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Beauty Enthroned
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ABSTRACT

For the longest time in Western culture beauty and art were inseparable from one another. However, within the last one hundred years, various cultural movements and phenomena have split Beauty into a series of dichotomies that exist independently from one another. These bifurcations have weakened Beauty’s power and influence and reduced its intellectual rigor. No longer taken seriously as a primary goal or characteristic of art, Beauty has been reduced to mere charm and superficiality. My body of work seeks to reunify Beauty, thereby giving back its agency and legitimacy in art.
In the summer of 2017, the Museum of Modern Art presented a retrospective for one of post-war art’s greatest icons, Robert Rauschenberg. The exhibition, titled “Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends,” brought together an astounding array of Rauschenberg’s works, including his paintings, combines, sculptures, and collaborations with cultural contemporaries. Walking through the exhibition, I was struck by how ugly everything was.

In fact, many of MoMA’s most esteemed works in its modern art collection are, in fact, ugly. De Kooning’s *Woman I* is positively psychotic. *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, while certainly a pivotal and ingenious work, is not one you would look at for pure pleasure. MoMA has several of Lynda Benglis’ scategorical blobs and multiple Louise Bourgeois sculptures that look like shriveled genitals. But these pieces were not made to be beautiful; they are fascinating because of their deformities. Functioning as necessary and critical reactions against the Western art canon, the works challenged and expanded the definition of art, adopting the forms appropriate to what the artists wanted to express.

However, with this expanded definition of art, concept became privileged over form. This phenomenon, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, has continued to dominate the approach to Western contemporary artistic practice. The politicization of ideas and concepts in art, particularly of Beauty, has gradually and perniciously saturated current cultural discourse, leaving little room for Beauty to act independently as a goal for artistic creation. Art is already deemed superfluous by contemporary society, and beauty only seems to exacerbate art’s status as frivolous. It seems that the only way for society to become more exigent, egalitarian, and inclusive is to eliminate Beauty’s relevancy. Unfortunately, the lack of beauty in art has led to the corruption of the artistic viewing experience. Wider cultural developments, including the hermeneutics of suspicion (Beech 12); skepticism towards objectivity (Beech 15); “heightened
moral sensibility” (Higgins 31); and the hyper-efficient, fast-paced state of contemporary society, contribute to Beauty’s lack of import in both society and art. Beauty has become disconnected from society as a whole, and the art produced today reflects this loss. Looking at contemporary art is less a spiritual or pleasurable experience and more of a mental game involving jumping through flaming hoops of social conditioning, theory, and politics.

Western culture has tamed Beauty, undermining its influence by fracturing it into a series of conflicting ideologies. My work focuses on three of these dichotomies. The first overarching split is the separation of beauty from art. For millennia in Western culture, art and beauty were one in the same, “with beauty as among art’s main principal aims and art as beauty’s highest calling” (Beech 12). However, during the rise of the avant-garde, beauty in art became superficial, trivial, and unworthy of inquiry. The second is the split of beauty into sensual and spiritual. The third is the split of the previously unified realm of beauty into the Beautiful and the Sublime, which privileged the Sublime as the profound aesthetic category and rendered the Beautiful pleasant but intellectually void.

My work investigates the intersection and relationship between these bifurcations, ultimately seeking to reunify them. Moreover, I assert the importance of beauty in an artwork as a means in itself. The aesthetic philosopher Arthur Danto separated works into those whose beauty was “incidental” and artworks whose beauty was “integral,” meaning “that beauty is internal to the meaning of the work” (Danto 62). Beauty is integral to my practice, and I use it both as a tool to convey my ideas and as an end goal itself.

Joris-Karl Huysman’s Decadent novel Against Nature (1884) embodies similar ideas regarding the relationship between beauty and art and the sensual and spiritual, and has inspired several major bodies of works. The novel focuses on the idiosyncratic aesthetic explorations of
its protagonist, a rich aesthete named Des Esseintes. Unhappy with the sullied commonness of bourgeoisie Paris, Des Esseintes retreats to a country estate to create his own ideal world of beauty and artifice. Jewels, design, perfume, books, and collectors’ items become substitutes for real experiences, and Des Esseintes uses his imagination and honed senses to conjure up fantastical journeys from simply interacting with the items. He would rather create his own ideal, romanticized experience rather than be disappointed by the reality. For Des Esseintes, sensuality and spirituality are intertwined, and he finds pleasure and transcendence through extravagant, artificial, and tactile beauty.

My investigation into the power of beauty started with an installation called *Altar to Beauty* (2016). The installation was conceived as an artifact of a culture whose main goal was to find transcendence through ornate visual stimulation. Consisting of blue and orange hand-printed wallpaper, wooden triptych, red velvet table cover, silver candlesticks, and a manifesto, the work was inspired by a chapter in *Against Nature* in which Des Esseintes decides to decorate the rooms of his estate. His tastes are wildly eccentric and elaborate, and his bizarre combinations of colors, patterns, and materials influenced my decision to use over-the-top, jarring patterns and a multitude of colors.

My engagement with Huysmans continued with my *Blooming Nobles* series (2017), where I first painted on a large scale. In chapter 8 of *Against Nature*, Des Esseintes expresses a
desire for “some natural flowers that would look like fakes” (Huysmans 97), and proceeds to order dozens of rare, tropical flowers, which he calls “princesses of the vegetable kingdom” (Huysmans 96). Wanting to capture his luscious and mangled floral cacophony, I used oil paints diluted with turpentine and thick impasto to create an explosion of floral forms across large canvases. Des Esseintes beloved flowers are “ravaged by syphilis” and “displayed livid patches of flesh mottled with roseola” (Huysmans 98), and I stained raw canvas with fleshy pinks, bruised purples, and sickly greens, thick spots of red impasto and sinister pencil marks to transmute Des Esseintes’ passion for these unique blooms from page to painting. Painting on large canvases meant that the forms would fill the viewer’s visual field. By combining various types of mark making on one surface, I wanted to build a beautiful space that simultaneously expressed elegance and grotesqueness. Des Esseintes’ obsession with unusual beauty, artifice, and escape parallels my desire for my artwork to unite beauty and art, and transport the viewer.
While developing the *Blooming Nobles* series, no other individual artist was more influential than Cy Twombly. In particular, I looked at his series *Nine Discourses on Commodus* (1963), which documents the horrific rule, decline into insanity, and eventual assassination of the Roman emperor Aurelius Commodus. Twombly captured putrefaction and drama in embracing the viscosity of paint and infusing it with energetic mark making, resulting in a lush carnality that arouses sensory reverie.

Twombly has further influenced me because of his approach to source materials. While he was a contemporary of Pop and Minimalist art’s greatest names, including Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris, and Donald Judd, he parted drastically from them in both technique and subject matter. Twombly found inspiration in poetry and myth instead popular imagery and consumerism, and used materials considered dead and gone to the 1960s art world: pencil, paint, and canvas. When the now-lauded *Nine Discourses on Commodus* (1963) was first exhibited at Leo Castelli’s gallery, it was scathingly mocked. Donald Judd called it “fiasco.” The work provoked one of the worst criticisms that could be have been said during that age: the paintings reeked of “old Europe” (“Nine Discourses”).

In a similar vein, I reject contemporary imagery, references, and materials in order to work against current notions of speed, quantitative efficiency, and digital immediacy. My work encourages prolonged looking and seeks to be a catalyst for spiritual experience, creating a space for the viewer to slow down and escape from the hyper-efficiency and fast pace of life of today’s
society. Using traditional media like painting and printmaking alludes to the past and reinforces the rejection of present. The large canvas format echoes the monumental formats of mythological and history paintings, which engulf the viewer and make them aware of their size relation to both the physical painting and their relationship to the historical material.

Kathleen Marie Higgins makes a poignant statement in her seminal essay “Whatever Happened to Beauty”: “The style of our activity is also contradictory to the traditional idea of beauty...Beauty appears to be attuned to our senses, and thereby facilitates a sense of repose in our contemplation of it. By contrast, in our era, we do not have time for beauty or repose. Our frenzy for getting ahead of the game by means of efficient juggling and corner-cutting does not jibe easily with the aesthetic model of beauty” (Beech 33). This observation, made in 1999, is only intensified in today’s world. Contemporary society, with its countless technological and social distractions, is an inhospitable place for beauty.

The Romantic Movement is ideologically aligned with how I conceptualize and place my work in the present. Originally a literary movement that started in 1800, Romanticism embraced nature and its “uncontrollable power, unpredictability, and potential for cataclysmic extremes” (Galitz). Romantic artists rejection of logic and rationality in favor of the imagination and emotion echo my desire for my art to remove the viewer from the present and immerse them in a beautiful but abstract, indefinable place. The Romantic artists sought to access and capture a similar emotional drama and fervent, ethereal essence in their paintings.
This drama and intense visual engagement is present in *The Lotos Eaters* (2018), a suite of lithographic prints based on Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Lotos-Eaters.” The lithographs depict the various flora mentioned in Tennyson’s poem, including asphodel, poppies, snowdrops, and lotus plants. Lithography provided a way to create marks that were both beautiful and sinister. Referencing Jim Dine’s artist book *The Temple of Flora* (1984) helped me develop the captivating but fundamentally foreboding atmosphere of the Land of the Lotus Eaters. Housed in a handmade black clamshell box with red lining, the prints offer an alternative channel for both the viewer and myself to engage with Beauty’s dichotomies.

Opening, unboxing, and examining the individual prints one at a time facilitates an alternative experience compared to viewing a large painting.

While developing my work, it was necessary for me to explore the facets of sensual and spiritual beauty separately before reintegrating them. The contrasting idea of beauty and transcendence, one that was overtly spiritual and tied directly to God, presented itself in the Biblical story of the Annunciation. A foundational moment in Christianity when God sends the...
archangel Gabriel to reveal to Mary that she will bear Christ, the Annunciation represents the unification of the divine and the mortal, and is intensely beautiful and timeless. I looked at dozens of Annunciation paintings, and each artist had their own way of conveying the beautiful divine in a way that fit with the accepted beliefs of the time.

Working during the Middle Ages, Simone Martini liberally used rich colors and gold in his *Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus* (1333). Renaissance artists Botticelli and Raphael conveyed the moment’s transcendence through the elegance of their figures and poised compositions.

My early explorations of the Annunciation relied heavily on gold, Madonna blue, and iconic Annunciation symbols like the lily. However I gradually shifted away from this approach because I wanted to convey the divine energy inherent in the Annunciation without overtly referencing it. I became transfixed with the graceful sweep of Gabriel’s robes as they flowed behind him, indicating that he has swiftly descended from heaven and his robes have not yet settled. For me, Gabriel’s flowing robes and wings became abstracted visual signals that alluded to the Annunciation but removed the content several degrees from Christianity.
*Untitled* (2018) is composed of thin layers of diluted pink, purple, and light blue oil paint that are built up to create an ethereal space. As in *Blooming Nobles*, transparency is again paired with line and opacity to add rhythm and lateral energy. White oil paint stick and gold oil pastel (a nod to the Middle Ages and my previous investigations) are applied in an arching movement. However, this time paint was continuously removed, reapplied, smeared, and dragged across the canvas. The paintings were composed on the ground and rotated constantly on the wall throughout the process in order to achieve a sense of suspension and weightlessness. The goal was to convey a feeling of being swept away by an unidentifiable force, a force whose momentum stems from divinity.

Eighteenth-century philosophers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke split the traditionally unified realm of beauty into two subcategories: the beautiful and the sublime. Elaine Scarry states that, “The sublime occasioned the demotion of the beautiful because it ensured that the meadow flowers, rather than being perceived in their continuity with the august silence of ancient groves...were now seen instead as a counterpoint to that grove” (Scarry 39). These two categories were inherently gendered, with the beautiful indicating something that was attractive and feminine, like a delicate flower. The sublime on the other hand was powerful, dynamic, incomprehensible, and masculine, for instance a storm brewing on the sea or a looking out to a vast canyon.
The painting *Hymn to Beauty* (2018) reconciles the beautiful with the sublime. With flashes of gold pastel and deep purple hues, the painting immediately draws the viewer in because of the pure pleasure it produces. However, the painting pushes beyond surface-level appeal and inspires a sense of wonder. The longer one looks at it, the more details emerge. I first established the hazy atmosphere by layering washes of color onto gessoed canvas, as I had done previously. However, instead of the pastel shades of Botticelli and Raphael, I used red, purples, and blacks reminiscent of Mark Rothko’s dark color field paintings. Analyzing the immense power in JMW Turner’s *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (1812) and the exquisite darkness in James Abbott McNeil Whistler’s *Nocturn in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket* (1872-1877) helped me integrate magnificent atmospheric force with delicate moments in the painting. This painting also represents the final unification of the sensual and spiritual, and of beauty and art. I took what I had learned from *Blooming Nobles* and my Annunciation investigations to create a space that embraces the sensual tactility of *Against Nature* and “The Lotos-Eaters” while concurrently
facilitating an immersive spiritual experience. *Hymn to Beauty* is governed by beauty, about beauty, and is a piece for which beauty is its main aspiration.

Why does beauty in art matter in a world of rampant violence, inequality, and hunger? Surely beauty is superfluous to survival, something special reserved for the privileged, the curtain that hides the world’s horrors. To this I say no. Beauty is necessary for survival, particularly beauty that humans create. Beautiful art is powerful because we see humanity and the potential for future humanity. Creating art is what makes humans distinctive as a species. While the ideals and standards of beauty used to be a homogeneous amongst a people during each period of time in history, today we have a more diverse sense of beauty. However, the sense of completeness, calm, and equilibrium that beauty engenders, whatever one’s personal taste, is universal. The point is that beautiful art fulfills a need that no other thing in this world can provide.

I do not suggest that art only be beautiful or that artists be constrained in the kind of visual forms they give to their ideas; it would not do to have one ideology dominate another like in the Academic past. However, the concept of beauty has been fractured to the detriment of both art and society. In uniting previously opposing ideas in my art, I give Beauty back its power and re-negotiate a rightful place for Beauty at the artistic table. Art does not have to be beautiful to be considered a work of art, but Beauty needs to be accepted as an artistically legitimate and conceptually sufficient aim. It is time for Beauty to return and reinvigorate contemporary art.
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