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The Bone Yard

Unlike the classic art, which was full of expressive and definite beauty and meaning, contemporary art is sometimes difficult for understanding. Artist's idea might be hidden so deeply within avangardist images that it might be even impossible to follow painter's idea. Julie Heffernan is definitely not such kind of artist. She is one of those very few painters who manage to unite the classic images of beauty with the symbolism of modernity. Julie Heffernan is famous for her series of paintings, in which refinement and idealism of baroque is combined with symbolism of contemporary reality. Another characteristic feature of the artist is that in all of her works involving human images are auto-portraits. I had a pleasure to view her works in the Oklahoma City Museum of Arts during her ongoing exhibition "Infinite Work in Progress" February 16 - May 13 2012.

The work I was preferred most of all was one of the earliest ones; it was not as colourful as the most recent ones. The name of the painting is "Bone yard" of 2010. The materials include oil and canvas. Overall size of the piece is 18x18 inches. The choice of materials is mainly conditioned by artist's nostalgia for the past times. Irrespective of the fact that she is sending the modern message to the contemporary public, she remains longing for the past times when things were different. This might be seen in the materials used, techniques applied and the images on the piece. The main feature of Heffernan's works is in contradiction and contrasting of various matters. Just as she contrasts past with the present and warns about the future, she also contrasts clarity with vagueness of contours and figures. In such way, she gains an opportunity to emphasise specific aspect of the whole piece and

relevance of a certain message. The same outcome is achieved in case of the contrast of colours.

Analysing the piece more specifically, it should be outlined that complexity of aforementioned techniques and symbolism of the painting send one clear message to the audience – irrespective of long-livingness of human civilisation, it could not prevent itself from extinction. The age of human civilisation is embodied in the figures of various ancient idols, depicting human vanity and supremacy over nature. On the other hand, human failure and actual extinction of human being as species was shown through the waterfall in the form of bones. The only witnesses of human failure are fishes in the pool. The use of colour and clarity/vagueness techniques, making fish and fountain brighter and clearer than the whole picture contribute to the central thesis of this work – death of one species and subsequent survival of another one, continuation of the natural cycle of life-death.

Another way to interpret the painting is from the point of constancy and flow of life. In this regard, human bones show the transience of human life and that no matter how humanity might want to live longer it will not be able to trick death. The image of fish observing the waterfall of human bones might be viewed as nature's observation of human vanity in desire to reshape what was once created ideal – natural environment of existence for all species. Particular feature of this piece is that, irrespective of the crucial meaning of the issues posed in it, it is quite small in comparison to other works of the artist. This inconsistency has also a specific symbolic meaning – even the smallest things matter in this world.

The meaning of this piece for the humanities and society in general is that it

shows the meaning of the contemporary art. Unlike the art of Renaissance and Romanticism, it does not exist exquisitely for the aesthetic benefits or for its own sake. This piece is an example of contemporary art, which exists for the benefits of the community – human society. Thus, it has an essential purpose – to force the audience considering some aspect of contemporary reality, like global warming, nuclear weapon and extinction of species due to human carelessness. In this regard, the importance of this piece and subsequent style of art is in its mediatory position between humanity and the surrounding world. Unlike media or political speeches, this piece does not impose certain plan of action or obligations on its viewer, but it makes the audience think of what might be wrong and why the waterfall should consist of human bones. This piece shows the interdisciplinary meaning of the contemporary art and systematic methods of expressiveness.

The main reason why I had chosen this piece among all others was its complexity expressed through simplicity of the images and the very composition. Although other paintings were bigger and more colourful than this one and immediately triggered emotional reflection, this one was not causing the burst of emotions rather it required attentive observation and thorough consideration of the symbols. On the other hand, it may be also a subconscious reaction to the image of human bones, which attracted my attention. In any case, this piece is worth of viewing and analysing and I recommend everyone to visit the ongoing exhibition of Julie Heffernan.