

New Modern Art: The Theory In A Nutshell

This is a way to do polyphonic painting – to make pictures look the way a jazz ensemble, chamber orchestra or a cappella choir sounds – now at our current point in history.

To give an art work several interacting voices is, of course, a fundamental good in any medium. Art is an effort to communicate (even when we're only dancing for ourselves) and if we do it well, the more voices that we weave into a piece, the better. With different harmonious or dissonant messages encoded in our various different kinds of gesture, if we do it well, it is possible to achieve a theatrical meta language. It is then possible in that theater to explore some deeper larger message.

But of course we do accept a serious constraint when endeavoring to make good still pictures. The only movement you can use is the movement of a viewer's eyes while they search the piece for meaning. So you need a way to cue the viewer to speak with changing voices during their contemplation, in their effort to construct some meaning from this stream of signal they themselves direct within. This has been done in various ways in various times in various cultures but at this point in Western history we have a very powerful method in our hands.

Human visual perception is a complex process with many sub-processes. The major genres of Modern art are actually native dialects inside of these sub-processes. And a great many people in our culture now are hip to Modern art. When looking at an art work they are pretty well accustomed to playing with the stream of incoming visual impressions (hosing it around toward here and there inside of Socrates' famous cave) to discover which sub-process or sub-processes of their perception will light up in recognition and call out realization of some meaning. So now we can construct a polyphonic painting by bringing in techniques from several Modern genres and pulling them together to a reconciliation of some kind. In fact, the public likes very much for us to do this. This is first class entertainment. And the more genres that we interweave, provided that we do it well, the better.

The art industry will, however, mostly think your pictures stink. Most people in the industry today find this kind of work distressing. They are psychologically incapable of seeing it. They don't know how. Instead, they choose a pattern filter from their kit of tools, hold it up into the signal stream, and only see whatever light comes through. To put the thing in terms that Dr. Jung might like, this kind of work requires a Dionysian perception mode and they are stuck in Apollonian. Screw 'em. The public will support us.

Modern art, from its start, was made to show the public ways to see. That's what the diaries and letters of the founders say it's for. In this disjointed, cruel and catastrophic modern world new ways of seeing were required in order to find ways of understanding that would actually tell the truth in peoples' lives and the genres of the Modern masters functioned like competing research labs. Now the playful Dionysian mode of seeing has grown and bloomed. Now we can pull together all the findings of the research pioneers to coax forth fertile fruit.

We painters stand now in a time like Shakespeare's time when the English language was newly coalescing. Like the poets of that time we now can build a language of astonishing communicative power.

Many painters are already reconciling disparate Modern genres in their pictures. Ignored by ninety-nine percent of the establishment, yet this effort is no less than an important forward movement. What I hope to do is promulgate a theory that will help to guide our work, coin a name for it ("New Modern Art") and show examples that will absolutely prove its worth.

by Stone Riley (C) March 2006