

Appropriation and important postmodern strategy



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Important shifts in visual strategies in the arts mark the historic cross-over from the Modern to the postmodern paradigm. While this holds equally true in music and literature, it is the evolution of such strategies in the visual arts that this essay concentrates on. While such demarcation cannot be pinned down to a specific year or date, it is possible to convincingly chart this shift via an examination of the working strategies of three important painters: Americans Andy Warhol and David Salle, and Australia's Imants Tillers.

Postmodern art, by definition, rejects strict genre confines and, unlike modern art, celebrates the mixing of forms and ideas. As a result of this rejection, postmodernism advertises the use of irony, parody, satire, humour and collage.

The use of appropriation in art is a useful strategy for commenting on or criticising aspects of life by recontextualising an image or object of already determined meaning. Giving new meaning to, or building upon the meaning of, an existing idea by redefining its context is an effective tool that alters or interferes with the viewers original association with an object or idea. This being immediately recognisable as a postmodern approach due to its embrace of contradiction, diversity and the "unconventional". This is important as the message translates easily, giving meaning to a modern day audience.

David Salle's *Tragedy*, 1995, is a diptych. The right-hand panel is performed in grisaille, a technique predominantly used to render figures from one base colour or monotonous, greatly accentuating the mood. In this panel are two figures, a smirking female, obliquely behind the main male figure who sits

with hands on knees with the face distorted into a grotesque parody of despair.

The left panels apparent pastiche is backgrounded by what appears to be a domestic scene derived from a 1950s advertisement, possibly a direct reference to Richard Hamilton's landmark artwork *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956), a work widely considered as a seminal precursor to Pop art. There is also a possible death motif in reference to the Cold War and the anxiety of the Atomic age of the post-WW2 West. In the centre is a black and white photograph of a bomb blast, surrounded by lemons, with a black glove at the top right corner. The explosion could also be representational of death, as well as the black glove being a traditional mourning trope, these funerary motifs all relating back to the tragic tone of the artwork, and the man's expression.

Salle's work is more about juxtaposition which he uses as a strategy to destabilise the ways in which we traditionally see, and at the same time reconfigure traditional visual narrative. He leans heavily on a simple strategy of montaging images of the banal and everyday. The effect is jarring and visually disturbing. In this, we can see his indebtedness to the better aspects of Pop like Warhol and James Rosenquist.

Salle also created another diptych work entitled 'Comedy' (1995) using the same layout, but mirrored with opposite facial expressions on the figures; as the man with an exaggerated frown in *Tragedy* now smiles in *Comedy*. The left panel of *Comedy* is also rendered in grisaille. In the right panel, an advertisement for a bedroom suite is set on its side and like the artist's early

works is collaged with additional imagery: a black and white photograph of a headless female fashion mannequin, enclosed by a garland of butterflies, and below a theatrically ruffled harlequin collar.

The paired titles may refer directly to Salle's set and costume designs for ballet and theatre, as well as his endeavour into directing the 1995 feature film *Search and Destroy*. The tropes of the frilled glove and harlequin collar in Salle's work of the early nineties hints to his involvement with the performing arts. A cinematic feel can also be identified in Salle's juxtapositions of scenes that conjure a cinematic impression in which components are arranged to produce an alternative meaning that is not, indeed cannot, be seen in the singular images alone. The fact that the images of the man in the foreground are reversed when comparing *Comedy* and *Tragedy* also gives the viewer an ironic configuration of the Janus, the tragic and comic faces are referenced, via each other, into a singular idea. The God Janus was the protector of gates and doors, beginnings and endings and dates to Roman times. But beyond the traditional trope of the Janus, is the fact that he is two-faced.

It may be of some interest to note that, before making it big as an artist Salle worked for a short time in the late 1970's as a paste-up artist for *Stag* magazine, a pornographic publication. It is interesting to note that highly sexualised and fetish images making a regular appearance in his works of the 1980s. In *Tragedy* the main figure is haloed by a biomorphic shape, at once visceral and phallic. If this motif is indeed phallic, along with the bomb blast possibly symbolising " a premature explosion", *Tragedy* may well portray a failure of male potency. Taking this reading, *Comedy* must surely

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read as the opposite: the main male figure beams, proud and confident as opposite a bio-morphically enclosed female mannequin in a flowing gown stands without a head. The fact the female mannequin is headless is also interesting, being without identity, the female strictly objectified.

The porn aesthetic is genuinely interesting though. While porn does not read compositionally the same as any other figurative traditions, porn's narratives run to succinct, highly predictable paradigms. Pasting-up, now a dead skill as all such work is now done on a computer, was physically very much like a collage. Pasting-up is a compositional exercise where images and/or text are literally separate physical items pasted into position on a board for photo reproduction prior to final printing. So we could argue that some of Salle's visual sensibility – the recurring figures and images, the outlines of figures and objects cast over earlier images and grounds – could have derived from his work for a porn publication.

Salle was raised on the mythology of the Abstract Expressionists.

Accordingly, the scale of his work is New York School-size; his 1995 diptych *Tragedy* is over 3.5 metres in length. Salle also defers to the Abstract Expressionist myth of all-over composition, the famous domain of Jackson Pollock. But rather than the frenetic, energetic marks of Pollock's famous *Poured Period*, Salle crams his canvasses full of eclectic figures and objects, often dissimilar and jarring, often seemingly disconnected and layered. It is an ironic homage to the macho painters of the New York School.

Salle is widely considered one of the early blatantly postmodern painters by virtue of his subversion of the recognisable, and by distorting the familiar via

awkward juxtapositions and unlikely compositional decisions. He drew from such widely artistic traditions as Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Realism and Cubism as well as images from popular culture. Although much of his work seems highly symbolic, Salle's paintings seem not to contain a specific message, but rather leave space for the viewer to interact, to read into, the work. It is this interaction that brings the work to meaningful completion. This active engagement of the viewer is also a prime postmodern strategy.

Imant Tillers use of quotation and appropriation has seen him classified as one of the early postmodern painters. His approach has a clearly personal element, despite appropriating imagery from both unknown and famous artists alike. Tiller's 1985 work 'The Nine Shots' is a an abstract figure who appears to be laying sprawled on his back, with nine target shapes all about him. Instantly, one can see the direct influence of Indigenous art influence on this piece. Tillers notably recontextualises the circular Indigenous motif for 'camp site' or 'resting place' to represent bullet holes.

The main Aboriginal image Tillers' has appropriated in The Nine Shots was Michael Nelson Tjagamarra's Five dreamings, 1982. This appropriation lead to some considerable controversy, with allegations that appropriating Aboriginal imagery without permission impinged upon the moral privileges of the artist. The offence being exacerbated

by the indissolubility of Aboriginal art from its environment. Tillers seemingly questioned identity established by and arising from locality by displaying appropriated cultural imagery with other images from different contexts.

Over the next decade Tillers' relationship with aboriginal art developed, even to the point of gaining a personal friendship with Tjagamarra whose work he incorporated without permission, the two even collaborating together in *Nature Speaks: Y (Possum Dreaming)* in 2001 using Aboriginal Walibri motifs. Walibri icons subsequently appearing as common elements in Tillers later work as a result.

Tillers appropriation of aboriginal signs seems now to be more an appreciation of their artistic power. Although there has been no change in Tiller's practice of appropriating Aboriginal art in his own work without permission, it could be deduced that the moral dilemma surrounding the re-using of sacred Aboriginal artworks has become less controversial, its treatment becoming more alike non-aboriginal art.

While appropriating, 'building upon', 'borrowing from' and 'being influenced by' others art is now a mainstay of postmodern art, it is never going to be without hazard as art is not confined to particular types of objects. Aboriginal art it is a device of selfdom, a title deed to the land, a cypher of ancestral presence.

It is the situation that Aboriginal law reserves rights to produce these sacred works to a limited group of artists and the infraction of these rights in the unauthorised borrowing of such art can be seen as a type of sacrilege that affects the foundation of the artist's society.

While widely recognised as the chief proponent of the Pop idiom, specific early works by Andy Warhol can retrospectively demonstrate the decline of the Modernist period. Warhol's rejection of the machismo of the New York <https://assignbuster.com/appropriation-and-important-postmodern-strategy/>

School is a classic Oedipal strategy. The best of the Abstract Expressionists had traded heavily on the supposed Jungian content of their work, whereby meaning was derived from the actual physical laying down of paint on canvas. Most notable of these, of course, was Jackson Pollock who was on the record in interview touting his Jungian pedigree. By implication also, this Jungian ideal cashed out on the implicit value of originality. To witness the extent to which adoration of the authentic mark of the artist extended, one only need examine the huge, stark calligraphic works of Franz Klein.

But Warhol was notable in his total rejection of these ideas. His foppish, effeminate persona stood starkly at odds with the Abstract Expressionists who, we must remember, were still practising in the years of Warhol's emergence in the early 1960's. In place of the Abstract Expressionists tortured surfaces were Warhol's radically underworked monochrome renditions of newspaper advertisements and newspaper headlines as in \$199 Television, 1961.

Warhol's Campbell's soup can, along with images of Coca-Cola bottles and Marilyn Monroe became the Pop Art movements representing motifs. The soup can being a satirical comment on America's consumerism. By using the familiar image of Marilyn Monroe's face he has turned it purely into an icon of pop culture, and no longer a person with depth and character. Her depiction is now just a shallow symbol of fame and beauty.

Warhol's signature use of the silkscreen completed his rejection of the New York style of painting of the late 1940's and 1950's. The silkscreen stood as a reproducible artwork, and the mechanic nature of this production put the

artist's hand at one remove from the finished product, especially given Warhol employed assistants to make the actual work while he stood as supervisor, and oversaw production.

In 1964 Warhol was one of ten artists commissioned to produce work for the World Trade Fair to be held in New York. Warhol's contribution, 'Most Wanted Men', 1964 featured silkscreen portraits taken from FBI mugshots. This mural-sized work was installed on the outside wall of the Circarama, a one hundred foot circular cinema in which a 360-degree view of New York was projected. Within days of its installation, however, the Circarama's architect, Philip Johnson, had asked Warhol to remove Most Wanted Men, saying the New York State governor thought it would offend the many Italians among his constituents, given all the men depicted were Italian.

Given twenty-four hours to replace or remove the work, Warhol had his assistant's scale ladders and cover the portraits with industrial silver paint. The strategy is intriguing. Beginning with the idea of appropriating photographs, photo-silkscreening them to find the appropriate scale, and then, after the order that it be removed, Warhol chooses not to replace the work, but 'complete' it with the metaphoric mirroring of the silver paint-out of the original image.

In real terms then, the interference or censoring offered by the Trade Fair organisers and associated politicians, did not necessarily result in a failure of this work. In the same way that many postmodern artists position their viewers to interact with a work in order to complete it, or find meaning, so Warhol played with the critical interference he was offered in a way that

served the work and, perhaps more importantly, appended Most Wanted Men with a complex narrative that sited the artist as the enfant terrible or provocateur who, in completing the work with a crude, industrial silver skin, metaphorically throws an unacknowledged and (given the ambiguity of its title, homoerotic) Narcissistic impulse back in the faces of the authorities.

So whether the artists intent is purely representing a personal side of themselves to an audience, or to provoke controversy and questioning from the public, the use of appropriation is a useful strategy of postmodernity as it requires the participation of audience thought to make a work “ complete”.

This would seem very unconventional to ‘ Modern’ art, but that’s what makes appropriation or recontextualization such a powerful postmodern tool. Salles’ personal love of the theatrical, Tillers’ questioning of sacred aboriginal art or Warhols parodic use of popular and commercial products; As can be seen from these well known artists and artworks of the postmodern era, building upon or giving new meaning to an image or object is a very efficient way of producing art with a message behind it.