

My abstract painting epiphany

In my opening statement on my art website I say this: "I believe every abstract painting should have immediate impact. It should hit you with unique visual delight. Those are the qualities I look for in abstract paintings and endlessly strive for in my own work." I can't claim to have always achieved visual delight in my own work, but I will always believe that statement to be true.

First things first. Many people don't "get" abstract painting. I myself was not a fan of abstract painting when a teenager. By my mid-twenties I had grown to love it. People who don't "get" abstract painting often look at an abstract work intensely, trying to find something real hidden there like a visual puzzle that is meant to be solved. Sometimes they might succeed – but it is by accident – the artist almost never intends a representative image to be concealed within an abstract work. Perhaps the painter Arshile Gorky expressed it best: "Abstraction allows man to see with his mind what he cannot see physically with his eyes...abstract art enables the artist to perceive beyond the tangible, to extract the infinite out of the finite. It is the emancipation of the mind. It is an exploration into unknown areas."

So what was the reason I went from not liking abstract painting to loving it? What was my epiphany moment? It literally was a moment, or rather three moments that happened in a short space of time. In a matter of a few days I saw reproductions of three abstract paintings that had immediate impact upon me and filled me with visual delight. The paintings were *Painting 1960* by Pierre Soulages, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic #34* by Robert Motherwell, and *Vermuse* by Maurice Estève. I realise those paintings might not have the same effect on everyone, but they hit me like a sledgehammer, especially the Soulages. Some abstract painting detractors might say there is nothing more to abstract works than clever patterns and pleasing colour combinations, but surely such comments cannot be directed to those paintings that had such a profound effect on me.

My immediate response to seeing those paintings was genuinely emotional. The key word in the phrase "abstract expressionism", is of course, the latter. As Gorky stated, abstract paintings do not draw upon outer visual reference but draw upon inner emotions that beg to be expressed. Yet this cannot be said of all abstract painting. For example, a typical painting by Barnett Newman can hardly be described as vibrant or emotive. Appreciation, as with anything, is a result of personal taste. People who love landscapes don't love them all, people who love still life don't love them all, people who love abstract paintings don't love them all – in fact they might love only a select few. For me, those three abstract paintings that hit me like a sledgehammer remain among a select few. There are many abstract works that I like, but that is not the same thing.

Certainly, some abstract paintings do draw on elements from the real world with excellent results. The painting *Football Players at the Park des Princes* by Nicolas de Stael springs to mind. However, the abstract element dominates the real element so much that, if it were not for the title of the picture, I suspect a lot of viewers would not see footballers there. It raises the question whether the definition "abstract painting" is the correct one for such paintings. Would "abstracted reality" be better? If I seem to be splitting hairs here, there is a reason, it is to help those who "don't get" abstract painting. The misunderstanding and confusion as to whether abstract painting conceals elements from the real world would be gone forever.

The real world would be gone forever thereby setting us free. Free to allow our emotions and spirits to soar without being restricted by a representation of reality. It is best not to look at abstract painting as an intellectual exercise. In truth it is the exact opposite: an emotional exercise. Don't stress about needing to feel a reaction. Some abstract works speak to us, some do not. Just relax, clear your mind of any pre-held opinions, and enjoy. Then one day that magic piece of work may

manifest before your eyes. That piece of work that has immediate impact and unique visual delight.
That epiphany moment.

“There is no shape to the feeling that has gripped me, no name. Manifested in amorphous sensations and rippling currents – bringing one moment a tear, then a smile; there is no comprehending this wave. A hummingness courses through my mind.”

— Radhika Mukherjee, Broken Shadows

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