

Morality & Art

We live in a world where the future has arrived. Today, everyone is an artist – even a 2 year old whose work was exhibited last month in Melbourne and I believe sold well. Everyone is allocated their 15 minutes of fame as Warhol predicted – just look at the evening news or the plethora of reality TV shows. Everyone has an opinion about everything, including art and morality. Even Prime Ministers are moral critics of art – Kevin Rudd’s response to images of Bill Henson’s exhibition last year of pubescent nudes was in a word - “disgusting!” He was responding like a lot of outraged people at the time to what they perceived as child exploitation if not child pornography. We live in such sensitive times where a mere suspicion of allegedly ‘dubious’ intent by the artist gets people to jump to conclusions at the drop of a hat and there is a ready and waiting media to give them air time and newspaper space.

Outrage and disgust at a lack of presumed ‘proper’ moral values and emotionally driven pack mentality is what makes news. Positive news as we know doesn’t do as well. Betty Churcher, past Director of the National Gallery in Canberra, amongst many other people, myself included, responding to Henson’s images, found them to be “amongst the most beautiful images of youth”. And yet, that response perhaps because it was complementary and by people who are very familiar with Henson’s work and his distinguished career didn’t even make the popular press.

It seems to me that today, morality like art is in the eye or mind of the beholder. Australia is a secular country with laws expressing the moral values of the dominant culture. In this secular world, every artist responds to morality in their art according to their individual conscience because social moral values generally speaking are fluid. What is shocking or regarded as immoral one day becomes the epitome of taste and quality the next.

This is not the case if one looks at morality from a Jewish perspective. Judaism’s moral values have stayed constant for over 3000 years, since we were given the Torah, our moral code. The Torah’s essence represents quintessential morality. Our laws and mitzvot as well as the Challachically prescribed attitudes towards: the environment, commercial transactions, building codes, the behaviour of soldiers during combat, the treatment of prisoners of war, of widows, orphans and strangers, towards life and peace and so on, covering every minute aspect of life are witnesses to that. Jewish morality is not a matter of personal opinion. It is a cultural and nationally prescribed responsibility.

Could the price for such a morality be art? We have Jewish morality but no Jewish art to speak of. Perhaps for Judaism the two don’t mix? The orthodox, rabbinic position towards art is that it should exist primarily to beautify and illuminate the content and wisdom of our Torah. From this Jewish perspective art has no other function. Perhaps, just as Judaism distinguishes itself by dietary, dress and behavioural codes, it puts limits on one’s parameters of self expression resulting in

such narrow, prescriptive guidelines for art. Perhaps the moment Jewish culture would begin to express itself freely through art, its moral values could be tested and this could become dangerous.

This is the Jewish dilemma in regards to art and morality. This is also my personal dilemma as a Jew and as an artist. In my small way I’m trying to open up the possibility for a Jewish Art that is capable of breaking out of this limited rabbinic injunction but I often feel like I have to start from scratch every time I start a new, Jewish project. There simply aren’t any precedents. Most nations, on the other hand have plenty of art and a whole swag of moralities.

I’m a painter, not a philosopher so when it comes to morality in art I prefer to comment from a purely personal perspective. Just like any other citizen of Australia I have to abide by the laws governing this land, including laws dealing with moral ideas. As our ‘western’, ‘democratic’ society changes and evolves, so do our moral values. Just compare our current attitudes concerning the rights of children, women or Aborigines, the environment and how we affect it, one’s personal sexual expression etc, to just a few years ago. Or just think back a little further, to the accepted morality of the ‘White Australia Policy’ which in my opinion was one of the most discriminatory, immoral and selectively oppressive laws in Australia since Federation, for almost 60 years. As an artist, my job is to make art, the wider morality issues I leave to our legislators and theologians. You see, Art exists for very good reasons and some of these are to provoke, to shock, to criticize, to expose, to shake society out of its comfort zone. Sometimes even to the edge of acceptability, to test the system. And when ‘moral standards’ or ‘public good’ or whatever other euphemisms are used as social tools to restrict, limit or censor artists towards certain ‘moral’ directions of taste, behaviour or thinking, or to produce ‘acceptable art’, I immediately hear alarm bells. I’m instantly suspicious because far too often has society and its accepted moral values of the time been not only doubtful but outright dangerous and destructive. Just a few examples will suffice.

In the late 19th century when Impressionism made its first appearance in Paris, the then world capital of culture, their paintings were received with the most vicious venom from both critics and the general public.

These harmless paintings of landscapes, the most popular art in the world today, appreciated for their beauty, light and pure colour, were ridiculed as paintings done by monkeys using their tails or by half witted, immoral people who had no idea of history and absolutely no talent. You see, at the time - dark, heavily varnished, studio based, history paintings were regarded as the epitome of art and the official Salon was the only judge of moral and artistic taste. The Impressionist’s, bright, brash paintings of the unimportant, the local, the familiar landscapes were regarded as vulgar and morally depraved!



It took about 40 years for the moral attitudes towards this fresh new revolution in art to change and become accepted. Post Impressionists, Cubists, Fauvists, Suprematists, etc, all had similar battles with acceptable, moral values of their time to overcome. These were nothing however compared to the morally oppressive straight jacket that was applied to art in Germany with the rise of National Socialism. In 1927 the National Socialist Society for German Culture was formed. Based on National Socialist ideology, the aim of this organization was to halt what was perceived as the "corruption of art" and inform the people about the relationship between race and art. By 1933, the terms "Jewish", "Degenerate", and "Bolshevik" were in common use to describe almost all modern art. This became the standard and acceptable social moral code. In 1937, Nazi officials purged German museums of works the Party considered to be degenerate. From the thousands of works removed, 650 were chosen for a special exhibit of Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art). The exhibition opened in Munich and then travelled to 11 other cities in Germany and Austria. In each installation, the works were poorly hung, leaning to the left or right, badly lit and surrounded by graffiti and hand written labels mocking the artists and their creations. Over 3 million visitors attended making it the first "blockbuster" exhibition in history. This exhibition pandered to the established moral values of their time. Just out of interest, some of the artists who were part of this infamous exhibition were: Mark Chagall, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Max Beckman etc – today regarded as some of the greatest artists of the 20th century.

A not dissimilar attitude towards artistic expression existed in Russia in the 1940's and 50's where the only, officially sponsored art by the State was Social Realism – to the exclusion of everything else. Morally exclusive and oppressive attitudes towards art can be found in virtually every country run by a political or religious dictatorship.

Sometimes, the so called taste makers, the experts, the elite, the leaders in whom we entrust custodianship of the 'moral good', the intelligentsia can equally be morally wanting. For example: in response to the very famous and highly provocative Herald exhibition of Modern Art, the exhibition that introduced the work of Picasso, Dali, Matisse and many others to Australia, shown in Melbourne and Sydney in 1939, J. S. McDonald, the Director of The National Gallery of Victoria wrote: "We have seen the advertising efforts that have been made to urge us to swallow this putrid meat...There is no doubt that the great majority of the work called 'modern' is the product of degenerates and perverts..." He tarred all modern art movements from Impressionism to Expressionism as "gangrened stuff which attracts the human blowflies of the world who thrive on putrid fare". He was probably the most powerful Art personality in Australia at the time and obviously a great beacon of morality as well!

He wasn't alone. Another very influential person in Australia and a friend of J. S. McDonald's was the art critic and artist Lionel Lindsay who was regarded as one of the artistic mayven's of his time, a taste maker and trend setter. In 1942 he published a little book titled; Addled Art. The cover of this book consisted of an illustration of a monkey in the caricature of a stereotypical Jew – you know the one with a long hooked nose, thick brimmed glasses and long beard, masquerading as an artist with a palette in hand smearing a canvas. According to him, Modern Art was not only a Jewish abomination but he – as the moral artistic beacon of Australia, saw it as his duty to expose it for the 'racket' he perceived it to be in the hands of Jewish dealers, art critics and artists. In this little book he accuses Jews of degrading Art's sublime values into a depravity called Modern Art. This book is neither accurate factual or scholarly. It could have been written by Goebbles the Nazi Minister of propaganda.

Despite all of its falsehoods, lies and bizarre opinions, Addled Art became a popular success. The first edition sold out in a week. Later, another edition was published in England and Argentina. However, in my mind the most offensive aspect of this episode in Australian art was that while writing this anti-Semitic diatribe, he was recommended for and eventually received a knighthood for services to art, in the New Year's honours of 1941 by none other than the Prime Minister of Australia - Robert Menzies. Even today, one need not look any further than our beloved cartoonist in the Age newspaper, Michael Leunig – the one that is famous for Mr Curley and the Duck drawings. These benign, poetic doodles of Leunig's imagination are just one side of his character, the other are his infamous political cartoons, especially about Israel and the Palestinian conflict. In these he is confusing and often abusing his position and instead, turns into a biased, political commentator.

For example; On Friday 16th of January 2009, he had a cartoon published titled 'The continuous crossword' where over a crossword like configuration he inserted the words Gaza a number of times, to make the point absolutely clear that this was the main subject with other words inserted as comparative references in the crossword; May Lai (a reference to the infamous massacre and mutilation of nearly 500 Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers in 1968 during the Vietnam war), Falluja (a reference to the massive loss of civilian life in this Iraqi town, again by American soldiers during the Gulf War in 1991) and Guernica (a reference to the Spanish, civilian town of no military importance, totally destroyed by the German Luftwaffe as an experiment of extensive aerial bombardment in 1937 resulting in hundreds of civilians murdered). In this cartoon, Leunig implies that all of these examples of past civilian massacres are like the even more extensive atrocities perpetrated by Israel during the recent Gaza war with Hamas. In his perverted sense of reality, USA and especially Israel are like the German Nazi's. The point of course is that whether these comparisons are factual, reasonable or indeed moral to make is not a question that matters greatly to Mr Leunig or The Age newspaper. For them, Israel's right to self defence, it's provocation after hundreds of rockets bombarded Sderot, Ashkelon, Beer Sheva and Negev kibbutzim, the moral behaviour of Israeli soldiers during combat or the context or circumstance of each example quoted has no relevance. Unfortunately this has become the accepted distortion of morality if not bigotry by our media and some of our so called intellectuals, when it comes to anti-Israel rhetoric.

Finally, for a little light relief, one example of where morality and artistic freedom was accommodated in law. In 2008 the President of France Mr Sarkozy took a satirist to court. The satirist made a voodoo doll with Mr Sarkozy's features, covered in printed statements that Mr Sarkozy had allegedly made. He was selling the doll with pins for people to stick into the various statements on the doll. Mr Sarkozy asserted that his body features were of his, exclusive use and that the satirist had no copyright to use them. He demanded an immediate ban on sales of this doll. Mr Sarkozy was awarded a symbolic euro in damages and the judge ordered K&B Editions (manufacturers of the doll) to pay \$2000 in legal costs. However the judge also instructed that "The demanded ban is disproportionate...it would compromise the makers of the doll freedom of expression and the right to humour". All future sales of the doll had to carry a bright red label on the cover with the words "Judicial Injunction" and a warning that sticking needles into the doll affronts Mr Sarkozy's dignity. The doll became an instant hit and best seller, all over France.



For me, making art is to constantly balance between my personal right to individual freedom of expression and society's moral standards and expectations. I believe that one should always be careful about embracing too readily the accepted moral barometer of the majority. Likewise one should have a healthy scepticism towards our leaders and upholders of society's moral values be they priests, journalists, cartoonists, politicians, gallery directors or indeed artists. As long as it doesn't incite violence, it doesn't discriminate against or hurt anyone, I always come out on the side of uncensored freedom of expression rather than pay the price for questionable, external, moral impositions.

I certainly don't believe that artists are or should be outside or beyond the social morality of their time however, art will always test society's values. This is one of the functions of art as I mentioned before – to test and to challenge - and I happen to think that it's healthy to be tested occasionally.

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