

Quarterly Artwork Review Archive

Quarter 1, 2021

The Ecstasy of St. Teresa by Gian Lorenzo Bernini



After Michelangelo's death in 1564, when it came to sculpture in Italy early in the 17th century, no one was more skilled or in demand than Bernini. He was also one of the major architects of the time, designing and building many of the iconic structures we see throughout Rome today; and he was a painter, playwright, and an actor. But it is his prodigious talents as a sculptor for which he is remembered and revered most.

Bernini's *Ecstasy* is an exquisite marvel in marble, most evident in his detailed realist rendering of Teresa's cloak. It is a depiction of St. Teresa of Avila and an experience the young nun claimed to have had in a vision, whereby she was visited by an angel that filled her with the love of God. The rods, coming down like rays from heaven, appear to be gold, but they are actually made of gilded stucco. It is all set in coloured marble and illuminated by a hidden window in the dome above it.

Bernini was often called in on projects by other artists and architects; and in the late eighties I was fortunate enough to see, or rather experience, one such work. When the esteemed architect, Balthasar Neumann, designed and built the Bishop's Residence in Wurzburg, Germany (completed in 1744), he brought in Bernini to plaster and paint the ceiling with an elaborate fresco. Numerous cherubs circle the outer edges of the domed ceiling, and others further in lead the eye inward and upward. It is painted in such a way that when you stand in the center of the floor and gaze upward, an optical illusion gives one the distinct bodily feeling of levitating, like you are being swept up into heaven. It was a moving, almost spiritual experience; and it was then I knew, and palpably felt, the genius of Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

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Quarter 2, 2021

Campbell's Soup Cans by Andy Warhol



Andy Warhol, the leader of the pop art explosion in the early sixties, may well be the most famous artist of the 20th century, and for good reason. His mother, an accomplished artist in her own right, got him interested in art when she gave him his first drawing lesson as he was recovering from the nervous system disease, St. Vitus's Dance, at eight years of age. He worked in many artistic genres over the course of his life, from filmmaking and performance art to drawing and painting. But it is as the artist on the forefront of the pop art movement that he came to prominence, and his "Campbell's Soup Cans" may be his most recognizable work.

Warhol made several versions of the soup cans into a series, as he did with a series of Marilyn Monroe images, a series on Coca-Cola bottles, and one on brightly coloured images of China's Chairman Mao. Like many people, when I saw "Cans" for the first time I thought: "Is this really art?" But that soon changed when I came to realize what he was driving at with these works.

Warhol's controversial pop art largely focussed on mass-produced commodities, and it brought him into the public eye. With pop art, he was underlining what had already begun to happen in modern society and culture – the ultra-capitalist bent of the late 20th century was making everything over in its image, commercializing it all, including popular images of popular people, and even art itself. The "Cans" make us recoil at first viewing, but Warhol would say it is the commercialization of art that is upsetting us. His works captured this, they modeled it, and at the same time propelled it forward.

Andy Warhol was a genius who inserted his art, and himself, into the modern culture. He was ubiquitous in the sixties and early seventies, and even managed his friend Lou Reed's band The Velvet Underground. Reed, in turn, immortalized Warhol's popular art warehouse, The Factory, and its colourful patrons in his hit song "Walk on the Wild Side" (Holly, the Sugar Plum Fairy, etc. are real people). And he was a paradoxical figure, with a lifestyle that seemed to celebrate and participate in what he was criticizing with his art.

But I believe Warhol's genius consists in an uncanny talent for anticipating the condition of humanity in the not-too-distant future, and the changes that will bring it about as it plays out in our society and culture. His iconic pop art demonstrated this, but his prescience was also evident in his words, especially his now infamous declaration: "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes."

Quarter 3, 2021

Girl With Balloon by Banksy



One of the saddest features of contemporary culture is our obsession with novelty. No matter what the genre, artists these days seem less intent on depicting or revealing “truth and/or beauty” (or lack thereof), and more concerned with finding something radically new, purely because of its newness compared to everything that has come before it in the genre. Musical artists want sounds that have never been recorded or heard before; fashion designers compete to find and display clothing designs that are completely different from anything previous; architects design ever stranger and attention-getting buildings; and so on – just to be new, with novelty as the guiding principle. It matters not how the piece may be positively defined, in and of itself; it’s all about how radically different it can be from everything else and, so, is only negatively defined. For too many artists these days, novelty is the new originality.

It is true that the history of art is replete with turning points generated by this or that artist’s radically new, iconoclastic approach to a genre, by which the genre evolved and significantly changed direction (Picasso’s cubism, Dali’s surrealism, etc.). However, for these creative visionaries of the past, it was not about pursuing novelty. Their radical newness was almost a by-product of the original works they conceived and created, becoming a positive consequence for the future direction of art itself. By contrast, I

refer here to change for the sake of change, novelty purely for novelty's sake, by which even the vision for and quality of the work takes a back seat to the desperate scramble for novelty, and so the integrity of the genre suffers.

And then there's Banksy...

Banksy is certainly an artist with a radically new approach; and though his work is novel on several levels, it is not purely for the sake of novelty. ***Girl with Balloon*** was the piece that took him from the relative obscurity of a decent graffiti artist in England to the rarified status of a world class artist of historical significance. As with greats like Picasso and Dali, there is so much originality in Banksy's approach and work that it defies its own novelty, and it marks a turning point in the history of the visual arts. To define his work as merely novel is to miss everything that places it so far above the pretentious novelty of his contemporaries, which makes him a standout among them.

Girl with Balloon was first rendered as a mural on a wall in London in 2002, including the now famous inscription: "There is always hope". This version, and a few other variations Banksy created around London, were used to support certain social campaigns (the West Bank barrier in 2005; the Syrian refugee crisis in 2014; the 2017 UK election). A poll in 2017 ranked ***Girl with Balloon*** as the United Kingdom's number one favourite artwork. Then in 2018, a framed copy spontaneously shredded during a Sotheby's auction with a mechanical device Banksy had hidden in the frame. Banksy confirmed that he was responsible, giving the piece a new name, ***Love is in the Bin***. And as a result, the auction house announced that it was "the first work in history ever created during a live auction.", which effectively made the destruction of a piece of art a new creation.

Banksy breaks the mold in so many ways, shakes the art world down to its foundations, and makes so many profound statements with each piece, the term 'novelty' just doesn't do him justice. Though he eventually took his craft beyond the realm of basic graffiti, he tried to keep his art out on the street, in the public eye. The image presented in ***Girl with Balloon***, with a strong wind blowing the little girl's hair forward, and the same wind taking her red balloon away, all against a grey and desolate backdrop, captures the dystopian spirit of our times. Even the statement "there is always hope" seems to contradict the image, even mock it, and there may be a hint of sarcasm, further adding to the darkness of the piece.

The surprising automatic shredding of the framed version at auction in 2017 underlined the transient nature of reality in these troubled times, the transience of novelty, and the transience of art itself. What's more, the achievement of anonymity, for such a well-known public artist, is more than intriguing – it's damn impressive. Most importantly,

for all his originality and popularity, and the culture's single-minded quest for novelty, neither Banksy nor his works are to be defined by the newness of his approach. Rather, as with all the greats, he turns everything on its head by using the newness of his approach to define contemporary reality, the better to critique it. For this is art.

Quarter 4, 2021

Mother and Child by Grant Boland



When it came time to turn my attention to reviewing creations of artists from my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador, I felt I needed to address the work of realist painter, Grant Boland, before any other. From the moment I laid eyes on the forty-nine-year-old River Head native's paintings, I have been astounded with the consistently high quality of his work, and the eerie, almost ghostly spirit that seems to inhabit and radiate from each piece, no matter the subject matter.

Since bursting onto the scene in 1994, Grant Boland has received multiple grants and awards for his work, amazing art lovers with his uncanny depictions of ordinary as well as extraordinary subjects. Looking over his body of work as shown on his website, one cannot help but marvel. Whether it be still life, human figures, interiors, city scenes or landscapes, Grant captures them all in a spooky realism that helps you realize how much you tend to miss in everyday life, and how Grant doesn't miss a thing in the totality of what he paints. And it appears that the more challenging the subject in terms of color, shades of light, shines, sheens, and reflections, the more it appeals to him and demands he render it in paint.

Mother and Child, Grant tells me, was created as a realist approach to Max Ernst's 1926 surrealist oil painting, *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses*. But to my artistic sensibilities, flush as I am with a deep love and appreciation of the masters, Grant's realism more than echoes the classics of the Renaissance – it reawakens them. As a lover of the works of Rembrandt, Titian, Caravaggio, and Vermeer, I can see that Grant's paintings betray several aspects of these masters' approach, primarily the central role and crucial use of light.

Taking Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* as an example, we may see that Grant's use of light harkens back to the 'chiaroscuro' technique of classical masters like Caravaggio. A central mode of Renaissance painting, chiaroscuro refers to the use of bold contrasts between light and dark in the work, heavily influencing the entire composition. And while it is true that the direction from which the light comes in these paintings is abundantly clear, the effect is so strong that the light seems to emanate from the subjects themselves. Grant Boland not only seems to have achieved the chiaroscuro effect in *Mother and Child* and many of his other works, to my mind he has improved on it, as there appears to be a special glow from the light in his works.

One more point. Photorealism in painting is often so real that one cannot tell it from a photograph. While this is always a remarkable achievement, it leads one to question the purpose or the point of creating such a painting if it is effectively identical to a photograph of the same subject. But with Grant Boland's realism, it is close enough to a photograph to elicit awe from the viewer, while still retaining the ever-so-slight

appearance and effect of a painting. For me, and I suspect many others, this makes all the difference.

In January of 2018, Grant suffered a stroke due to a damaged artery. Though it gave him a real scare, he continued painting as therapy during his recovery, and soon he was back in the studio as busy as ever. He thought he was going to die, but the experience left him with even greater purpose as a painter. Today he is more dedicated to his art than ever before, and more conscious of the relationship between his mortality and the legacy he will leave behind.

This Quarter (Q2, 2022):

***Sunset on the Black Sea Coast* by Grigory Ivanovich Kapustin**



Given the geo-political events of the last couple of months, specifically the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this quarter I am featuring the work of a Ukrainian artist as a way to show support. The chosen artist is Grigory Ivanovich Kapustin (1865-1925), and the piece is titled “Sunset on the Black Sea Coast”

Kapustin, a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, worked for several years in the studio of the outstanding marine painter in Feodosia, and ended up working in Odessa at the turn of the 20th century. Kapustin was widely known and successful for his marines and forest landscapes, and until 1917 his paintings in tsarist Russia were printed on postcards in huge circulation. Today his works are kept in many regional museums, including the Peterhof Palace in St. Petersburg, as well as in many Russian and foreign private collections.

Detailed information on the life and inspirations of Kapustin are hard to come by. But judging by his breathtaking treatment of the sky in this painting, one can make a good argument for Kapustin’s creations being strongly influenced by the work of J. W. M. Turner (1775-1851), the esteemed English Romantic painter, printmaker and watercolourist. Like Turner, Kapustin was fond of painting the sky and the ocean, and their approaches to painting them are quite comparable.



If we compare this painting to Turner's "The Harbour of Dieppe", we may see several parallels: the dominance of the sky, taking up most of the painting, rivalling the foreground; the sheer expansiveness of both paintings; how the sun and its light occupies a central place in the scene; and then there's the ocean mist that seems to hang in the air in both, such that you can almost taste the salt water.

I have always been a big fan of Turner's work, but since finding Kapustin I have been finding it hard to decide whose work I like most. Fortunately, I don't have to choose and I can enjoy both.

This quarter (Q3, 2022): *Number 11, 1952 (Blue Poles)* by Jackson Pollock



As with many of the greatest artists in history, the "drip painting" technique of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) was controversial when it first appeared, sparking a debate as to whether it was great art or just a sham. The debate raged on for many years, during which Pollock and his radical technique became accepted and eventually revered, helped in no small way by a four-

page spread of his work in Life magazine. Today, of course, he is considered one of the greatest painters of all time.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Pollock produced dozens of drip paintings. What is unique about these paintings is that he is presenting us with paint as paint, instead of using the paint to depict something; and he was the first to do so. It is also called “action painting”, as Pollock would lay the large canvas on the floor, allowing him to look and work at it from all angles without the paint running. The piece also presents differently depending on the proximity of the viewer; with each step closer revealing more colours and colour combinations that are lost in the overall macro-effect when standing farther back.

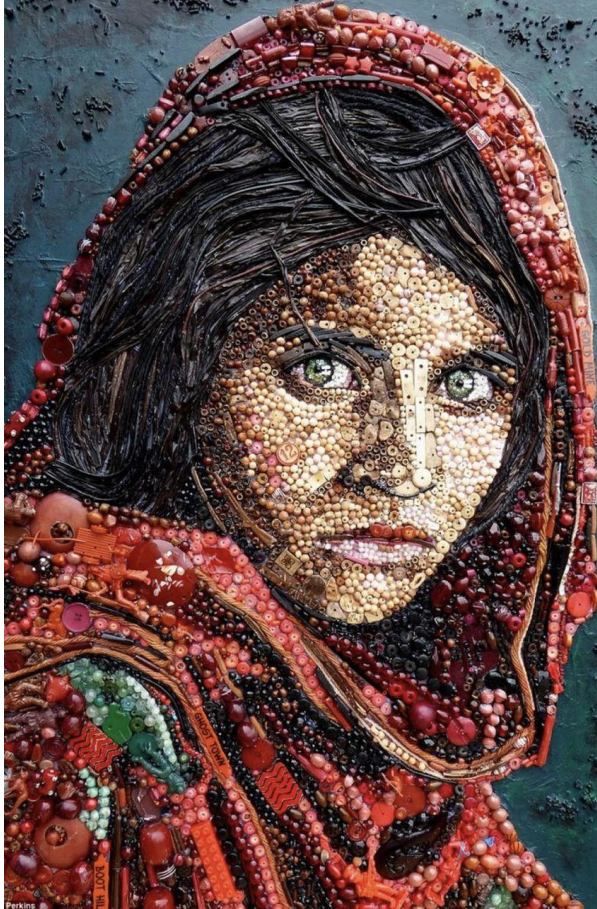
At one point, Pollock decided to stop giving titles to his works, and instead numbered them. Ironically, he later decided to call Number 11, 1952 “Blue Poles”, detracting from the audience’s enjoyment of the work. As art historian Dennis Phillips put it: “(the name) limits our field of comprehension and does the painting a singular disservice. Because we look for the poles and miss much of the rest, the name is simply too distracting.”

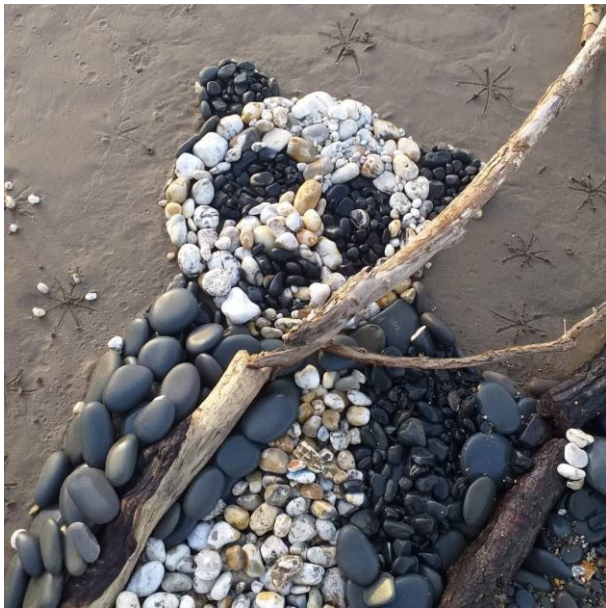
To my mind, Pollock’s drip paintings are epic. They are busy yet straightforward; and there is a sense of organized confusion that is strangely compelling to my eye, and to the eyes of many, apparently. I also think it reflects the rise of electronics in Pollock’s time, as the piece resembles a tangle of wires or soldered wires on a circuit-board. It is not at all unusual for artists to reveal the Zeitgeist of their time, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Sadly, Pollock was a hopeless alcoholic, trying many different methods over the years to quit, all of which ultimately failed. Then, in 1956, he was killed along with one of two passengers in a single-car accident while drinking and driving at the age of 44.

This Quarter (Q1, 2023): Artworks Made Using Everyday Materials

For my artwork review this quarter, I want to strike a blow for genuine artists. Here in the early days of AI generated “art”, and claims that it qualifies as art, I thought I’d feature a selection of artworks that no AI program could ever create. Why? Because it involves an artist’s creative selection of ordinary, everyday materials as the medium. It reinforces my belief that no matter how deft AI programming becomes, it will not be able to match the full range of human artistic expression.







This Quarter (Q3, 2023): Sculpture in the 21st Century

For my artwork review this quarter, I am highlighting some of the newest and most dynamic, thought-provoking sculptures from around the world.

1)



***Force of Nature* in London, United Kingdom**

Located in a few major cities around the globe, it was designed by Italian artist Lorenzo Quinn, inspired by the destruction brought on by hurricanes. It is made from bronze, stainless steel, and aluminum, and depicts Mother Nature hurling the planet in circles. As this one shows, one of the most prominent aspects of a lot of contemporary sculpture is creating the illusion of dynamic movement, and this piece is an excellent example of this.

2)



Les Voyageurs in Marseille-Fos Port, France

Les Voyageurs, by Bruno Catalano, evokes memories and the parts of themselves that every traveler leaves behind when they leave. Like many contemporary sculptures, it makes a point by highlighting what is missing.

3)



***Non-Violence* in New York, New York**

Non-Violence (also known as *The Knotted Gun*) by Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd stands beside the United Nations in New York, and has come to represent hope for a nonviolent future. Cited as one of the primary inspirations behind the arms-to-art movement, it is especially poignant and powerful given the steady stream of mass shootings in the U.S. in recent years.

4)



***Freedom Sculpture* in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

Freedom Sculpture is a 2001 piece designed by Zenos Frudakis. The 7,000-pound and 20-foot-long bronze piece depicts the struggle involved in breaking free from all that holds us back. Note that this piece brilliantly employs both of the two previously mentioned features – the illusion of movement and the highlighting of what is missing.

5)



***The Shoes on the Danube Bank* in Budapest, Hungary**

Created by Can Togay and Gyula Pauer, *The Shoes on the Danube Bank* is a 2005 work commemorating the hundreds of Hungarians who were ordered to leave their shoes on the bank of the river before they were shot during the Holocaust. So powerful, and it is interesting to observe that, in this piece, what is missing are the human beings who owned the shoes.