

Critical Points

Written by Fernando Castro



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Recently I read an extremely negative critique of the exhibit "**John Alexander: A Retrospective**" at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. The vitriolic tone of the review reminded me why I do not write negative critiques. The reviewer takes aim not only at the work but also at the artist himself: "Alexander's strategy of massing expressive strokes works well to obscure artistic shortcomings" and "Wow, this guy really is a crappy painter."

[1](#)

Only once in my life I fell into the trap of writing negative criticism. Not only did I find it to be an extremely difficult task to show why a well-executed photograph was shallow, but ultimately I also felt it had been a fruitless endeavor.

I suppose that theater, cinema or culinary critics who point out the failings of actors who cannot perform their roles, storylines that convince nobody, or overcooked seafood render a valuable public service by ranking plays, movies and restaurants with zero to five stars. After all, people do not wish to waste their hard-earned money watching a poor production or eating unappetizing paella. But in photography, painting and other such visual arts viewers seldom pay anything and they can walk out of a gallery whenever they want. While it is true that in many museums people do have to pay, once a piece of art gets there it has gone through enough filters to make the choice a matter of taste. In short, I do not see art criticism as a ranking service that would induce this art critic to write negative critiques. For me art criticism is not about praise or condemnation, but rather about interpretation.

The “it’s not a ranking service” argument is only one reason why I do not write negative criticism. Here are a few others. First, I am wrong more often than I care to be. Thus I could cause serious damage were I to trash work like that of Vincent Van Gogh, for example. Many important artists had and have detractors: Murillo, Gauguin, Vasarely, Dali, Frida Kahlo, Chagall, Paul Jenkins, Andrew Wyeth, etc. Those of us who have the power to publish must exercise it with prudence, modesty and discretion. If an art work seems to me “undeserving,” I would rather allow somebody more intelligent than I to convince me that it is not; or, if I never become persuaded of its merits, simply let it pass in polite silence. In fact, silence is often the most devastating negative comment –it is not even googleable!

Secondly, although a certain amount of iconoclasm is required of a philosopher, it seems a waste of energy and time to direct it at art works and artists –unless there are issues at stake that go beyond art. In general corrosive enthusiasm is better aimed at more pressing political, economic, social, environmental and moral issues. Artists ought to take risks without being afraid to make mistakes and a critic ought not only to leave room for that freedom, but help generate it as well. Admittedly, it is very tempting to break our respectful silence when mediocre works and artists are widely celebrated. However, such a situation is more a test for a critic than

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for art institutions. After all, who is going to be fooled? Live and let live, I say. If someone manages to make a good living selling questionable art, kudos to him or her. In the long run, it is a good outcome for a variety of reasons: its multiplying effect on the economy, money is better spent on bad art than polluting cars, the wealthy who are happier in spite of their expensive bad taste may be inspired to contribute generously to art projects, etc.



Thirdly, from studying the *indigenista* art movement, I came to the conclusion that some “mediocre” paintings are really important and worth reflecting about. It is a mistake to think that the values of art are completely separate from those of society at large. Indeed, although they are not exactly the same, there are noteworthy overlaps. Indigenista painters addressed subjects that for a variety of racist and ideological reasons were thought by many not even worthy of depiction: namely, indigenous peoples and cultures. In fact, in the heyday of indigenista painting, an unsympathetic critic dismissed their work as “pintura de lo feo” (painting of the ugly) –a charge that aimed more at the subject matter than the art or artist, and which now, embarrassingly enough, is more revealing of his own biases.

The negative critique of John Alexander also reminded me of one of the first lessons I learned in logic and philosophy: steer clear of ad hominem comments and always address the theses (art works), never the person who claims them (the artist). Moreover, even when sticking to the works, I like to curb my enthusiasm and stay away from adjectives of praise. The job description of a visual arts critic should not be to eulogize, but to inform, connect, contextualize, explain, clarify and provide plausible interpretations of the works. Lastly, there is an important distinction to be made between difficult subject matter and obscure language. Writers and readers alike ought to accept the challenge of complex issues but they need not be alienated by unnecessary theory and obscure language. Art, like jazz, is for everyone even though only a few decide to develop a taste for it.

Once a French professor asked me what method of criticism I practiced in my critical writing. For a microsecond I felt that maybe I had been playing tennis without a racket, but a nanosecond later I remembered I was a philosopher. In order to interpret artworks I employ every rational means Sherlock Holmes uses in solving a crime, from careful inductive thinking and calculated conjecture to deductive logic and probability. One has to ask: who is the victim, what is the evidence, where was the crime perpetrated, what are the possible motivations of the perpetrators, who are the possible culprits, what does the crime amount to, who benefits from it, is society partly to blame, etc. Although I am a bit uncomfortable about following methods, I called this way of thinking about art “ideological psychoanalysis” because it aims to understand the ideas behind a work and the mind that produced it. So it is ideological without being Marxist and psychoanalytical without being Freudian. The more mysterious and heinous a crime is, the greater the demand on our thinking. However, if the crime is petty thievery, one does not need Sherlock Holmes to get involved.

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1. For the aforementioned negative critique go to:
<http://houstonpress.net/2008-06-05/culture/john-alexander-the-mediocre/>
[\(back\)](#)

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<http://www.zonezero.com/editorial/june08/june08.htm#forums>