art surprisingly coincides with the birth of modern acting in the early 1900’s. 1910 marks the birth of a new kind of art where representation takes on a whole new direction. Kandinsky makes the declaration that “art is free” and begins to create “pure abstract art”, which becomes the first abstract movement.

The coincidence of the birth of modern acting and modern abstract art occurring at the same time is not so strange after all. Man has lived through role-playing and identity-based living for many thousands of years and we have become identified with what we do and the roles we play. All things are categorized by the mind, individual and collective, through differences and the roles we play. Man, through artistic expression yearned to express and recognize what he was going through emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Prior to the 1900’s, the art of acting was to represent characters externally; body, posture, gestures and of course voice were the main tools. Actors were not expected to “feel” their roles emotionally nor were they expected to inhabit their characters psychologically; acting was a grandiose external show of indications, which now is the anti-thesis to modern acting. The correct jargon for such display is being “theatrical.”

The great skill in those days was to project a self-image of the character through voice and body; it was grand, dramatic and spectacular. Modern acting inspires the actor to live and breathe inside the character, so as to become the character. Audiences today participate in the internal experience of the characters portrayed. It is from this observation that, in my view, abstract art came into being and continues to be recognized as a new art.

As an abstract artist I externalize on canvas what I am experiencing from within but cannot express in words. The forms, shapes, lines and colors that come out are no longer recognizable objects from my projected self-images, that is “what I think I know about myself and the world around me.” Life from this viewpoint becomes a continual dance of appearing and disappearing forms.

Abstract art is my awakening from self-image. When I no longer recognize something in a work of art I begin to know myself as pure experience. I become transparent to the ideas of myself. I reach beyond mind into pure abstract feelings. You could call such abstraction emptiness, spirit, love, freedom, joy or oneness.

The dualistic roles we play within society such as rich and poor or young and old, breed established divisions through generations. Left un-scrutinized they can rob us of a deeper and richer experience of life. Abstract art, without representing objects, speaks of the liberation from conditioned role-playing or ego-life. At that level, it is also non-political as it simply aims at pure experiencing.

When psychological or emotional suffering is experienced, there is always a self-image involved. I become an object of my suffering or vice-versa. I suffer from something and therefore, objectify my suffering. Here are chronic examples: not being good enough, often seeing something wrong with the way life is, needing control, being or feeling like a victim, etc. We see ourselves as objects located in time and space and observing life "outside" of ourselves. We play the observer and the observed in a perpetual and dualistic dance of opposites.

Every time I use or refer to "I", it becomes a self-image or more specifically an idea of myself: what I think or imagine I am. Self is not personal. I appear as a separate self because I am identified with matter: body, sound, sight, feelings, sensations, etc. That self is not "personal" can be one of the most freeing realizations. We are free from the perspective of life itself. If I only experience myself as a conditioned organism locked-up in that object-subject appreciation of life, I am aware but my experiences are limited to those of my conditioning. "I" owns, "I" has feelings, "I" does things, etc. "I" gets scared of losing that self-made sense of self that constantly monitors and processes through thinking and emotional internalization. Past and future are in a constant bad marriage ruled by the mind.

Abstract art aims at the liberation from identity or self-image based living toward a more integrated living where we recognize the totality of who we are and begin to experience it. We can become self-aware and no longer self-conscious or self-seeking. We stop processing through old conditioned fear mechanisms and begin to see things as they are through the energy field of total awareness. Only the absence of this understanding or intuitive feeling brings momentary pain and suffering. When the pain or suffering engendered is used to reconnect to pure awareness, it has become useful and helped us expand our "field of awareness".

Abstract art as well as abstract feelings help us get in touch with our vastness and our universal belonging to life as a whole. Abstraction is in a very real sense the actual context of our existence. From this viewpoint, the true purpose of art can be seen as the empowerment of the individual and the elevation of the consciousness of the individual.

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