

Imitation and Translation

Friend or Foe?

In the lead up to biggest single event in Sydney, **World Youth Day 2008** (WYD08), MLC Gallery in conjunction with the WYD, is conducting a virtual forum to discuss and debate art, religion and interpretation.

The exhibition will take the 2000 year old story of Christ and place it in the realm of today - Christ is a black boxer and the fight is set.

We start our forum with **Imitation & Translation**, a debate that has been silent in art for far too long, and at what cost?

Have too many inane and idle artworks been 'produced'?

Voice your point of view.

Contemporary art leaves little room for that which is not visionary, genius or sublime. It leaves so little room, in fact, that looking to the past for inspiration in the present is considered shameful... unless it is a post-modern appropriation which "dissolve(s) the authority in authorship" [Ackerman]. The growing fear of 'unoriginality' has harboured contempt for yesterday's darlings of the art world: imitation and translation. Modern disdain has bred misunderstanding of these concepts, so we are now left to question what imitation and translation are and how they can contribute to the future?

Imitation, by definition, has always had a fairly consistent meaning. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle proposed that, within the confines of the figurative, "art was mimesis, imitation of reality" [Sontag]. During antiquity and the Renaissance imitation was divided into two senses, the first being "the imitation of Nature or human behaviour" and the second being "the imitation of preceding writers and artists" [Ackerman]. Now, reverting to a more general sense, imitation is to bear resemblance to that which already exists. What has changed, however, is the attitude towards imitation and its place within art. Prior to modernity, imitation was "an explicit principle of creative formation and procedure" [Ackerman]. Researching techniques from Ancient Greek relics was routine for the esteemed artist during the Renaissance. Michelangelo would spend hours studying techniques used in Laccoön to reapply on his statues. Implicitly within this practice was the idea that "imitation involved improving on the visual percept" [Ackerman]. The Enlightenment, however, ushered in the abandonment of imitation and its solidarity with creative ancestors. Self-determination has become a decisive component in the success of an artist; to be noticed, one must be set apart from the rest. 'Influence' has replaced imitation and even it has trouble penetrating the creative process, so often being shuffled into the reflective analysis of deconstructive criticism. While it seems almost unfair to cast aside imitation, which has served as a proven educational tool for centuries, perhaps it is too limited to be involved in contemporary creative processes.

Translation, however, seems a far more accommodating instrument. Renowned translators, Martin Luther, Rudolph Pannwitz and Walter Benjamin amongst them, urge that a true translation occurs when the essence, the spirit, the "ultimate elements" [Pannwitz], of the original text

are expressed in the language of the translator. If, as argued by Walter Benjamin, this "sense" is rendered completely and faithfully in the form of the new language, then the apparent and often misapprehended conflict of "fidelity (to the original) and freedom" is invalid; one, in fact, "denies the other any legitimacy at all". Caravaggio, for example, was the first to translate stories of the Bible into the language of his time using modern settings and costumes [LANGDON]. Flagellation is one such translation. It would be inane to argue that, by using an existing text as the basis for his painting, he was deprived of creative freedom; the colours, techniques and themes accumulate to become an avant garde masterpiece. His interpretation attests that the translation's context, inherent in the translator's language, enables the audience to connect on a much deeper and meaningful level with the refreshed text. The message of the original becomes universal. Translation reduces the distance to the original, enriching the old text, the new text and, most importantly, the audience.

While the value of imitation and translation within art is ultimately subjective, it is important for us to acknowledge their presence... however hard we try to deny them. If we educate ourselves and forthcoming generations on the merits of these methods, perhaps we can encourage a future that does not fear a lack of creativity. For it is this fear, if anything, that asphyxiates innovation.

Lessey Blazley



1 MICHELANGELO Buonarroti
Slave (Atlas) 1519-36
Marble, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence



2 Miriam Cabello
Bearing the Cross 2007
Oil on Linen, MLC Gallery, Sydney



WYD is going to be the biggest single event held in Sydney with an expected 500,000 people to attend.

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