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Cecil Crawford O'Gorman

El Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas se propone dar a conocer, por medio de sus Anales, lo que los artistas más destacados de México piensan acerca de su arte. Para la generalidad del público estudioso no es fácil conocer las ideas estéticas de cada uno de ellos y por eso se ha pensado que sería útil recoger las reflexiones en que cada uno fija su posición frente a la actividad que desarrolla. Damos ahora la primera de esas confesiones, en el idioma en que fué escrita para evitar los escollos de una traducción, y en números subsecuentes continuaremos esta serie que se nos antoja llena de interés.

Cecil Crawford O'Gorman no necesita presentación. Irlandés de origen, reside en México desde hace unos cuarenta años y es aquí donde ha realizado su interesante y varia producción pictórica. Ha cruzado la vida entre los movimientos artísticos del siglo, siempre atento a las nuevas corrientes, que ha experimentado por cuenta propia, y se encuentra en la actualidad rico en conocimientos y dueño de un equilibrio distinguido, que nunca perdió. Su sentido crítico presta mucho interés a su confesión estética, la cual, sumada a otras, nos ayudará a valorar el panorama ideológico de nuestros artistas contemporáneos.

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THE PAINTER LAYS DOWN HIS BRUSHES AND TURNS CRITIC

BY

CECIL CRAWFORD O'GORMAN

It seems time to ask myself whether my work is artistic. I do not know why I should bother about this at all, but I confess to a avain but legitimate desire to live in my work after I am dead, and I know that unless the work is considered artistic, I stand but a small chance of a permanent place with future generations. But what does the word artistic exactly mean. I find no definition that satisfies me, and nowadays, the fact of daring to express oneself on the matter seems rash and calls for a good deal of toleration and sympathy.

In the welter of differing opinions, I know that many will disagree with me and possibly will think my ideas old-fashioned; but if I can in some logical way explain the sudden and almost universal revolt of artists against past forms, I shall be able to see myself more clearly and judge my work by a more universal standard.

Since the introduction of modernism I have been wishing to untangle my thoughts and find a satisfactory explanation as to why there should be such a great change in the artistic field, not only in Painting but in Sculpture, in Music, Architecture and Poetry. Never as before has it been so clear that

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the artist is in search of some absolute value, and an explanation of this desire must be sought.

At first sight it seems foolish. It seems as foolish as the idea of the alchemists who passed their lives searching for the one eternal substance, the substance that would indefinitely lengthen their lives and would change base metals into gold. We seem to have arrived again at a moment in time when having failed to obtain the perfect substance, we remount our jaded nag and start out in quest of an ideal beauty; a beauty without mortal form. Are we not again filled with a desire to touch the intangible or square the circle?

We all know how occasionally, visions of loveliness strike us so poignantly that any attempt at description seems futile and how at certain rare moments, the ugly parts of life catch a ray of beauty that defies explanation. At such times we feel exalted and we know that what we see does not penetrate to us from the eye alone, but in some mysterious way comes from within. Can these imaginings be related to the creative faculty, enabling us to visualize things that are not, to beautify the repulsive and improve on Nature? In other words, can these visions be related to what we call Art. I think so, but in order to establish my point I feel obliged to state the relation as I understand it between Beauty and Art.

The two words are evidently not synonimous and they seem to me to be words pertaining to two different worlds, the first all embracing, all enhancing —a bright constellation infinitely removed; the second, a word only applicable to our every day disenchanted world of work and struggle. I think that Beauty must always contain an element of Truth, and these two closely allied concepts are of a higher order, impossible of complete attainment.

Art is to Beauty what reality is to Truth. Nature is beautiful and real but never Artistic or Truthful. Art and Reality are the reflections of Beauty and Truth in our minds, and many different reflections come to us from these eternal lights. Some see great beauty in the vast uninhabited deserts, whilst others are only terrified. Rembrandt found beauty in a butcher's shop.

Art evidently applies only to human production, and like all human things is in a state of constant change. Like ourselves ever developing and ever changing are the reflections derived from idealistic Beauty, and this continual flux changes our ideas about the essence of this concept. That which was considered Truth among Scientists two-hundred or even one-

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hundred years ago is no longer so considered, and we are aware, although it is not so generally accepted, that what was beautiful a few years ago is in a large degree not thought so now.

I am not setting out to challenge any philosophy, nor have I any desire to suggest a new theory about the Universe. I am merely looking for the simplest method of explaining certain disconcerting phenomena. I know that numbers of people do not accept the Scientists as arbiters of Truth, and many would prefer the opinions of theologians. I myself am in the happy position of being able to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. I see Truth and Beauty as unalterable and everlasting, but accept the continual change of Reality and Art. Possibly as we evolve towards new horizons we receive more light which enables us to alter our viewpoint.

If there is any doubt about this flux of values we have only to glance at the scientific books of the past —mathematics, chemistry, biology, physics. The knowledge of our ancestors has become childish and false. As regards Beauty, we have only to look at many pictures of the past that were considered by the critics as the expression of Artistic Beauty. Nowadays, these same critics would consider them intolerable and inartistic. Rummage in the dust of the attic and pick out some old-fashioned plates which a few years ago were considered in good taste and you will agree that our sense of Beauty is in constant change. If we accept as some do the complete relativity of Beauty and Truth, everyone's opinion must be equally valid and we must deny all absolute values. This gets us nowhere and is opposed to the general feeling of mankind. Some will consider the Cubists to have achieved the ideal —others, the Impressionists— others, the ultra-moderns or the Primitives. Relativity leads us on a road which opens into fair fields where the gaudy flowers of liberty of cristicism and individual right of judgement bloom. But any explanaton of Art which lingers to rest in this pleasaunce of high sounding names must be unsatisfactory and insufficient. There does exist an objective Beauty in Artistic works which cultured people of any race recognize at once. We all know it. Individual right to criticize must certainly be respected and no one except perhaps a few Nazi leaders would be bold or foolish enough to place restraint on this liberty. The wrong consists in thinking that everyone's opinion is equally good, though even this does not untangle the skein or get us quite out of the difficulty because unfortunately, we all think ourselves very knowing and are fully convinced that when we think a thing beautiful it really is beautiful.

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What then can we do about it? Now if this thing we call Beauty has a true existence and is recognizable by people of culture, surely the correct thing is to place ourselves in cultured people's hands and allow them to guide us to it, or to open our eyes to what previously was invisible. We do not embark on a ship and let every passenger have a turn at the wheel, and it is quite clear that if every passenger were allowed the right to say what course should be folllowed, confusion would result. Taking a symbol from mathematics this would entail a problem where a large number of equal constants should be found on either side of an equation. As every school boy knows these would be struck out by the master's pencil and the result be zero. In other words we should come to no conclusion.

If on the other hand we recognize a master mariner who can guide through these fogs and bring us safely to port, we arrive at the uncomfortable conclusion that there are certain superior beings capable of understanding Art and others of an inferior brand incapable of understanding it.

Now unfortunately, there are few things we so resent as to be told we cannot understand. We do not so much mind being told we have bad taste. We can always answer with a sarcastic reply or turn up our noses. But to be told we are un-intelligent in a matter so apparently simple, is more than we can bear.

This is precisely what the Modern Art Critic and the Modern Artists tell us. They say that the appreciation of Modern Art is a question of understanding. It is no longer a question of being pleased or displeased. These modern artists are trying to form a new aristocracy of intelligence and they, of course, are the judges and peers. They tell me that if I want to paint a cow I must paint the essence of a cow.

One of the most remarkable things about modernistic art is its general unpopularity, and I ask myself whether the recognition of Beauty has suddenly been withdrawn from the multitude to be cast into the hands of a small number who call themselves intelligent.

I know, of course, that the bulk of the public has never at any time appreciated the full artistic value of great works; to do so requires special aesthetic education —the eye or ear must be trained. But there has always been a recognition of certain values by everybody. As Ortega Gasset has very well said, the public, in general, do not look at a picture; they look at the object painted, and although this may be quite important, it is not

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the most important thing in a picture. A sonnet cannot be judged by the subject matter any more than can a sculpture or a picture.

When painting first started and the world was less sophisticated, the only object of paintnig was to represent subject, animal, or saint. The better this was achieved, the better was considered the painting. This is quite easy to understand, and in this simple manner wonderful work was done by the primitives. Whether unconsciously these primitives got other values such as simplicity, unification, decoration, etc., that are now considered necessary in good painting is another matter. If they got these values they got them by intuition and chance and lack of scientific technique. If they interpreted a Saint for a church they found out that by making the face flat or by simplifying the folds of a garment the picture carried better and could be seen from a greater distance. If too many colors were used they found the public eye was distracted from the subject matter.

As I repass in my mind the different schools of painting in the past I notice an ever greater cleverness creeping in the work until great perfection is acheived in the intrerpreted object painting in the Van Eycks, Leonardo, and a host of others. In a few more years I find that nothing was left unpainted, flowers, pots and pans, bottles of beer, beautiful women, cardinals (for the sake of the scarlet) just about to lift the rook and give the checkmate, pitiful ragged urchins standing on their heads in a chorus of applause, landscapes in which the very air was present—a great advance in scientific realism with interpretation on the decline. Then I see Satan appearing, a bitten apple in his hand. I see him in an artist's studio, his face close to the artist's ear and I hear him whisper—"Why paint only objects exising in Nature? and I hear the answer— Because there is nothing else to paint". Then I hear Mephisto (pointing a long finger at the open window) say two words—"Paint light"; and light was painted. Impressionism was born and a lot of cardinals playing chess went into the garbage pan or went to decorate humble peasant dwellings because they just filled that space so nicely; and the game went on with renewed energy for another few years.

Some painters painted light coming round objects; others painted landscape where landscape all but disappeared in hazes of various greys due to diffused light. Others thought to decompose light on the canvas juxtaposing colors that at a certain distance would re-compose in the eye of the observer. The Pictorical Art became a bag of clever scientific tricks. And still sophistication had not been completely exhausted.

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There was still one more possibility—to paint nothing, that is, nothing existing in Nature, not even light; but can something be painted that does not exist in Nature? Few would think it possible. The Cubists showed us how it could be done and so we arrive at the geometrical figures—the perfect triangle, square, cube, ellipse, sphere, all acting and reacting, intersecting one another in different colors squeezed out of tubes, some casting dark shadows, others casting light shadows, and some casting none—one might say, throwing out their own light, independent entities. The critics were phaced at the audacity but dared not show themselves old-fashioned. They praised and part of the public swallowed the unsavoury meal. Thousands of little painters seated at their dirty bohemian tables nudged each in understanding smiles. The game was so easy and the art dealer encouraged the Artist. But for once, the great public failed to respond and Cubism died of hunger in spite of all the propaganda and the pretty names such as A Nude Coming Downstairs, or The Shy Young Man's Introduction To The Duchess.

Cubism was dead but not its influence, nor was the blow dealt by the public sufficient to extinguish in the artist the desire to create something which would stimulate the nerves and imagination to further recreation. Imaginative and intelligent people cannot deny that Picasso's "Three Musicians" conveys a highly dramatic sense of the players which could with difficulty be improved upon by any other method, nor could the grandeur mixed with fear be better interpreted than in some of Rousseau's pattern paintings of forest scenes.

This evocation or calling to life of sensations by means of suggestion is no novelty in the history of Art, and was used more or less by all but the primitives. El Greco was the greatest exponent of this method and is for this reason considered by many modernists as the greatest painter of the past. There is a sketch of nothing but rocks by Pietro de Cosimo which contains on examination numberless suggestive nature forms and transports the careful observer to a dreamland of his own.

In my opinion, the best that can be said for modernistic painting is that a relatively new method has been implanted to excite the imagination of the observer. It enables the artist to produce nature forms without the somewhat childish necessity of direct imitation. The best modernistic pictures arrive at this quality in a clean direct manner which gives them a high decorative value. The old way of... leaving something to the imagination... was got by the melting of forms and colors into the semblance of anything.

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Between the two methods the new painters certainly have the advantage as the attainment of decoration is no small quality in an art that is essentially decorative.

Is is quite possible that this sort of painting will be better understood and liked by coming generations when the imaginative faculty of man is more highly developed, and the eye more accustomed from birth to scientific and geometrical forms. I nevertheless confess to a doubt as to whether this intuitive faculty is developing as time passes. It may be going into obeyance and eventually be dethroned by reason. If we can judge by the life of the individual we certainly find that the child loses much imaginative power as it grows to manhood.

There are always two ways of seeing things that are in motion and it is difficult to say in the railway station whether we are moving forward or whether the near-by train is moving backwards. We can never even be quite sure whether our enjoyment of Limberger Cheese is a relic of barbaric cave days or whether the taste has been slowly cultivated.

Refinement itself might be called degeneration and is often thought to be so by robust and healthy people. When loocked at broadly the possibility of creating Beauty in Art can be acheived by very different methods. The beauty that we see in the early Flemish Artists is in great part due to our admiration of the faithful rendering of objects and light effects, where technique of work is carried to a high perfection, whereas the work of a Renoir or a Monet seems beatiful owing to the masterful achievement of refined brain work and mental and manuel skill—(Here technique or method of handling paint and brusch seems of less importance).

When we come to consider the suggestive art of the Moderns, technique is of no importance whatever, because the beauty conveyed is that of the spirit and the observer does as much as the artist to produce it. This very rough analysis of beauty in Art, which must not be taken too literally, seems to explain why there are such great differences of opinion, and the existing confusion is only worse confounded when Art critics, who should enlighten us, use a multitude of terms that convey different thoughts to different people. In one short book on Modern Art I found the following words constantly used... Subjective reaction—Structural profundity—Fundamentalism—Spiritual harmony—Significant symptomatism—Neo-plasticism— Compressionism—Abstract design—Dynamism—Rythm of color—Sensitivism—besides

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the names of different schools whose works are, by the public, almost indistinguishable.

We get a healthy lesson on Art criticism if we remember that El Greco said that Michael Angelo was a sincere and good man but did not know how to paint. Cézanne, when Gauguin was in his best period said... "Gauguin is no painter; he only turns out decorative figures"... and Manet told Renoir to give up painting because he did not even know the rudiments of the Art.

A few days ago a person whose opinion I respect gave me a novel view on the subject of Modernism not only in painting but in music and poetry. It is one which seems to harmonize with the condition we have been brought to, by the rush and noise of modern civilization. The idea is that neither heart nor brain are any more interested. The interest lies with the nerves. Nowadays, the only question is whether one gest a thrill or a kick. It seems of no importance whether the thrill is one of horror, of surprise, or of joy. This theory does not completely satisfy or convince me because I cannot bring myself to think that such numbers of Artists should have suddenly shut their eyes to all sensuous or intellectual values.

When great changes have occurred in former times it was the few intelligent and imaginative people who revolted against the deterioration of Art which the non-understanding public had too easily embraced, as for example when Romanticism became mawkish and unwholesomely sweet, and the "back to nature" movement came in with open air schools. Today, the reverse is in order and the public, as a body, is in revolt against the few. The public not only see no beauty in the new Art, but even consider the work hideous.

I do not put this forward as a criterion of whether Modern Art is good or bad. The very idea of "counting noses" has always seemed to me a bad argument; but I do think there is nearly always something wholesome about public opinion.

I purposely pass over the class of snobs who, through a desire to be thought Modern, rave over pictures that thoughtful people are unable to appreciate or loudly applaud in concert halls the agonizing polytonal or atonal disharmonies of such composers as Schonberg and Bartok. We all know they cannot understand the music and the composers themselves tell us there is no intention of appealing to the senses.

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To me, the beauty of Art is firstly a sense appeal to which there may be added other appeals, perhaps to the intellect through technique or to the spirit through interpretation or metaphor. Metaphor is the faculty of transmuting the beauty that arrives to our senses from nature into another form. It enables us to denaturalize nature or de-humanize the human, and in my opinion, according as the artist uses this faculty for ennobling or degrading nature and humanity, he produces Art or else rubbish fit to amuse lunatics and children.

Speaking about the great potency of metaphor, someone (I forget who), has said that the Creator when he made man forgot to remove this small part of Himself, as a surgeon might forget a bisturi within the entrails of a patient; and he goes on to remark "No wonder he say that His work was good".

In Poetry the use of metaphor is more general and aparent than in Painting and Sculpture. There are two principal ways of using this gift. One of them is to ennoble reality and the other is to ornament or decorate it. It would be interesting to inquire whether in ultramodern Poetry, Sculpture, and Painting, the metaphor instead of ornamenting or ennobling nature has not been used as the substance itself. Metaphor in Poetry corresponds to stylation in Painting, and the use of this gift must be considered as one of the most important factors in the judgment of Painting. In every decadent period it was lost.

I do not like the word stylation as it implies the following of a certain style, whereas it really means deliberate interpretation; in a sense, it means falsifying or altering nature for a certain purpose. Now what object can there be in altering Nature? Is Nature not sufficiently beautiful? The answer to this question gives us one of the keys to the understanding of not only Modern Art but all Art. Nature is *not* sufficiently beautiful. All sensitive people are hurt by nature's processes. The cruel struggle for life through aeons has brought about a repulsive complexity, an intranquillity, a want of balance, a lack of unity, a poverty of harmony. I do not say that Nature never composes herself into exquisite beauty, but I can truthfully say that in nearly fifty years of painting I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I have had the joy of finding the perfect landscape, or seeing a human figure with a background good enough to bring into relief the delicacy and strenght of flesh tones.

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Let us turn for a moment to see how much the modernist uses this quality of stylation for the creation of beauty. We are agreed that they find no beauty in Nature, and for that reason have turned to the geometrical figures. I ask myself whether the use of a nonexistent negative figure can ever create a positive result. I think not and the best proof is that the most radical of these painters has been obliged to use some Nature forms. It may only be the quarter part of a guitar, a single eye or the simplest form of house out of balance, but a certain minimum is obligatory if the painting is to mean anything.

Economy of form in painting or words in Poetry is undoubtedly admirable as long as the Artists' idea is made clear. It stands for simplicity and cleverness, two qualities we all admire, and our judgement of modern painting and sculpture largely depends on whether we consider the Artist's idea realized. I myself have never yet met the person who without reading the title of an ultra-modern painting has been able to guess its meaning. If I see part of a guitar I presume the picture has something to do with musicians, or if I notice an eye, I very naturally look and perhaps even find the semblance of a human form. Perhaps the acceptance of modernism depends on the childish delight we feel in solving a picture puzzle. I am willing to admit my own incapacity in this particular, and so perhaps am a bad judge. A fair judgement on this subject as on any other, should be accompanied by a degree of mercy, but is not the quality of this latter becoming strained when delight is substituted for Beauty. A good dinner is very delightful but can scarcely be called beautiful.

There is, however, a lesson to be taken from modernism. The essential factors of simplicity and decoration had been partly lost. Modernism has brought them back to importance and the art of the future will be incomparably better by the study of the Art of this period.

Photography has been largely to blame for our state of confusion on account of its superficial resemblance to drawing. As Geoffrey Gorer so well puts it "The artistic photograph is a monstrous hybrid, being neither a work of Art nor a record, but bears the worst stigmata of both media".

The eye of the Artist is an intelligent organ, and when a painter with arm at full length measures the size of an object on his pencil, I kow that his eye is not an intelligent one ond is incapable of seeing what an artist should see.

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The perfect picture has never yet been painted, nor can we hope it ever to be so because perfect beauty is not of this world. The different qualities which for us make up beauty are at war with each other. We find as great beauty in a rapid sketch as in a finished picture. We admire the modesty and delicate tracings in Nature as we do her harsh outlines and masses. When one quality of beauty is created another is invariably sacrificed, and the true critics' business is one of judgment between profit and loss.

Onother very plausible explanation of the sudden turn of Occidental Art to what we know as modernism or surealism is that up to the present we have limited the term Art to our own ideals and have, in the course of centuries, combined it with the idea of Beauty which we derive from our Graeco-Roman inheritance. A proof in favor of this statement is that Peoples such as the Javanese or the Mexicans, who were totally shut off from our traditional past evolved their Arts on lines totally different from ours, and only by an exaggerated extension of the word can we call their works beautiful. Mexican Art to occidental eyes is extremely hideous and is as little connected with Nature forms as an Art can well be. This was certainly not due to an incapacity to produce such forms, for the extreme complexity and fine workmanship of their representation of Divinity show a high craftmanship.

Anyone nowadays who denied Artristry in the Gothic cathedrals would be thought extremely limited in his acceptance of the word. Nevertheless, Michael Angelo considered these works as barbarous and was absolutely unable to see their loveliness.

This shows us that we are not fashioned universally but rather that we come into a world already formed by our inheritance into a definite pattern. Our education still further affirms the pattern until finally we are unable to adjust ourselves to any other. This point of view on Art dovetails particularly well and is an essential consideration for the historian of Peoples whose traditional past is different from our own. The Spaniards who conquered Mexico found a comparatively high civilization, but were unable to inculcate the idea of obligation for the reason that the idea was never entertained, nor was there any word in the Indian languages that corresponded to this Roman concept.

On these lines Modernism might be considered a revolt against our own exaggerated or limited views, and might represent for future generations an aspiration which owing to our proximity thereto we are unable to

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appreciate. Art considered in this broad sense is man's attempt to fulfill an inborn desire, whether in verse, stone, paint, or music, to attain the infinite and explain the longings which are part of his heritage.

In spite of all the clever probings of science and all the modern explanations of the Psyche, we seem to be as far off as ever from a complete understanding of man and the human heart. For myself, I must remain humble. take my own lessons, and accept limitations.

San Angel, Mexico, January 1939.