

Representational Art - Still Around?

- Cathy Carey

When you go to an art museum or gallery you'll see several categories of representational art - Landscape, Still Life, and Figurative. This was the trend in art that was prevalent up until the 1940's when the world became abstract and Abstract art, which is non-representational, dribbled and slung itself onto the scene.

When looking at paintings I try to imagine the mind set of the people of that time period by interpreting the style and subject matter the artist uses. For example how does a Jackson Pollack Abstract Expressionist painting describe modern society compared to how a Michelangelo painting illuminated the philosophy of the Renaissance. How much more informative of humanity it would be to study mankind through its art styles instead of by an assessment of its wars. Instead of a time period being known as the era of WWI, it would be known as the transition from the beautiful, swirling, organic shapes of Art Nouveau to the hard edges of Modernism and Surrealism.

What I find very interesting about current art trends, is the lack of a cohesive unifying style. I suppose this may be seen as a lack or loss of identity, but I see it as a significant description of the multifaceted, multitasking time period we live in. We are able to accept and enjoy many styles that represent many types of people and experiences. One recent trend is that, after fifty years, artists have been turning back to representational art. By definition, Realism represents the external world as it is actually seen. In modern terms, Realism has been used to describe artwork depicting changing social values and deeper inner truths in addition to superficial appearances. For example, a portrait might seek to show the personality of the sitter in addition to their outward appearance.

Representational art can also include paintings of familiar things but in unusual or unrealistic settings. In styles like Surrealism and Magic Realism, the images are recognizable but out of context, and are presented in combinations that are surprising and create deeper layers of meaning. In contrast, Abstract art is non-representational, having no identifiable objects or people, and where the meaning and symbolism are open to interpretation.

During the heyday of abstract and conceptual art, galleries didn't even carry representational landscape, still life or figurative work. Some excellent realist artists we know today saw their careers drop off and die during this time. One of the best known American Realists, Edward Hopper (1882-1967), who painted the well known "Nighthawks", is a case in point. Having achieved recognition and good standing in the art world by 1933, he was given a retrospective exhibition at the epicenter of the art world - the Museum of Modern Art in New York.. In 1950 he had an even larger retrospective show at the Whitney. But by the time he died seventeen years later in 1967, he was isolated and all but forgotten, having been usurped by the rise of Abstract Expressionism. As is often the case, in the years since his death, he has become known as an important and well recognized artist of the twentieth century.

Realist art today has it's fingers in the paints of past schools and combines metaphor and symbolism with a delight in superficial appearances. Often it is the contrast of the perceived surface and imagined inner world that gives current art its edge. Current artists often use very vivid and lush color, and push the realism of the perceived world to a heightened emotional meaning through their strong use of color. The march of technology into our everyday lives has not escaped the notice of the arts either. Many artists are using the computer to create paintings, combining photography with painted images and digitally manipulating color, texture and subject matter just as they would with paint and canvas. Yes, but is it Art?

The meaning of Art as I interpret it, is an individual's expression through interpretive media (painting, sculpture, music, dance, theatre, collage etc.) of something they care to communicate. So when asking if computer, abstract, or anything off of the traditional path is Art, I think what most people want to know is if it's good, and why. Because the answer is always: Yes it's Art! As to whether or not it's good is up for debate - a debate future societies will have to answer. For instance, during the time the Impressionists were starting out, the French people were appalled by their work. The critics and public alike thought the artists couldn't draw and their colors were considered vulgar. They didn't think it was art and actually thought being exposed to it could adversely affect your health, warning pregnant women not to view it at all! "A mass of decomposing flesh with those purplish-green stains," is how art critic Albert Wolff once described a Renoir. Kind of hard to believe today since Impressionism is now considered one of the most popular and beautiful painting styles.

One of the mainstays of representational art is the figure. Portraits, nudes and anything else relating to the figure are the theme of the current show at the Rancho Santa Fe Art Gallery (6004 Paseo Delicias). The Figurative Art show has examples of all styles of representational interpretations of the figure, from traditional paintings and sculpture to digital computer paintings. The public is invited to attend the reception Thursday, March 9 from 5-7PM. The show runs March 6 - April 29, 2006. Visit their website at ranchoart@sbcglobal.net or call (858) 759-3545 for more information.

Cathy Carey is a member of the Rancho Santa Fe Art Guild and full time artist.

www.artstudiosandiego.com