The dustbin of art history

Ben Lewis

Prospect, May 2010 Issue 171

Why is so much contemporary art awful? We're living through the death throes of the modernist project—and this isn't the first time that greatness has collapsed into decadence

The paintings in Damien Hirst's exhibition at the Wallace Collection last October were execrable. Most critics fulminated that these works of art should never have been hung in close proximity to masterpieces by Poussin and Rembrandt. My visit to the show was brief. But as I made my way hastily to the exit—down the grand staircase past vast pompous canvases of sunrise and sunset by the 18th-century French painter François Boucher, full of pink putti and topless girls in diaphanous dresses—I realised that those critics were wrong. The Wallace, famous for its collection of French rococo, was actually the perfect setting for Hirst's exhibition, titled "No Love Lost, Blue Paintings."

For there are compelling parallels between much of the contemporary art of the last two decades—not only the work of the expensive artists who made the headlines like Hirst, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, but also many of the conceptual artists patronised by public galleries—and French rococo, a movement that extolled frivolity, luxury and dilettantism, patronised by a corrupt and decadent ancien régime. Boucher's art represented the degradation of the baroque school's classical and Christian values into a heavenly zone of soft porn, shorn of danger, conflict and moral purpose. Similarly, Hirst's work represents the degeneration of the modernist project from its mission to sweep away art's "bourgeois relics" into a set of eye-pleasing and sentimental visual tropes.

Rococo ended in the revolution of 1789, with the bloody end of a political and economic system. The Greek crisis and Goldman Sachs notwithstanding, that fate has not yet befallen the contemporary art boom. Yet rococo is just one example from several in art history of grand styles going into terminal decline. Another came at the end of the 19th century, when romanticism and neoclassicism degenerated into academicism and salon art. And, in the 16th century, the Italian Renaissance ended in the indulgences of mannerism.

This kind of art is not all "bad." A late style may dazzle us with its beauty, amaze us with its scale, impress us with its craftsmanship, charm us with its wit, or stun us with its excess and opulence. It always trumpets the spirit of its age—and is often highly valued by many critics in its own day.

Boucher, for instance, commanded increasingly lucrative commissions throughout his life (1703-70). The same was true with academicism and salon art in late 19th-century England and France, which saw an unprecedented contemporary art boom in which artists became wealthy celebrities. The French academic painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905) told a colleague, "every minute of mine costs 100 francs." In 1871, John Ruskin paid 1,000 guineas for 1814, a painting of the Napoleonic war by

French artist Jean-Louis Meissonier (1815-91). In 1877, Ruskin sold it for six times the sum he paid. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, however, both Meissonier's reputation and market value had crashed.

There is a pattern typical of these end-phase periods, when an artistic movement ossifies. At such times there is exaggeration and multiplication instead of development. A once new armoury of artistic concepts, processes, techniques and themes becomes an archive of formulae, quotations or paraphrasings, ultimately assuming the mode of self-parody.

Over the last decade, not only conceptualism—perhaps the dominant movement of the past three decades—but the entire modernist project has been going through a similar process. Of course, some important and inspired artists have made important and inspired work in recent years—from famous photographers like Andreas Gursky and painters like Luc Tuymans to lesser-known video artists like Lindsay Seers and Anri Sala. But there is something more fundamentally wrong with much of this century's famous art than its absurd market value.

I believe that this decline shares four aesthetic and ideological characteristics with the end-phases of previous grand styles: formulae for the creation of art; a narcissistic, self-reinforcing cult that elevates art and the artist over actual subjects and ideas; the return of sentiment; and the alibi of cynicism.

Mannerism: Susanna and the Elders (16th century) by Alessandro Allori

1. FORMULAE

The most immediately visible parallels with the end-phases of the styles of the 16th, 18th and 19th centuries—mannerism, rococo and academic painting—lie in the transformation of artistic forms into formulae. Today, the iconic processes of modernist movements, once specific to a group of artists or to their inventor, are used as templates to generate product lines. Photorealism, for example, was once an episode in the art history of the 1970s: now scores of artists have photorealist "lines." Hirst makes photorealist paintings of his pills (and the birth of his child); Marc Quinn does photorealist tropical flowers; Mustafa Hulusi does photorealist flowers too; Jeff Koons makes photorealist paintings of wrapping paper, while the Indian contemporary artist Subodh Gupta does Indian pots and pans photorealist style, to mention only a few.

Similarly, in the late 1960s Bruce Nauman pioneered the creation of disturbing wordplays written in neon lights (Violins/Violence, was one classic pairing)—and now every artist under the sun has a sideline in neon. Just to mention a few Brits: Tracey Emin writes messages of love in neon, Shezad Dawood sets Arabic words in neon amid trees, while Martin Creed has a neon slogan on the front of the Tate Britain right now: "Everything is going to be alright." Other over-used minimalist forms include the grid, the series, mirrors and the cube or geometric solid. In painting, the brushstroke-with-drips has become a similarly omnipresent device.

The ascendency of the formula has had further consequences. Thirty years ago, an artist developed his or her own style over the course of a career. Now, too many artists construct their oeuvres by selecting styles from modernism, to which they can add their own tweaks and twists. Once again, Hirst is a good example, with his own takes on abstract painting, vitrines and readymades, grids and the aforementioned photorealism. The artist's signature style may become a branded look whose "development" means its application to diverse subjects. The "style" of Subodh Gupta is Indian cooking utensils. He began by laying out his tiffin pots and pans in sleek minimalist rows on shelves, then welded them in dynamic loops and used them, like Lego, to make enormous skulls and the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion.

Unsurprisingly—logically, even—near-plagiarism is rife and little remarked-on within this art culture. The most extreme example I have seen in recent times is Ai Weiwei's huge bicycle sculpture Forever Bicycles (2003), where the concept is virtually indistinguishable, except in its scale, from Gabriel Orozco's 1994 Four Bicycles (There Is Always One Direction).

An array of phoney art theories, grouped under the idea of postmodernism, have evolved to mask this process. In the age of postmodernism, we are told, originality is over, appropriation is in, style is dead, pluralism is the order of the day. Yet this is true of the end-phase for any great movement. Under mannerism, quotation from previous masters replaced invention, and realism was transposed into decoration. Typically, the rippling musculature that Michelangelo and Leonardo studied from live models and dissections now became a dappled pattern of ripples on the surface of bodies.

Rococo's "heavenly soft porn" replaced baroque's classical values: The Toilet of Venus (1751) by François Boucher

2. NARCISSISM

Quotation leads us into the second disappointing characteristic of our art: its narcissism and self-advertisement. Later 19th-century neoclassicism was a hermetic art about art—Bouguereau paintings were full of figures lifted from Michelangelo and Botticelli, positioned in an idealised classical world whose sources lay entirely in the realm of art and archaeology. Similarly, far too much contemporary art today is about art. In Turner Prize-winner Mark Leckey's Made in 'Eaven (2004), the camera rotates around a sculpture of Jeff Koon's shiny Rabbit (1986), capturing the reflections of Leckey's apartment in the sculpture. The graffiti artist Banksy has made portraits of Kate Moss in the style of Warhol's Marilyn and his Campbell's Soup Cans spraycan stencil. The American-born, London-based artist Peter Coffin has made a series of freestanding silhouettes that reproduce in 2D the outlines of works by Alberto Giacometti, Max Ernst, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Indiana, Yves Klein and Jeff Koons. The list goes on.

The proliferation of the readymade has played its own part in this self-absorption. In the hands of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Joseph Beuys, the readymade was a means of redefining the creation and perception of the work of art. An object could be used to subvert fundamental definitions of art (Duchamp's famous urinal), explore the unconscious (Man Ray) or be deployed for symbolic purposes (Beuys).

Today, however, the readymade becomes an expression of the view that all human experience can become "art" the moment an artist displays it as such. Rirkrit Tiravanija puts a reconstruction of his apartment in a gallery; Richard Prince photographs cigarette

adverts and frames them; Carsten Höller builds big theme-park-style slides in Tate Modern. Despite postmodernist pledges to debunk the mythology of the artist, artists appear to me to have become more mythologised than ever thanks to this kind of imperial ambition.

Salon or "academic" art, the ossification of neoclassical style: Day (detail, 1881) by William-Adolphe Bouguereau

3. SENTIMENT

The shininess of art today—the commercialism of contemporary artists, the celebratory tone and mass production of work—are legitimated by curator-critics as a reaction against the drily intellectual years of conceptualism, when art was a scribble on a piece of graph paper. But what a small and conservative act of rebellion this glossiness is. Art has become small, superficial and self-indulgent in its emotional range: sentimental rather than truly intellectual or moving.

The styles of minimalism and conceptualism, for instance, originally served the purpose of expanding the definition of the art object: they sought to overcome sculptural and pictorial conventions and to explore visual perception. A sculpture could be laid out on the floor, like Carl Andre's bricks. It could express the simplest empty spaces, like Donald Judd's boxes, or scare you with its apparent precariousness, like Richard Serra's sheets of steel. An abstract monochrome painting, like those of Ellsworth Kelly, would overturn centuries of assumptions by discarding the frame or setting the picture at a diagonal angle.

Now, these styles are applied to sentimental ends. Like rococo's pastoral scenes, Hirst's monochrome butterfly paintings purvey a pretty and frivolous aesthetic. His Modern Medicine series, of prescription drugs in cabinets, presents contemporary versions of the paintings of the muses to be found in the salons—vague paeans to the power of art. Tracey Emin's casts of children's mittens and coats, exhibited in public locations at the 2008 Folkestone Triennial, Takashi Murakami's cute Japanese cartoon characters, and Jeff Koons's enormous balloon dogs operate in the same dewy-eyed register as Bouguereau's images of children nursed by their mothers and surrounded by cherubs. Once again, these works of art are not necessarily "bad"—neither are the paintings of Bouguereau and Boucher—but they are kitsch.

Postmodernism, the grave of the modernist project: Second Mission Project ko2 (1999) by Takashi Murakami

4. CYNICISM

Contemporary artists and their curators and theorists concede many of these faults, but invoke in their defence a critical attitude towards their material. Yes, Koons's shiny balloon dog is kitsch—but it thereby subverts hierarchies of taste in art. Yes, Hirst's gold-plated cabinets containing grids of industrial diamonds are glossily vacuous, but they are a critique of the society that admires them. Other artists have made works about their own shortcomings. One of Maurizio Cattelan's brilliant early works, in 1993, was the installation of a live donkey and a chandelier in a New York gallery, to thematise his inability to come up with a good idea. The German artist Martin Kippenberger (1953-97) spent much of his (now acclaimed) career making art that described his frustrating quest to make important works of art. A surprisingly honest sense of failure,

hopelessness and a bankruptcy of ideas are fundamental components of this end-phase of modernism.

Rococo and academicism also witnessed this kind of confessionalism. One of Boucher's better paintings is of his most important patron, Madame de Pompadour at her Toilette (1756). The mistress of Louis XV sits in front of her mirror applying the white powder and rouge that was de rigueur at court. But this is not just a court portrait. Boucher was often criticised for painting women who had already "painted" themselves with make-up and for his use of unnatural pinks and violets. In this work, however, he embraces this critique by painting the making-up. In a further twist, Madame de Pompadour is depicted looking at her reflection, and holding her powder brush as if she is an artist painting a self-portrait. Here is art celebrating its own superficiality. In doing so, it absorbs any criticism made against it, like Warhol's celebrities—or Hirst's Golden Calf, which ironises the adulation and criticism his art receives.

Whose reputation will survive?

Shortly after the end of the 19th century, the market in academic painting collapsed. Instead of commanding thousands of pounds (the equivalent of millions today) works could be bought for a couple of hundred. Some collectors had already turned to the "alternative" art scene of the day—Édouard Manet, Gustave Courbet, Edgar Degas and the impressionists. The work of these artists was exhibited and collected at the time—if not on the same scale or accompanied by the same hype as the salon artists. But unlike the salon artists, the reputations of these "alternative" artists survive to this day.

There have been inspired and important artists at work during the last ten years, just as there were in the late 19th century. But in order clearly to see what is in front of our eyes, we must acknowledge that much of the last decade's most famous work has been unimaginative, repetitious, formulaic, cynical, mercenary. Why wait for future generations to dismiss this art of celebrity, grandiosity and big money? To paraphrase Trotsky, let us turn to these artists, their billionaire patrons and toadying curators and say: "You are pitiful, isolated individuals. You are bankrupts. Your role is played out. Go where you belong from now on—into the dustbin of art history!"