



## Visual Art vs Entertainment

by Judith McGrath

Usually I approach exhibitions by recently graduated visual art students with high expectations of enjoying thought provoking examples of contemporary art. Unfortunately, more often than not these days, the anticipation provides more satisfaction than the reality.

Recently I attended an exhibition of work by students of a prestigious art college in this city (Perth, Australia). It was more than disappointing. Of the sixty-five exhibits presented only four offered a visual experience that engaged my attention with form and content, displayed an acceptable level of skill and communicated something other than a pun. There were more than the usual number of flashing slide projections, silent videos and interactive computer displays. It is hard to relate to this type of exhibit because it, not the viewer, dictates the terms of engagement leaving no room for personal interpretation. These particular efforts were difficult to evaluate due to equipment failure, while the only messages I could decipher were about fun and games. It was obvious the new artists didn't know the difference between art, visual art and entertainment.

The confusion is understandable. Just pick up any Sunday paper and find the section headed Arts & Entertainment. It gives us movie schedules interspersed with dates and venues for live rock concerts, information on the City Ballet Company's production of Swan Lake and opening hours at the Zoo. Between photographs of television stars and actions shots from the latest video release we find the column offering edited media releases from fine art galleries and professional theater groups. Clumped together like this it is difficult to determine which events are Art, offering food for thought, and which events are Entertainment, providing a fun experience.

In the gallery, when viewing the exhibits proved boring, I began to observe the audience. Most visitors walked non-stop around the venue, slowed at a few exhibits but none caught their attention sufficiently to cause them to stop, investigate, consider. When a group of four art students came in the reactions were very different. They glided through the display stopping here and there; audible responses included laughter with the occasional "Wow" or "Yeah". They seemed to like the work of those they knew, weren't much interested in the efforts of those they didn't, and discussed the artists not the art.

As undergraduates at the same institution they were initiates, attending the show to write about it for their art history class. I asked what they thought of the exhibition and all agreed it was "great", it was "fun". They liked one video (knew the people in it), enjoyed the computer game (but it crashed) and agreed the exhibit with the rusty tin and fluffy fabric was really good. One member of the group remembered its title but not the name of the artist. No one knew what was being communicated yet all agreed it was funny (entertaining) and a good work of art. This experience and exchange was unsettling. It brought me to the opinion that if it is to survive, Visual art must be held separate from Art and kept far away from Entertainment.

Visual art and Art (craft, dance, music, literature) have similar origins and aspirations. Their primary purpose was a form of communication between humanity and the gods before becoming a way for religious and secular rulers to instruct their subjects. Visual art and Art encour-

ages contemplation of, and challenges to, confirmed cultural truths. Entertainment on the other hand is intended to divert the mind away from serious concerns by offering aimless pleasure. The parameters of Visual art and Art are flexible, often integrating as they are the keepers of culture. Frescoes and icons epics and odes, morality plays and satirical poetry, the music, movement and costumes of sacred and secular rituals, these are the vessels that hold our history. Entertainment has already made broad inroads to Art, heaven help us if it overtakes Visual art. I have seen the visual pollution that results when Entertainment tries to be Visual art.

Entertainment, from team sports to a stand-up comedy routine, is easily accessible for a fee. It distracts us with lively sights and sounds and the promise of thrills or laughter. We are passive spectators, good entertainment does not call for actual participation, it is calculated to tempt us into accepting the vicarious (virtual) experience. Even interactive electronic amusement is controlled and we are penalized if we make an incorrect response or attempt lateral thinking. Entertainment is intended to wash over us as we offer up our minds and emotions to be played with, emptied, than tossed aside for the next wave of paying customers. If we are exhausted at its conclusion it's from the adrenaline not our overworked thought processes.

Art such as dance, music, theater and in some cases film, are valid art forms in their intention but today the outcome is often more entertaining than inspiring. They are presented at a calculated time in a specific space that requires an entry fee. The performers dictate our experience; they decide the duration of the presentation, manipulate our emotive reactions, and rarely invite our participation except to express approval. The audience is more passive than active; we witness the performance, we are placed at a distance and held there by the construction of the venue. We are validating bums on seats. In order to survive these days, most art forms must first entertain then hopefully engage the intelligence or imagination of the audience.

Visual Art is accessible free of charge in a public place or private gallery. It invites the viewer to actively participate in the experience. It does not dictate our response instead it solicits an exchange, one that may differ according to each individual. We can spend as much time as we want with an exhibit, view it from a distance or up close, walk around it or stand in front of it and consider it as we choose. A good work of visual art inspires the intellect, touches an emotion or ignites the imagination. It asks us to consider the subject, medium, image or idea and relate it to our own life experiences. This contemplation often lingers on the borders of the mind after leaving the venue.

A work of visual art is still and silent, we approach it rather than it invading our space. We invite its peaceful presence, unlike the demanding visual stimuli that bombards our eye in every aspect of our lives. In the city street our periphery vision is constantly attacked by constructed images, some accompanied with sound, that vie for our attention. This barrage continues at home when we turn on the television. Kinetic images, factual and fantasy, become a single blur of visual "infotainment". To survive we have learned to turn a blind eye in the same manner we turn a deaf ear to traffic noise. Our mind turns off while our eyes remain open.

Today's visual art student will find it hard to cross the void between open eye

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and closed mind for two reasons. First, they are unaware it exists and second, they don't realize that viewing a work of visual art involves making a conscious effort. We must enlist our mind or emotion in order to see past the surface of the physical object and perceive its metaphorical intention.

Modern art students are rightly taught their work must be contemporary, it should reflect attitudes of its society and employ the icons and visual vocabulary of its culture. Just as Michaelangelo's *David* was contemporary to his era, so too modern artists must echo the ethos of their "now". And they do, by producing exhibits that offer a quick visual fix that entertains the spectator. They reflect an Age of Entertainment rather than Enlightenment. Regrettably these potential artists have not been taught that for visual art to be good, it must be anchored by a quality that continues beyond instant gratification to communicate with viewers across time and geography. *David* certainly does. He was and still is a symbol of hope, to many cultures. He stands forever a brave young man gathering the mental fortitude to do battle against a formidable foe.

The delightful students I spoke with haven't learned how to establish that kind of visual dialogue; they only know how to produce something entertaining to look at. They don't know how or why visual art

can or should connect with its past, project to its future, all the while communicating in its own time. They don't understand about cultural vessels. But they will write their reports in academic art-speak which, like the exhibition, will be considered entertaining and communicate very little. They will probably get a pass.

My one hope is that somewhere in their art education they will learn sufficient skills to fall back on when the hoopla and hyperbole of art school is over and they start looking for work in the real art world. Meanwhile, they thoroughly enjoyed the exhibition believing they were engaging in works of visual art when in fact they were re-acting to its entertainment value. But then, they don't know how to differentiate between the two.

Judith McGrath lives in Kalamunda, Western Australia, 25 minutes east of Perth. She received a BA in Fine Art and History from the University of Western Australia. McGrath lectured in Art History and Visual Literacy at various colleges around the Perth area, and was an art reviewer for *The Sunday Times* and *The Western Review* both published in the Perth area. McGrath was also a freelance writer and reviewer for various art magazines in Australia. She also co-ordinated the web site *Art Seen in Western Australia* found at (<http://www.artseeninwa.com>). McGrath is currently enjoying retirement.

## Redux Contemporary Art Center

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subsequent recombination, shapes lose their real-world connotations and take on fictitious roles. Forged relationships between benign and malignant forms confuse the original implications of each while revealing the precariousness of perception and how easily it can be tampered with. Recent projects pit pattern and ornament against forms derived from armor and weaponry. Seemingly oppositional pairings create duplicitous environments where conflicting messages are conveyed. The use of felt, foam, and other tactile materials further complicates questions of source, masking the identity of forms while allowing them to inhabit both sculptural and two-dimensional space.



Work by Liz Miller from a previous installation

Miller is a studio artist and educator. Her works have been featured in numerous group and solo exhibitions including: The Contemporary Art Center of Virginia (Virginia Beach, VA); Mercer Union (Toronto); The Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Colorado-CO Springs; Haas Gallery, Bloomsburg University (Bloomsburg, PA), Harcourt House Arts Centre (Edmonton) and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Miller has received awards for her work, including a Jerome

Foundation Fellowship, two Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grants, and a McKnight Foundation Fellowship. Her work has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *Time Out London* and is included in two books: *High Touch Visuals* (Gestalten, 2007) and *Nature: Inspiration for Art & Design* (Monsa, 2008). Miller received her BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA from the University of Minnesota. She has taught at MSU since 2005, where she is currently Associate Professor of Drawing/Foundations.

Redux Contemporary Art Center is a nonprofit arts organization committed to the fostering of creativity and the cultivation of contemporary art through diverse exhibitions, subsidized studio space for artists, expansive educational programming, and a multidisciplinary approach to the dialogue between artists and audience. Redux offers free year round art exhibitions, artist and curator lecture series, and film screenings, while educating our community through classes and workshops, community outreach, and internship opportunities. Redux is instrumental in presenting new artists to our community through our artist in residency program, and our many live artist and music performances. In addition, Redux remains a bustling center for the contemporary arts with 22 private artist studios, and the only community printmaking and darkroom facilities in the Lowcountry of South Carolina.

For further information check our SC Institutional Gallery listings, call the Center at 843/722-0697 or visit ([www.reduxstudios.org](http://www.reduxstudios.org)).

## Corrigan Gallery in Charleston, SC, Offers Works by Mary Walker

Corrigan Gallery in Charleston, SC, will present the exhibit, *Dreams and Nightmares*, featuring new works by Mary Walker, on view from Oct. 4 - 31, 2011. A reception will be held on Oct. 7, from 5-8pm, in conjunction with the French Quarter Gallery Association fall artwalk.

Series of thoughts, images and sensations occurring in a person's mind during sleep and those that turn frightening or unpleasant are "such stuff as dreams are made on." Nightmares are those dreams that have turned towards disturbing, uncomfortable imagery and sensations. The unconscious mind puts characters together and sets a theater stage where the bits and pieces of one's life experiences come

together in odd ways and bizarre juxtapositions occur.

In these new paintings, Walker puts images from her ballad series together with some of her favorite characters - Pinocchio, her dancers, figures from New Mexican petroglyphs and her more recent harpies are the winged beast, with the head and breasts of a woman but the body of a bird of Greek mythology. They are considered to be noisy, filthy and hungry whereas dear Italian Pinocchio was of good intention but always led astray.

Nightmares were occurring to the artist and she decided that painting was a way

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