

PHOTO TOPICS SYLLABUS

AESTHETICS: TASTE, BEAUTY, REPULSION & THE “REAL”

NewSchool Online University, Spring 2005
Graduate Photography Seminar
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A brief summary of western art history:

1. From way, way back until sometime in the 19th century: Great art is beautiful, beautiful art is great (1a. definitions of beauty mutate over the centuries).
2. 1839: Photography is discovered. (somewhat concurrent: formation of early roots of modern art criticism)
3. Impressionism through modernism: Art is freed from the shackles of representation and begins to pursue among other things, pure beauty, or abstraction.
4. Some time in the twentieth century: Writing about art finally comes to dominate art itself, and appropriately enough, an art where ideas are king (and where beauty is just one among many ideas) comes into prominence.
5. 1960's, 70's: Artists actively attempt to make art for which beauty is not a concern at all (many artists use photography as part of these art experiments). (5a. issues relating to representation begin to re-emerge, especially in relation to photography/video)
6. 1980's, 90's: Postmodernism: Identity Politics, yada, yada, yada... (6a. photography gains a semblance of equality with other media).
7. Today: You arrive on the scene.

From the “modern” perspective of art history, the measure of great art was always beauty. Though the principals and ideals of beauty may have changed over the centuries, those years of servitude left their mark. Since the 1970's when an art of ideas really came into prominence, many artists attempted to cast beauty aside as a necessary part of their work. Today, we are in a quandary.

How do we relate to beauty now? (When) Did beauty become a bad word, —and why— and is that still the case? Where does beauty stand in a hierarchy of valued aspects of great art? When is beauty not an issue? What political uses does it have and how have they been used? What are the converses of beauty? Have they been addressed in the past? Who is dealing with it/them now? What is ugly, grotesque, and/or repulsive art? How has photography (and film, television and the internet) influenced the perception and understanding of these issues?

Because photography was always dependent on the world of things for its images, it could not possibly ignore that in life which was considered ugly, or outside the bounds of good taste. Just as art history can be seen as an incessant pushing of boundaries and a series of challenges to what *was* in vogue, photographic history may be seen in a similar light. While images of death and decay had been made for centuries, photography democratized choices of subject matter in a variety of ways.

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Recently there has been a trend toward *outré* images. These purveyors of ugly, vulgar, overwrought, sentimental, clichéd, repellant and prurient imagery have been seen in an increasing number of gallery and museum exhibitions. But are these artists involved with the flip side of beauty continuing a rebellion, or are they still in thrall to some notion of beauty? Is this trend very different from the practices of conceptual artists, some of whom attempted to excise beauty from the dialogue?

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the course are to develop an understanding of the history of aesthetic theory and its contemporary uses, as well as use this understanding to evaluate your images and those of others.

The ideas I would like us to explore come out of looking at art in Los Angeles galleries over the last ten years and a couple of key articles that framed these issues in my head (especially Schwabsky & Shattuck in week 3- see bibliography below). I am interested in aesthetics because it is used to judge what we as artists create. There has been a certain tug of war over what constitutes good art since I was in grad school in the early 90's. Work that had a strong political or socially directed content was used by certain critics to moan about the loss of beauty in contemporary art. This oversimplified division between work about ideas and work centered on more formal or visual issues of course reflects the ongoing “Culture Wars” in U.S. politics. An awareness of this dichotomy is essential for anyone interested in participating in the contemporary art world. But this *per se* is not the goal of the seminar.

I was asked to teach an on-line seminar in Aesthetics. I was already interested in how judgments about art were made, and one of the things that most intrigued me was what criteria were used to argue that any particular work was “bad.” The language that was used often led to questions of taste, and as I researched how these judgments were formed I was lead back to representation. Art and subject matter accused of representing bad taste often turned out to include a literal depiction of some thing that had not previously been represented in art and was therefore considered more REAL, often because it was (re)presented for the first time. Examples of this might include dead creatures *a la* Damian Hurst, or various bodily fluids as in Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy or fecal content as in the artist John Miller, or ugly and/or deformed people as in John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage, “bad” painters like Laura Owens, etc... I also believe this could be traced back much further into art history.

Photography has a particularly strange relationship to aesthetics because of its mimetic qualities. Certainly since Plato, the classic debates about how ‘things’ are depicted, whether in visual art or writing, have always revolved around the relationship between the work of art and our notions of reality. What constitutes beauty is another classic arena for aesthetic debate. While beauty can be said to have an attractive quality, there is a parallel history of the opposites of beauty being used in visual art. Exploring these issues is the goal of the seminar.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students will be expected to actively participate in the discussions of topics raised by the assigned readings (such as post their insights, suggest alternative analyses for the material we review, and make connections between readings and/or with other visual representations not reviewed in the class).

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SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS

Each of you will be responsible for posting lecture notes for one weeks assigned readings. You will be part of a pair when doing so. You should follow the example of my own lecture notes for the first three weeks of class, available on my website at: http://www.mossprojects.net/photo_topics/ You will also be responsible for posting a research paper on a topic or artist of your own choosing. These will be due during the last two weeks of class. For this project, you must present art work (you may use your own, or that of others) using the critical terms of aesthetics we have been studying during the semester.

GRADING

Grading will be determined based on: Participation and weekly reflections 50%; Lecture Notes 25%; Final project 25%

SCHEDULE

1/31 week 1. Early Aesthetics. **WRITERS:** Plato, Aristotle, Alberti, DaVinci, Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarme, Clive Bell, Roger Fry

2/7 week 2. Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics. **WRITERS:** Clement Greenberg, John Paoletti, Dave Hickey, Peter Schjeldahl, Marjorie Welish

2/14 week 3. Art for Art's Sake? **WRITERS:** Roger Shattuck, Barry Schwabsky, Peter Schjeldahl, Roberta Fallon, Max Kozloff. **ARTISTS:** John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Joel Peter Witkin

2/21 week 4. Taste and Class. **WRITERS:** Edward Rothstein, Herbert Muschamp, Martin Parr, Michael Kimmelman, Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, Tessa DeCarlo, Grace Glueck, Alex Kuczynski, Bruce Hainley. **ARTISTS:** Nan Goldin, Sebastiao Salgado, Larry Clark, Danny Lyon, Norman Rockwell, Thomas Kinkade

2/28 week 5. Shock. **WRITERS:** Gean Moreno, Ann Powers, Natalie Angier, Michael Kimmelman, Calvin Tompkins, John Miller. **ARTISTS:** YBA's, Catherine Chalmers, Diadoh Moriyama, Vanessa Beecroft, Cindy Sherman, Lyle Ashton Harris

3/7 Week 6. Bodies. **WRITERS:** Michael Amy, Roberta Smith, Simon Schama, Peter Schjeldahl, Elizabeth Hayt, Roberta Smith. **ARTISTS:** Wim Delvoe, Tim Hawkinson, Chaim Soutine, Duane Hanson, Joel Peter Witkin

3/14 Week 7. Illness. **WRITERS:** Catherine Lord, Thomas H. Kochheiser, Michael Sand, Sarah Lyall. **ARTISTS:** Bob Flanagan, Hannah Wilke, Nancy Burson, Mark Gilbert, Eugene Richards, W. Eugene Smith

3/21 Spring Break

3/28 Week 8. Dead Bodies. **WRITERS:** Mike Kelley, Alan Riding, Edmund L. Andrews, Nicholas Wade, Nissan Perez. **ARTISTS:** Mike Kelley, Gunther von Hagens, Andres Serrano

4/4 Week 9. Photos and Reality. **WRITERS:** Liz Kotz, Emily Apter, Bonnie Clearwater, Thomas Weski, David Company, Max Kozloff. **ARTISTS:** Ralph Eugene Meatyard, August Sander, Diane Arbus, Lucas Samaras

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*4/11 Week 10. Murder. **WRITERS:** Luc Sante, Hilton Als, Joe Lokard, Greil Marcus, Caryn James, Pam Belluck, Jim Rutenberg, Julie Salamon. **ARTISTS:** Izima Kaoru- fashion deaths, Corinne May Botz, Ken Gonzalez Day, Weegee*

*4/18 Week 11. War. **WRITERS:** Michael Ignatieff, Stephen Engelberg, David Margolick, Michael F. Gibson, Theodore K. Rabb, Michael Kimmelman, Leslie Camhi, Barbara Stewart, Edward Rothstein. **ARTISTS:** Walid Raad, Johan Grimonprez*

*4/25 WEEK 12. Pornography. **WRITERS:** John Pultz, Roger Shattuck. **ARTISTS:** Nobuyoshi Araki, Robert Mapplethorpe, Sylvia Plachy, Wilhelm von Gloeden*

5/2, 9 Weeks 13-14. Student Projects

Other artists to consider: Annette Messager, Christian Boltanski, Jack Pierson, Richard Misrach, Lewis Baltz, Marnie Weber, Nicole Eisenman, Megan Williams, Sue Williams, Monica Majoli, Jeff Koons, Sean Landers, Jim Shaw, Nayland Blake, Robert Gober, Cathy Opie, Carolee Schneeman, Carolee Caroompas, Richard Hawkins, Andy Warhol, Richard Prince, James Welling, Francis Bacon, Kitaj, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Corot, Courbet, Manet, Beckman, German Expressionism