

Practical Aesthetics

Examining Artwork With a Critical Eye

by Stephen Knudsen

In 19 years of leading critiques as a painting professor, I have seen the benefits of having a *framework* that makes critiques a powerful and vital tool for artistic improvement. Even my most intuitive students benefit from holding up a set of questions to their work, enabling them to tackle aesthetic issues in a way that is practical and encourages critical thinking.

In 1958, art philosopher Monroe Beardsley created a practical aesthetic framework with the potential to benefit working artists who desire to critically analyze their own work and to better appreciate the work of artists they admire. Beardsley's theory is a simple, elegant set of objective reasons for aesthetic success in a work of art. In the treatise, Beardsley proposed that a wide variety of reasons for aesthetic goodness could be condensed into just three categories: *intensity*, *complexity* and *unity*, known as ICU.

ICU is a handy reference for those looking for a means to judge a given work of art beyond intuition — a loose set of guidelines that squares with both basic human perception and the critical eye. As such, it has potential as a tool in critical and formal analysis that can aid both the student and professional. I have seen the power of ICU in self-critique in the process of making art that engages — that, as Mark Rothko said, is “felt even when you have turned your back on it.”

In this article and the companion PDE, I have done substantial surgery on Beardsley's original ICU theory, altering it so that it will be serviceable for today's artist and to better fit with 21st-century ideas about art.¹ I overhauled and expanded the possible qualities of ICU and the new structure is put to the test in specific examples.

Intensity

When discussing a work of art, many notable critics and artists will refer to its *intensity*, the quality of having great energy, strength, depth or emotional force. For example, critic Robert Hughes speaks of the intensity as a “Whitmanesque” quality where the work inhales the world around it. Intensity can be expressed in both content and in form, so let us further define some of the traits



Figure 1: *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp. Photographed by Alfred Stieglitz. The 1917 original, a urinal signed R. Mutt, can only be seen as replicas in museums today.

that have potential to boost this quality in a work of art.

One important quality of intensity that holds great power is *perceptual shifting*. Perceptual shifts in a work of art can occur any time an aspect of the work can be perceived in two clear and different ways, and this gives opportunity for added intensity.

Consider the 2D/3D perceptual shift in many realist paintings. In observing people looking at paintings, they walk back and forth to see the work from multiple distances. They do this because it unlocks a type of intensity in the painting. At a distance, a realist painting is perceived as a picture, yet up close it is perceived as personal marks, sometimes visceral strokes of paint, rising off of a canvas. This 2D/3D paradox is a common perceptual shift that adds vitality.

There is also the potential of a work to invoke a perceptual shift from non-art to art. I call this kind of perceptual shift an *anti-aesthetic/aesthetic shift*.² Once the mind registers something as “art,” it takes admirable mental dexterity to deconstruct it into non-art. The reverse is also true. But such perceptual shifting back and forth is the nature of some works and the recognition of this helps to make sense of more difficult artworks such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, one of his first “readymades.” (See Figure 1.)

¹For Beardsley's unaltered ICU theory, consult his text *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, p. 462-64.

²In his text *Beginning Aesthetics*, John Valentine, introduces the idea of perceptual shift.

For many viewers, *Fountain* is a quandary: Is it serious art or a practical joke? Even its title is a slippery combination of non-art and art that can denote clear water flowing over a sculpture as easily as a urinating man. And while Duchamp claimed the urinal was an arbitrary object aesthetically, its white porcelain has several aesthetic properties (smooth texture and an unusual shape) that are difficult to ignore, especially when presented in a gallery or museum instead of on a bathroom wall.

What is clear is that when Duchamp declared *Fountain* to be a work of art, his intention was to provoke. Duchamp presented *Fountain* as an ironic and enigmatic piece with a great deal of wit. As perception of the object oscillates back and forth, it is the concept that becomes the art. The intensity generated by Duchamp's idea was so great that *Fountain* turned the course of Western art, especially concerning conceptual art and performance art.

The anti-aesthetic/ aesthetic shift is not the only perceptual shift possible in a work. For example in *The Family of Saltimbanques*, Picasso created a subject-matter perceptual shift. (See Figure 2.) At first glance the painting is a portrait of circus performers, perhaps inspired in part by the performers of Cirque Medrano. But closer inspection reveals to us that the narrative depicted in the painting is taken directly from the life of the painter. Study of context shows us that the work is also about Picasso, his friends, his lover and a little girl all caught up in a disturbing episode.

In 1905, Picasso was living in Montmartre with his first love, Fernande Olivier. The couple took in a little orphan girl whom

Learn More About ICU.

Be sure to read the companion piece, *Practical Aesthetics: Knudsen's Revised Qualities of ICU*, for a closer look at the characteristics of intensity, complexity and unity discussed here, as well as an in-depth analysis of Mark Rothko's *No. 61, Rust and Blue* using ICU theory. Available online as a free PDF download at ArtCalendar.com/practicalaesthetics.

Picasso and his friends grew to adore. But to Picasso's displeasure, Olivier tired of the girl and insisted the child be sent away. In the painting, Picasso depicts himself as the harlequin and his closest friends as other circus performers. Olivier is separated from the group in the far right corner of the painting. The emotional tension over the child's fate is expressed by all of the figures looking away in thought and by Olivier's distance from the group. This perceptual shifting of Picasso's circle back again to a group of transient circus performers gives the content more dimensions and adds to the universal intensity of the work.

Complexity

Complexity is the tendency toward many parts and/or qualities in intricate arrangement and contradiction. At a basic level, complexity involves building variety within and among formal elements of a work: line, shape, value, hue, saturation, translucency, opacity, textures, etc.

First, let us look at how richness in contrasts involving formal elements builds complexity. In the visual arts, seven color schemes are often noted. They are arranged as follows in an order from least contrast to most contrast: achromatic, monochromatic, analogous, trichromatic, split complementary, complementary and double complementary. This order moves from consonance (or harmony) toward dissonance (or discord). Moving toward dissonance builds more overt complexity, while moving toward consonance, a work becomes subtler.

In the visual realm, there are more contrasts than just the hue contrasts of the color schemes. One of the most thorough color theorists on this topic was Johannes Itten. In his definitive text *The Art of Color*, Itten dedicates an entire chapter to contrast languages that have great power. In his list of contrasts, we have value contrast, hue contrast, saturation contrast, simultaneous contrast, contrast of extension, and temperature contrast, and though he did not add it, translucency/ opacity contrast could be added as well.

As an example of one type of



Figure 2: *The Family of Saltimbanques* by Pablo Picasso. 1905. Oil on canvas, 212.8 cm x 229.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

contrast let us take another look at Picasso's *The Family of Saltimbanques*. (See Figure 2.) Look at how Picasso adds complexity to *Saltimbanques* by changing the value contrast throughout the work. Overall, the composition has a rather low value contrast level, casting the figures in an ethereal haze. However, not all value contrasts are the same throughout the painting. The highest value contrast is reserved for Picasso and the lowest value contrast is reserved for Olivier — and for good reason. The act of Olivier sending the child away is distancing her from Picasso. Olivier is dissolving in this painting as though she were in the background, but she is, in fact, in the foreground — the last place that the viewer expects the lowest value contrast. These poetic contrast changes create richness and lend themselves to a complexity that supports the content (or inner logic) of the narrative.

Unity

Let us now focus on Beardsley's last category: *unity*, or the combining of parts and/or elements into an effective whole. The easiest discussion of unity involves building repetition within and among the formal elements (line, shape, value, hue, saturation, translucency, opacity, textures, as well as loudness, pitch, timbre, duration, tempo). Let us look at unity on a deeper level.

In the discussion above, we spoke of color schemes as a builder of complexity. Let's explore some organizing maneuvers that have the ability to tie all the components of a work into a whole. This idea of wholeness, or *gestalt*, is a form of unity that is important in the human psyche. For inspiration, let's look at a great example of *gestalt* in the experimental animated film, *Felix in Exile*, by William Kentridge. (Please see www.artcalendar.com/kentridge.) Using stop-motion photography, Kentridge creates an entire film from thousands of sketches that are drawn, erased and re-drawn on the same few pieces of paper. Since the eraser marks are built into each successive drawing, each image has an essence of the preceding image, with the last image functioning as the history of the entire film. Kentridge's process is a powerful thread that ties the film together into a profound whole.

Great examples of art more often than not come together as a unified whole. In the big picture, complexity is not opposed to unity. Just as in the Kentridge film, a work of art can have great



Figure 3: *Nude Floating*, 1939, by Edward Weston. Silver gelatin print, 8" x 10". Collection of the Center for Creative Photography.

complexity that culminates into a well-organized whole.

Rhythm is one of the great unity builders. In music, rhythm is often a mathematical organization of sounds into accented and de-accented beats. In the visual realm, rhythm is an arrangement within and among formal elements in repeating patterns.

Note the unifying visual rhythm in the Edward Weston photograph, *Nude Floating* (see Figure 3). When a stone falls into water, it creates wave energy that radiates as ever-larger rings outward. Likewise, the slight movement of Charis Wilson (the nude) in the water creates radiating waveforms. These waveforms, which are rhythmic, create parallel rhythms in the *caustic network* created by the focus and defocus of light falling across the body. A caustic network is created when a disturbed water surface acts as positive and negative lenses as direct light passes through the water and then rakes over something opaque — in this case, the concrete bottom and the human flesh. Though this astonishing light and water interaction is often extremely complex, it is also extremely unifying due to its inherent rhythm. The concrete tank itself is a curve, so in the photo everything squares in an act of rhythm — light, water, concrete, and flesh.

Tonal merging is another powerful tool used in creating unity. Any student who was ever told to improve a figure/ground relationship by merging colors of the figure into the ground and vice-versa is being instructed in the virtues of a type of part-to-part assimilation to build a unified whole. This idea can go a long way in solving many problems of disunity. For example, imagine a complicated design composed of four different complementary color pairs. Say this design lacked *gestalt* because nothing ties it all together. A miniscule addition of one pure color to all the

other colors will make an almost imperceptible change yet give the design a feeling that everything is now connected, achieving an essence of unity without losing the complementary quality.

Where is the greatest tonal merging in our perception of a landscape? It's in the background. There, due to optical distortion, hues and values have merged drastically and resolution is low. Mark Rothko employed this type of tonal merging throughout the entire pictorial field of his mature period paintings to create a unified mystical feel. (See companion PDF.)

A *gradient* is another powerful tool often used to create unity. A gradient is simply the path or movement in incremental degrees from one quality toward its opposite that can produce a feeling of gestalt by guiding us from one point in the work to another. Gradients also evoke visceral engagement and complexities.

Lastly, in the visual realm, ideas of *pictorial thrusts* (extensions) can help our understanding of compositional organization that lends to unity. Since thrusts cause the viewer to move from one point to another within an image, they increase unity. And having thrusts in a variety of directions creates complexity.

For example, take the pictorial thrusts at work in Eric Fischl's Post-Modern narrative, *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog*. (See Figure 4.) Notice the horizontal thrusts of the central figure that lies on a horizontal across the canvas and the line of the three heads in the background. Also notice the many diagonal thrusts such as those created by the wave edge, boat gunwales, and fishing rod. These important figures, edges, lines, and gazes lead the viewer from one end of the work to the other, help to connect parts across the work and therefore lend toward gestalt.

Principles of proximity (figures near or overlapping) and enclosure (a central figure orbited by four others) lend unity in this work as well. The extensive repetition of triangles and the repetition of the turquoise water in the turquoise cushion also lend unity. This sense of unity and soothing order in the painting supports the astonishing apathy shown by figures in the face of the danger of the oncoming storm. In other words, the design in the painting supports the inner logic of the work and generates more unity.

This unity then charges the intensity of the work as well. In 1981 as Fischl was making *Old Man's Boat*, New York's negative attitude toward new painting

engaging "our curiosity with a strong and central interest in story" was epitomized by Hilton Kramer in *The New York Times* of that year. Kramer's essay, entitled "Narrative Painting Struggles for a Rebirth," opened the discussion of the genre resurfacing but doubted it could be done with any significance at that time.

But then Fischl quelled the doubts with paintings such as *Old Man's Boat*. Fischl took what was seen as an outworn form, narrative painting, and respectfully recontextualized it. He used it to deliver a voyeuristic contemporary spectacle that spoke (and still speaks) to the social malaise and the discontent with the supposed utopia that modernism was to bring. It resonated and made us want to look again at new narrative painting. And after looking, we could not forget. **AC**

Stephen Knudsen has taught painting for the past 19 years at SCAD and is a painter with an international exhibition record. He also recently led the development of an image comparison tool that incorporates practical aesthetics for The Artstory. To see more of his examples on this topic, visit theartstory.org. Knudsen is a frequent writer for Art Calendar, has published groundbreaking color theory and developed the Knudsen Dual Color Wheel, used in universities across the country. He will lecture on his revision of Monroe Beardsley's aesthetics at the 2010 SECAC conference. E-mail: sknudsen@scad.edu. Website: www.steveknudsen.com.



Figure 4: *The Old Man's Boat and the Old Man's Dog* by Eric Fischl. Oil on canvas, 84" x 84". Saatchi collection, London.