

Sleeping Beauty

The Common Review

I.

While I was in Rome this past May, wandering around looking at art and architecture, newspapers carried the story about a London warehouse fire that destroyed millions of dollars worth of contemporary art. Works by (not so) Young (anymore) British Artists (originally called "YBA" for short) in the famous Charles Saatchi collection, were incinerated. Included among other similarly spirited works of art was Damian Hirst's salami-sliced and formaldehyded shark, its pieces somberly suspended in a row of separate tanks as if it had been turned into giant, slimy, sushi. And then there was Tracey Emin's tent, its insides brazenly embroidered with the names of everyone she's ever slept with. Curators publicly bemoaned the loss to culture, and insurers hunkered down to do the depressing arithmetic. Meanwhile, many journalists covering the story couldn't help but smirk. Once again, a collision of a common-sense and practical human endeavor (in this case, firefighting) with the fatuous delirium of the art world had exposed the tinny arrogance of contemporary artists and the money-eyed idiocy of contemporary collectors. Even I, an abstract painter, had a nice laugh thinking

about smart art people huffing over the disappearance of chemically preserved dead sharks and camping tents with funky stitching.

To permissive me, however, whatever serious people call art is art. The London warehouse fire destroyed art that's at the center of a vigorous cultural debate, and it follows that there was a genuine cultural loss. Logically speaking, that's hard to deny: the fire consumed some of the most well-known and—within the art world, at least—respected works art of our time, bought and sold for very high prices by very astute and competitive collectors. I'm not a fan of these particular British artists, but contemporary art in general interests me. I follow it, and I include some of it in my Top 100 "play list" of art that I'd take to the proverbial desert island.

And like most contemporary artists, I'm ambitious, which means I want my art to be favorably recognized in my own times. But during the past forty years, most contemporary art hasn't been like mine. Where I still try to make something beautiful, a lot of the best and most serious contemporary artists have turned their backs on beauty. Their real interests range

from sex and death to politics, race, ethnicity, popular culture, religion, math, science and the theoretical underpinnings of art itself—in other words, to anything but beauty.

Broadly speaking, this kind of art all fits into the category of "conceptual" art, rather than "retinal" art (to use Marcel Duchamp's famous distinction). Its first and primary concern isn't aesthetics. Beauty considered in the purest and narrowest sense, as something where the visual parts fit into a whole in a pleasing way, and where this balance and harmony suggest to sensitive viewers something they think is transcendent or non-material, is now extremely rare in serious contemporary art. (High-end schlock contemporary art by an artist like Thomas Kinkaid, the self-described "painter of light," or illustrator-Fauvists, with their either cynical or oblivious exploitation of a kitsch idea of beauty, doesn't count here.) But even broader ideas of beauty—where art might take a while to assimilate as beautiful because it's presented in the form of expressionist distortion of some sort—are becoming rarer. Overall, art that is about beauty usually doesn't command the same attention, nor, frankly, does it seem as compelling, as the widely varying art—from, say, Lawrence Weiner's austere work consisting purely of words, to the Chapman Brother's penis-nosed, sneakered, mannequin kids—that eschews beauty.

During the past decade, it looked briefly like beauty might make a comeback. The word itself started popping up in *The New York*

Times art reviews, and a flurry of books about it appeared, notable among them Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (1993), *Uncontrollable Beauty* (1998)—a collection of essays by a variety of art-world ponderers, selected by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro—Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), and Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics & the Concept of Art* (2003). For all their differences, these books argue the same point: The value of beauty has been in decline for a long time, but because beauty is essential to human beings, it can and will be resuscitated—even if that requires a little bit of tinkering with its meaning.

All that writing on beauty—much of it coming from within the art world—hasn't, to my eye and experience, changed contemporary art's anti-beauty tilt all that much. And now there are books that argue the opposite—that contemporary art is in crisis—such as Julian Spalding's *The Eclipse of Art* (2003) and Donald Kuspit's *The End of Art* (2004). For Donald Kuspit, art is past the crisis stage; it's simply over, and we're into an age of something awful that he calls "postart." Of course, in the wake of Francis Fukuyama's famously wrongheaded pronouncement that we've reached "the end of history," one should take with a ton of salt any news flash that something is "over." Whether or not art is over, however, beauty is in big trouble.

If Plato is right—if you *do* become like what you imitate—ambitious art students incubating in

art schools will only aggravate things once they hit the streets. Art students imitate art that gets the most attention, and these days, it's anything but beautiful art. Yes, balance, harmony and unity are still taught in beginning design classes, but they're taught as techniques, rather than convictions. In art schools, post-modern ideas that knowledge shifts according to who's "producing" it, that identity is "socially constructed," and therefore slippery," and that "authorship" is a fiction and doesn't matter, permeate the studios like the smell of turpentine.

II.

Oscar Wilde proposed that art mirrors not life, but the viewer. I believe that modern ideas in philosophy and science that had nothing to do with art—that were outside of it, and unconcerned with it—have been more powerful in weakening the power of beauty in art than anything that ever happened within art itself. By dragging beauty from its original lofty connection to a transcendent world and placing it squarely on the ground, next to all the other qualities of all the goods of the material world, modern philosophy and science cultivated a new kind of viewer. In particular, the philosophical collapse of belief in natural law—which is the idea that principles to morality exist outside of man-made conventions, and that reason can discover them—inadvertently, by sheer accident, took down beauty with it.

Up until modernity, Western ideas about beau-

ty and morality were connected by a powerful structural analogy. Plato, in particular, continually explores the deep connection between beauty and goodness. True, the analogy is subtle, and is never so stupidly understood as to mean good people are physically beautiful or have good taste. But both morals and beauty were each of a hierarchical system that ranked things from highest to lowest, and, in a complicated way that only a genius could trace, the moral realm and the aesthetic realm merged. Beauty and morality both lived under the protective wing of natural law right up until the modern age, when powerful ideas arguing that natural law was an invention of human beings—and that beauty and morality were products of history rather than aspects of universal truths—finally took over.

Western art started out with an understanding of the world that was the opposite of what it is today. Beauty was in an ordered world, not just in the ordering mind, and human beings and gods were both a part of nature. At the foundation of Greek art was the general Greek worldview, which Plato's philosophy, in particular, articulates, out of which the classical political philosophy of natural law developed. Modern liberal political philosophy rejected classical natural law, of course, favoring a variety of social contract theories instead. Although there are some who still defend natural law—most notably, the Catholic Church—it's become an old-fashioned notion.

The trouble with natural law begins in its claim

to universality, but it doesn't end there. Natural law involves ranking things from low to high, which clashes with our own practice of justice that stress equality, rather than distinctions. Worse is the incontrovertible fact that natural law has been used over and over again to justify egregiously offensive institutions and ideas, such as slavery and the inferiority of Blacks and women, or economic or social inequalities, such as the divine right of kings and the privileges accorded to aristocratic classes. Social contract theories can be equally adept at justifying inequalities—the parts of Rousseau's thought that turn women into Stepford Wives can't be ignored. To be fair to natural law, however, people have turned to it at critical moments when they rebelled against unjust institutions or rulers—as Jefferson did, for example, in writing the Declaration of Independence.

III.

Ancient Greek artists have not left us evidence that they worried about natural law. Generally speaking, people thought that creatures were ranked, with man close to the top, and the animals, earth, trees, sky and all the rest of the natural world below him. Man was more wonderful than anything else in the natural world because even though he had a material, bodily existence, he also had reason, as well as a soul. But man was fixed in a place lower than the gods, who occupied the highest place. He had the tragic fate of not merely dying, like all

living things, but knowing ahead of time that he must die. On occasion, a potentially divine side of man appeared, albeit in fleeting, bold moments and in only a few, blessed lives—for example, when a warrior was young and perfectly fit, and the blaze of combat in a just cause could compel him to forget his fear of death, reaching instead for glory and honor in battle.

This kamikaze-pilot kind of beauty is too extreme for us to embrace today. And even though we can understand the Greek principle that art was about pleasure, we think of our pleasures differently from the way they thought about them. In Greek thinking, everything, from human beings to pleasures, seems to have been ranked, and the highest pleasure was always connected to the highest and most noble ideas. In art these highest ideas showed up as beauty.

The Roman historian Pliny noted that the Greeks valued likeness (what we call "naturalism"). It's not hard to see this, even without Pliny's help. All we have to do is look at classical Athenian statues from the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE (marble Roman copies of which are now scattered around the world's museums). Everything is under control in these statues; proportion, balance and rhythm all work to convey an extraordinary naturalism. And we still take pleasure in likeness today, valuing it so much that most people prefer photography-based images ("it looks real" kinds of images) to patterns and designs or expressionist distortions.

tions of things.

We don't love likeness, however, in the same way as the classical Greeks did. No matter how naturalistic, Greek ideas of imitation were always modified by the overarching Greek conviction that transitory artistic imitations referred to something permanent. The highest or best likeness showed up in the statue of the perfect male nude, the beauty of which revealed that a man had the potential to be divine. The Greeks thought that by applying in art the proportions of geometry to the body, they created a link to the realm beyond and superior to the senses.

Accurate proportion—which is the trick to achieving likeness, by the way—was a special kind of imitation. It imposed on the biological body the clarity of geometry. And the intriguingly special proportion of the golden section—where the ratio of the smaller part of a whole to the larger part is the same as the larger part is to the whole—also fascinated the Greeks (it shows up in the proportions of the Parthenon, for example—in mathematics, it's a proportion of about 5:8). Proportion was so important in Greek art that the canon of Polyclitus, now lost, stated that beauty lies in the proportions of the parts of the human body.

Today, geometry is confined to the 10th grade, pushed to the side by modern physics. And Greek statues, although mesmerizing for their awesome antiquity, do not move us by how close they are to something divine. Who can believe in Sophocles' idea of man as a wonder-

ful thing when, whether we're practicing Christians or not, most of us have residual traces of the Christian idea that at bottom man is a bad sort of fellow? Even without accepting Christianity's cloud of sin hanging over the human race, we look around us and perceive humanity constantly at work on a stupefying variety of evils: genocide, terrorism, wars of aggression, racism, subjugation of women, exploitation and abuse of children—who can list it all?

The Medieval Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas fundamentally changed natural law by adapting it to Christian theology. Natural law was still in force, and man was still near the top of its hierarchy. But the plurality of merely superhuman gods who existed within natural law was replaced by a single omnipotent God who, after creating the world and its Christian morality, floated of necessity above the human hurly-burly on earth.

But natural law was turned upside down with the publication of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. In his blatant reduction of justice to sheer power, Machiavelli turned morality into a question of who wins rather than who is right. Machiavelli was subversive, however, and ahead of his time. Aquinas' natural law—that God created each living thing and gave it its nature—continued to pervade Western culture. Without Aquinas, for example, we wouldn't have the Renaissance Sistine Chapel ceiling, with all those sensuous, dangling nudes. The classical Greek art that had been lost during the middle

ages—either suppressed for its pagan qualities, or simply melted down for its bronze—was rediscovered during the Renaissance but also reinterpreted to fit Christian beliefs. The nude was now explained as beautiful because God made man made in his own image.

From the beginning of the Renaissance until the revolution of modern art, the idea that beauty in art is deeply connected to illusion held strong. Although there were internal artistic struggles over whether color should be the most important part of painting (as it was for Titian), or design should dominate it (as Michelangelo thought), art used illusion to try to capture not just physical likeness, but the underlying design accepted as inherent in the natural world. There was a fierce longing, particularly in painting, to capture the roundedness of nature and even to compete with it over which was more powerful. Raphael's epitaph exposes the ferocity of the struggle to get a hold of nature and aesthetically subdue her: "Here lies the famous Rafael Sanzio. When he was alive, the Great Parent of things feared she would be beaten by him; when he was dead, she feared she herself would die."

IV.

The pure "aesthetic experience" as we know it wasn't possible until the 18th century, when beauty rose to the top of the charts as its own hot topic. While political philosophers coming after Machiavelli—especially Hobbes and

Locke—had been doing the hard work of systematically replacing classical natural law with modern natural right, beauty was on the back burner. During the Enlightenment, however, philosophy's beady eyes turned to beauty. Kant's revolution established that abstract universals like beauty derive from how the human mind works, rather than from objective qualities in objects themselves, and paved the way for subjective feeling, or taste, to become the standard for beauty.

By the middle of the 19th century, confidence that direct, individual experience was the final arbiter of taste was high. Logical positivism had a huge impact on early modern artists, particularly the Impressionists, who based their art on their sensations. Meanwhile, beauty in traditional art had devolved into academic formulae for good taste and teachable tricks for achieving an expedient naturalism. Non-artists seldom realize how deft many artists can become at making illusions. After 400 years of the Renaissance model, illusion had become the *sine qua non* of beauty, and beauty was ready for the assembly line. The invention of the camera (in 1839) helped artists with mediocre talent achieve the same effects as masters. The rising ubiquity of beauty—in the sense of good—looking industrially produced goods and easy reproductions of beautiful images—made the old idea of beauty as "high" and "rare" antiquated. Modern artists who were truly *artists*—who truly wanted to make *beauty*—were essentially forced to break with the tradition of beauty-through-naturalism in Western art.

V.

Of all the ideas in the 19th century, Darwin's theory of evolution undermined beauty the most. Evolution had nothing directly to do with beauty, but in time it would have a brutal effect on it. Darwin revealed that life begins with the simplest organisms and, over eons, evolves to the most complex creatures such as apes and human beings. The change is mechanistic, occurring through random mutation—not designed mutation, or acquired characteristics that are inherited, but through sheer accident. The species whose history of random mutations makes them survivors survive, and the others don't. Darwin called this mechanism "natural selection." Darwin's theory that mankind's appearance at the summit of the animal kingdom could be explained simply materially, by the concept of evolution, was the scientific repudiation of natural law that philosophy had been anticipating since Machiavelli.

For all his avowed love of Aristotle, Darwin replaced design with accident—and cruel accident, at that. *The Descent of Man* (1871) turned human beings into creatures who weren't even particularly important accidents, just another species-accident that happened to derive from the same ancestor as apes. Forget both divine spark and divine design. Human beings became biologically-defined material creatures, on a par with newts and chimps. All three are equally worthy or unworthy of delight and despair, or preservation and extinction.

In the famous ending to *The Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin observes the beauty in evolution:

There is a grandeur in this view of life with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.

But Darwin's discovery of the mechanism of natural selection, whereby new species emerge from earlier forms of life, was not such a beautiful idea to everyone when it was first introduced, and it remains loathsome to many people today. When it comes to beauty, it can present a serious problem—and not just for crazy creationists. Pondering beauty after Darwin demands a reconciliation of the idea of beauty with human beings who are no more than mechanistic products of random mutations in lower life forms.

To my husband, who is an abstract painter like me, but an avowed materialist of the Daniel Dennett sort, there is no problem here. For him, beauty needs no connection to transcendence in order to be beauty. If he has the sensation of beauty when he paints, and a small but attentive audience responds with a like feeling to what he's painted that's all he asks of his life as an artist. He fully accepts that beauty is material, and considers my yearning for a transcen-

dent beauty to be a weakness, a sign of someone who can't face the truth and wants to be comforted.

There are many artists like me who find Darwinian materialism so dispiriting that it affects our overall confidence in our art. Absorbing Kant's teachings—that our paintings aren't in themselves beautiful—is hard enough. But to absorb Darwin's teaching—that beauty is only one of the myriad material explanations for reproductive success—is heartbreaking. When I intuitively adjust something in my painting to make the color more beautiful, for example, I believe the adjustment matters *absolutely*. If it's only for me and a few other deluded souls, it might as well be art therapy. I'd just as soon toss my brush in the trash and head for the white wine. There is no reconciliation of beauty—which is irrational, or at least non-rational—with rational, material explanations of the world.

It's hard even to be a deist after Darwin, despite Darwin's final ringing sentence in *The Origin of Species*. Sure, the Harvard professor and popular science professor Stephen Jay Gould manages to stay upbeat, as do college-town Episcopalians with a couple of scotches under their belts. Both resort to the fallback idea of a distantly removed winder-upper of clocks. But many people, especially the pitiable fundamentalists, find hard-core evolution, with its lack of intentional design, too bitter a pill to swallow. In fact, half of all Americans won't swallow it, and still believe that God directly

created Adam. A quarter of them want creationism taught in the public schools. But contemporary artists, whether like my husband or like myself, are by nature outsiders. We're more aligned with freethinkers than religious fundamentalists. Many artists know very little math or laboratory science, but almost without exception they instinctively rebel at fundamentalist rebuttals to religiously inconvenient scientific ideas.

VI.

Among the art world *cognoscenti*, blame for the lack of beauty in contemporary art (or, more often, credit) is laid at the feet of Marcel Duchamp, the granddaddy of conceptual art who made it abundantly clear, in both his art and memorably sly ironic comments, that he had nothing but contempt for beauty. By the time Duchamp appeared on the art scene in the 1910s, modern art had been going strong for nearly half a century, and it would have another half century before it would poop out with the arrival of pop art. From our vantage point today, it's clear that one of the most important accomplishments of modern art was to open us up to new ideas about what can be considered beautiful. Modern art threw aside idealized nudes and pastoral landscapes, replacing them with thrilling explorations of color and form, including radical distortions of nature and full abstraction. Isamu Noguchi, for example, who was an artist who rose to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s, at the height of modern art, summed up the modern spirit when

he said, "Everything is sculpture. Any material, any idea without hindrance born into space, I consider sculpture."

Modern art ought to have been good for beauty—indeed, it ought to have been its salvation, since it rescued it from the banality of French Academic art—and it was, for a while. Although Picasso considered art to be a lie that revealed truth (rather than a lie that revealed beauty), he could churn out forms from his imagination that all but the most rigid middle class families eventually would incorporate as part of what they considered beautiful. When Duchamp initially offered his urinal for consideration alongside other modern works of art in the New York Society of Independent Artists exhibition in 1917, modern art's more radical enthusiasts barely hesitated an instant before embracing the idea that a "found," factory-produced object like a urinal could be as beautiful as any work by Picasso. "I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty," Duchamp said.

Duchamp was the first artist to recognize that modern art could not eternally spin out new forms for aesthetic delectation and still maintain what we now call its "cutting edge." Inevitably, it would die out because artists and audience alike would grow tired and bored at an endless parade of Expressionism, Cubism and abstraction. Duchamp was right about the boredom part of modern art, even if there are some artists like my husband and myself who continue to love the particular beauty of the

abstract forms in modern art. But even without the general cultural exhaustion with modern art, or Duchamp's ironic jabs, modern philosophy and science would have eventually undermined belief in beauty all on their own.

To reiterate my thesis: Modern philosophy and science inadvertently dragged beauty from what had always been its lofty perch, fixing it firmly to the ground, right in the middle of the material world. Turning beauty into no more than the material here and now is what eventually made it problematic for artists to believe beauty is worthy of pursuit, not some perverse inclination on the part of a particular group of self-indulgent artists. The exasperated stance toward contemporary artists that so many non-art people take—asking why artists can't just make something beautiful—is patently unfair. It pressures artists to come up with what no one else can come up with, to come up with what the rest of society no longer deeply believes in—beauty. Contemporary science and philosophy, considered together, explain the current anti-beauty slant in contemporary art better than any of the particulars that have to do with either modern art or Durham's ironic stance toward it.

Beauty, it turns out, was ditched for good reason. Before science progresses much further, it might be a good idea for it to weed out the human gene that longs for transcendent beauty. Otherwise, we'll all be a miserable lot, desiring from both art and life something neither can deliver.