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### The Beauty of Mimesis and the Beauty of the Abstract: Underlying Principles

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#### Abstract

In this essay, I argue that an essential and basic biological need to survive is predicated on the ability to find order and pattern and hence a certain hard wiring for aesthetic beauty. This manifests in art and as new forms emerge, so new conceptualizations of the aesthetic develop. In this way

theory and practice operate in tandem, although the former generally precedes the latter. In arguing for such an innate disposition, the search for such clarity is able to include not only mimetic art, but later developments in the abstract dimension.

**Keywords:** Mimesis, Abstract, Beauty, Aesthetics Form

#### 1. Introduction

Post the Renaissance and discoveries such as perspective and the use of oil paints together with the waning interest in historical, religious, and mythological subject matter, led artists to concentrate on the faithful rendering of a likeness to nature as it is perceived. The advance was extraordinary, but then with the rise of Modernism from the Impressionists onwards this faithful copying of nature was questioned, and abstract art came into being. In this essay, I will extract underlying principles that inhere both in mimetic resemblance and abstract art towards an appraisal of the potential beauty and convergence of both such approaches. Even where the very premise of representational art appeared to erode and where abstract art appeared to deny coherence, the principles posited still hold, so that the theory and history of art appears to be a continuous narrative. I shall refer to specific examples to develop such a thesis.

#### 2. Principles of beauty

Below are two well-known works of art. The first by Courbet in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the second by Rothko in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Clearly their styles are radically distinct. Nevertheless, are there overarching and underlying principles by which one can determine their exceptional impact on art? I claim that there are, drawing from formalism, in the sense that they both conform to what I would argue are innate predilections, rather than simply learned, following certain Kantian mental categories. Since my approach is formalist, iconographic and other extra-aesthetic meanings are ignored, drawing from the idea that content and form can be separated and over and above the apparent content, the way form is articulated is itself a certain kind of content, regardless of subject-matter.



The Encounter (Bonjour, M. Courbet), 1854; Oil on canvas; 50 4/5 × 58 7/10 in | 129 × 149 cm



Orange and Yellow; Mark Rothko, 1956, Color Field Painting, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, US, oil on canvas, Dimensions: 231.1 x 180.3 cm

### 2.1 Order

In both images a certain order prevails. In the first the composition is divided in two by a strong horizontal line separating land from sky, foreground from background. The sky is not tempestuous, but serene and calm. The two figures are equally weighted to that of the single figure as the latter is somewhat more in the foreground than the other two. Shadows, creases in the folds of the clothes and attention to acute detail in the form of facial expressions enchant the viewer, giving a sense of the reality of the scene, highly ordered so as to create a scene in sharp focus in a way a camera might capture the moment of meeting. The charm of such a meeting is communicated through the sheer order of the elements of art: a stable composition; a subtle arrangement of colors; attention to detail and the harmonious gestures of the figures as well as the employment of linear and atmospheric perspective to create a “window into”, a portal into a specific moment in time.

In the second image, obviously vastly different, one may also note a certain harmony and order. in the play of rectangles and orange offset by yellow, “incubated” in a warm orange which appears to be a mixture of yellow and orange. Nothing jarring or violent, but a certain stillness and combination of colors and saturation that calms, creating a meditation in time and an opening in space. Though not a rendering of a natural scene quite obviously, it is the play of composition, color dynamics and shape in and of themselves that speak most generally of the formal elements that could be found in nature, though now abstracted as a template for any number of things: the flow within nature; the dynamics of harmony and design that flows through nature or the simple rendering of an image of mental clarity or emotive stillness of being.

Thus, the order that inheres in both these works, would, I conjecture fulfill a principle of mind, namely the search for such order and clarity. This argument is made on the basis that aesthetics functions as a very basic component of

human cognition – without order, without relationships between elements within a visual space, there can be no meaningful cognitive process. This seems to be at the very base of the human need for categories, structures, and a kind of scaffolding in which to place things. Whether realist or abstract, one notes that indeed such a mechanism may be at play, and one might even seek a biological and neuro-aesthetic account to explain such desires for order.

### 2.2 Beauty

One might explain this innate desire or need for order as the search for beauty. Although “beauty” may be politicized, culturally relative and historically malleable, it is a concept that has persisted since time immemorial. Beauty gives one peace; it attracts the eye and the mind; it eases the heart, and it communicates feelings of transcendence and even the sublime.

Attributes of beauty seem to be the ability to simplify the complex; to evoke immediate response and to be a precondition to discovering patterns and symmetries, the basis for discursive understanding. In both these images, I would argue that they are beautiful precisely because they do indeed reveal a harmonious balance: vertical and horizontals equal each other out; colors coordinate and curiosity is stirred by the stillness of a moment in time and a pause in spatial configuration – still, but suggestive of movement. The eye can hover or move into the work of art as it presents a certain quality at once in time and yet beyond time.

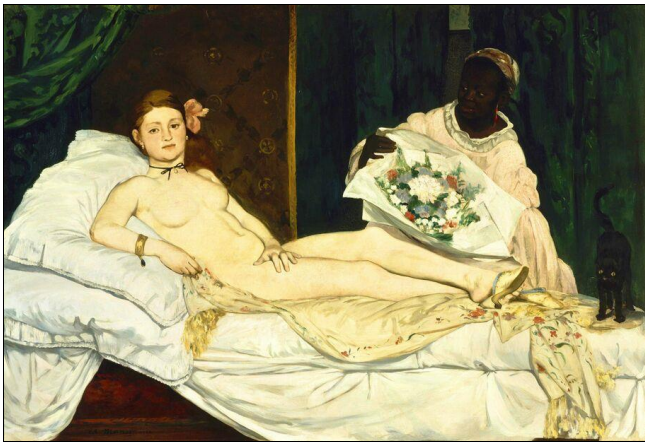
### 2.3 Form

If one accents to the idea that these works embody aspects of beauty and order, then it is precisely the form that allows for this. Form as a concept should not be taken lightly. Like the ability to convey to another one’s current feelings in a word or a string of words, form is able to render the otherwise chaotic flux of conscious experience into something solid, stable and in itself coherent.

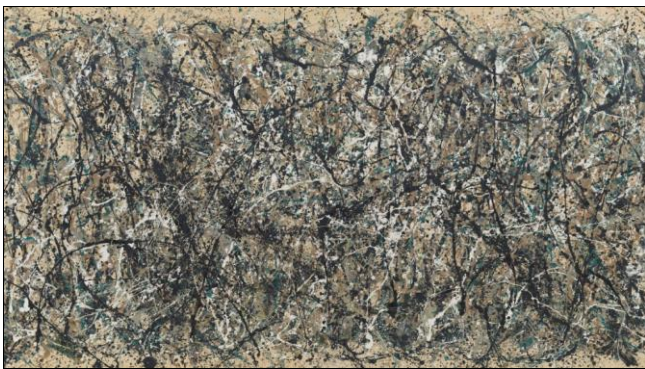
In the first painting, the proportion of the figures and their relationship to nature exhibits a high degree of formal modulation. We recognize the forms as figures, as a landscape and in that “recognition”, in that mimetic truth, there is a sense of knowing, like a child who learns to read or identifies a picture and gives it a name.

In the second image, Rothko has not denounced form. It is not formless. We recognize the field of color not as ill formed blobs, but as well conceived and felt areas of colors with density, weight, careful color modulation, neither bland nor painted as if this were merely an exercise in house painting. Here too there is form, albeit not to correspond with anything known, but simply form in and of itself, the contemplation of which may lead to a harmonious play of intellect, imagination and feeling. The vast scale induces an overwhelming experience of being immersed within the painting, rather than just looking at it from a distance as would be the case with the Courbet painting whose scale, while large, is far less grand and encompassing.

### 3. Is there really a “principle of beauty”?



Édouard Manet; *Olympia*, 1863. 130.5 x 190 centimeters; Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Jackson Pollock, *One: Number 31*. 2.7 m x 5.31 m; 1950. The Museum of Modern Art; Oil Paint, Enamel paint

These works would have countered the prevailing sense of beauty and aesthetics. Yet, in time, they would be included in the pantheon of art history as instances of evolution in art and thus objects of beauty. Although they do not seem to conform to the kinds of analysis that demonstrate the “correctness” of the previous two works, we might still find a formal understanding of these works that allows for appreciation within the confines of notions of “order”, “beauty” and “form”.

### 3.1 Order

My contention is that since the need for order is innate, so new forms of art, wherein previous kinds of orders are no longer viable, challenge the mind to establish new hierarchies of order, a new system of systemizing if you will. In this regard, while the first painting no longer adheres to naturalistic tonal modulation or to ease of movement spatially and within a realistic setting, there may yet be a new conception. Here line crudely defines the figure and the background space; light is less subtle; the figure is at once passive and active (new for a rendering of the female nude) and black and white exist in harsh, stark contrast. How then can this not challenge prevailing sentiment and sensibility.? It does, but such a challenge is answered by seeking new kinds of patterns and modalities for art. The viewer is enjoined to see a flattened plane or pictorial space as itself real, rather than the contrived “window into...”. The viewer is enjoined to connect areas of color purely for their own sake, without regard to subject matter. The viewer is enjoined to appreciate bold outlines as an artistic tool, rather than hide as such with careful tonal modulation. Here, space

is defined by areas and shapes, a precursor to abstract art and thus forming a “missing link” in the narrative of art. In this way, such a painting becomes part of the very order and sequencing of the history of art (in the West).

In the second image, Pollock denies the color field of Rothko and instead fragments it into stringy, strewn lines that appear to lose form, order, pattern. And yet, it is precisely this apparent formlessness that heightens a new kind of order of perception, namely lines in and of themselves as the very energy of the hand that so renders them. In this perceptual “chaos”, closer inspection reveals unity, and a higher order structure, where each part is related to the whole and on a holistic level, manifests as a coherent form. Rather than geometric pattern and exploration of fields of color, the painting when viewed at such a large, engulfing scale, envelops one as one organized and continuous reality and similar to Rothko, therefore invites a meditative presence – chaos morphs into order through such a perceptual/conceptual experience.

### 3.2 Beauty

Given the capacity to find new forms of order, so the idea of beauty shifts and is itself in flux, akin to the change in fashion over time. In this sense, practice precedes theory and what is first encountered as a rebellious act, as not beautiful, is then assimilated and shifts the conceptual terrain, so that a new order is discerned and hence a new capacity for beauty. Both works in time and in accordance with the institution and prevailing and evolving history of art now become emblematic of a beauty newly conceived. Thus, solid outline may have a virtue and wild, dynamic flux once thought of as chaotic, even ugly emerges as a purposeful, unified perceptual field, at once energized and open to interpretations that previous forms did not invite or even allow.

Arts’ redeeming virtue then is that in exploring new perceptual terrain through an expanding repertoire or style, leads to a more complex conceptual terrain. Yet, since the mind’s vocation is always an attempt to simplify, to reduce, so the perceptual field which is initially confusing and may negate previous examples, is filtered through eye and brain in a way that the apparatus will seek unity, simplicity, coherence. And so art history has, elevating these new forms into the canon of art theory, history and practice, as instances of beauty.

I conjecture, as mentioned above that this is a biological need, just as primitive man may have needed to alter perception of the landscape in order to see more clearly and be successful in the hunt, for art is a kind of knowledge that expands the perceptual and helps the brain deal with otherwise confusing data. Once placed within a structure – for example as Manet’s anti-realism or as Pollock’s “drip” or “action painting” - so now the category orders this otherwise aberrant additions and a new order can emerge rather than chaos and lack of clarity. Art then assists in making sense of the perceptual terrain and by seeing such new forms as beautiful becomes a way of dealing with that terrain, initiated firstly in art and then manifest as the capacity to see patterns even where the opposite may seem to be the case. Beauty can only be seen when sight itself has a concept by which to name it, hence the enduring value of art not simply as a handling of the craft, but as offering new vistas of the beautiful through the play of original formulations of the elements of art themselves.

### 3.3 Form

Given the argument above, such art only becomes form as such when the conceptual apparatus “catches up” with this new perceptual and stylistic “advance”. Again, the mind abhors the amorphous, the ill-defined, the unaesthetic. If it can incorporate a new image within its narrative, all is well and good, just as a person once able to weave certain events into a sensible story can now deal with such events, so the practice of art is “tamed” through discursive analysis. Hence, I argue that art is not simply a play of craft and mindless expression, but rather a dialectic between theory and practice. Form then emerges as both a newly found material form and a newly evolved conceptual breakthrough. In this sense, the historical analysis of art, wherein certain art necessarily evolves at a certain juncture in history, would make sense.

I would make the further observation that humans necessarily think through forms. Even a highly abstract discipline such as mathematics requires symbolic notation. Minimalist precision of form is one extension of such an argument as is the highly philosophical nature of contemporary installation art where things – as in child’s-play - represent something else. Just as poetry uses the device of a metaphor to conjure images, so art is invested in form as a mechanism to reveal content. In these paintings above, Manet asks the viewer to reevaluate standards of classical beauty and Pollock wildly breaks down form and yet in that destruction, constructs a new form. For form is both a constructive and destructive act – the constant dialectic between tradition and progress, between the accepted order and the modern epitomizes the very struggle with form that art so creatively deals with.

When Classical sculpture comes to symbolize say a Fascist State or when an artist such Rivera is said to express the will of the people through his style, form becomes politicized, and freedom of interpretation curtailed. Art becomes dangerous. Only when freed from a simplistic correspondence between form and meaning, can art breath and new forms emerge. Where precisely the boundaries are is unclear as there are many examples where certain forms of art have been censored. Is form a- political, a simple aesthetic play or when deemed not aesthetic, the purview of power structures? Whatever the boundaries – and there must be some – form allows for new thoughts and impressions of beauty itself. Art is a language. Yet the medium is not transparent and itself may be the product of the more dominant forms of its time: prevailing paradigms and the pursuit of capital, in cultural terms, monetary terms and honor/power seeking. In this sense, form may not be a necessary good. Cages’ “4 minutes 33” of silence may be a good retort. But it too has become yet another form.

### 4. Conclusion

In this brief article, I have argued for the natural predisposition, that is, a universal substrate of human consciousness to seek order, pattern, and clarity or in other terms, form and beauty. This is not exclusive and simply the determination of aestheticians or artists or art historians, but a biological mechanism for dealing with perceptual datum and codifying, absorbing, and reacting in ways that deal with one’s environment in the optimal manner. This plays itself within the domain of art as well which could be said is heightened visual perception.

I offered a few examples where such ordering mechanism is evident whether one is talking about a painting which reveals mimetic accuracy or the abstract and then discussed a further two examples, again one more “realistic” than the other, when it appeared, such norms were not adhered to. Yet in accordance with this underlying human trait, a further ordering and reevaluation of beauty comes to the surface and such images are than weaved into the narrative of art. this, I argue allowed for conceptual flexibility.

While as stated practice precedes theory, it is in their creative oscillation that art develops as well as new tools and languages to deal with the plethora of experiences and sense datum, contributing to a nuanced and ever developing field of art in theory and practice.

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