

A 'Story' was very simple and exciting when I was younger. My mother would sit in my bed with me, and delicately flip through the pages of Aesop's Fables or of "The Little Engine that Could", reading to me as I laid my head on her shoulder knowing that my mother was the greatest storyteller in the world. At such a young age, maybe three or four, the stories that she would weave were so vivid and clear that I would get lost in them. As she read the same stories to me over and over, even without being able to read, I began to repeat the words exactly as they were printed in the book, feeling the story as if I was telling it for the first time. Later, when I was able to read, I read many stories, immersing myself while being carried away by the author's imagination.

As I got older, my story telling became best expressed through my art. I wasn't drawn to the meticulous detail of writing, but I loved the idea of conveying a multitude of feelings and emotions that told a story into a single work of art. This art piece represents my effort to provide a certain story or narrative through art.

The following paper describes how art may create a narrative for the observer; a discussion of some of the principals of narrative in art; examples of artists who, through various mediums, have created stories in their art; and an analysis of some of the narrative principals applied to my art.

My Written Narrative

I believed you instantly when you first whispered it to me.

"We're all masks," you said, "we're all monsters underneath," and you made a face at me. I smiled back at you.

"We're monsters," you said, "We're the beasts". You know, the ones that crawl out at dawn. The ones that drag themselves from their slumber, who bear their stained teeth, snarling at the wind. From under the blankets of niceties and acquaintance, they ascend from their depths dragging their knuckles across our spines. The letters engraved from bone spelled out the fears and doubts while we set up their cages. They rely on us and we feed them. We all act it's like its some big secret. Taboo. Unspeakable. But the obvious leaks through the polish and there they are.

On display.

For you, for me.

"We can point them out now!" we laughed. Look there.

There's the rabbit, curled in her guile.

The dog, guarding the naive.

The bear, poised in her introspection.

The fox crouched on the sly.

The crocodile; leering and patient.

The stag; struggling to aid the lost..

The pig that sees herself as a burden.

The wolf, hiding his hand.

The lion, baiting and snapping.

And the lamb, feigning innocent to it all.

They all fight and growl and snarl at one another, fighting for your reflection. Because between the oil and the grime they look just like you. They look just like my mom, they look like your dad, they look like the neighbor and the dog and the mailman and your boss and the president and the church and the telemarketers and the cars and the industries and the government and the country and the masks that we all wear look like everyone everywhere at anytime. And they look like me, too.

Each creature, each beast, each *thing* that inhabits the planet is wearing a mirror around their necks. But we continued to laugh. The mirrors around our own necks had begun to crack as our masks slipped between our lips. We'd figure it out.

"We're all monsters", you had said, "We all have a beast".
But, you didn't mention that most of us have more than one.

What is Narrative in Art?

Narrative art has held various meanings throughout history, but today we describe works as narrative when they tell a story or imply an association. Some artists construct their works like cartoons with two or more panels suggesting a time line. Other artists place elements within a single panel. Often the meaning is unclear and the viewer must resolve the story or make connections between different elements.

Narrative work, of course, has told stories since at least the time of the ancient Egyptians. Starting in the Renaissance, paintings of events from biblical or classical history—acquired the highest status. Nineteenth-century painting and sculpture depicted not only great moments in history but also domestic dramas of a decidedly sentimental nature. Modern painters rejected such subjects during the late nineteenth century in favor of scenes from contemporary life. Later modern artists sought to purge painting and sculpture of narrative. Storytelling was thought best pursued by writers rather than visual artists, and literary became an insult in the jargon of modern art. By the 1960s, the modernist insistence on abstraction and the taboo against narrative had made telling tales irresistible to many artists. Pop art, New Realist painting and sculpture, and Nouveau Réalisme all provided figurative imagery into which narratives could be read—whether or not the artist intended them.

With the start of abstraction, artists began to look at art as a means of personal expression rather than of storytelling. With Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s, artists struggled to express the idea of self in relation to the universe by using large gestural strokes on canvas. Movements and styles since that time – Pop Art, Op Art, Conceptual Art, and Earthworks—also avoided narration. However, in the 1970s, many artists returned to figurative work; that is, to art that explored the idea of a human presence within a particular space. Narrative artwork has been around for centuries and yet, it's still hard to describe just what a piece of 'narrative art' is, to me, narrative artwork is just really any piece of art that tells a story to the beholder.

Principals of Narrative Art

So what makes a piece of artwork distinctly narrative? It's difficult to pinpoint a concise body of elements that constitute 'narrative artwork'. However, I believe that several components

are regularly employed that gives the viewer a sense of story within a creation. Knowledge, context and emotional sensation are often present in art to flesh out the story in the art.

Our psychological reaction is driven by how strong each of these components is activated. Work can be purposely made to jack up one aspect of these components, but it's difficult to achieve all three. When you get that 'wow' experience from a piece of art, all of those three components are at their peak, knowledge, context and emotional sensation.

Knowledge of the viewer when viewing an art piece is one of the most obvious components in artwork. You have to be able to recognize and compute the image to actually physically understand what you're looking at. "Knowledge" doesn't mean that beholders have to know about the historical context of the work, or the biography of the artist. Knowledge just means it is the cognitive judgment that the brain makes about content, technique, medium, and scale. Beholders gain knowledge by asking themselves: is this work big or small? What is it made out of? Why? What is the position of the work in the room? What are some of the subjects in the artwork? If you could make up a story about what is happening in the art, what would it be? Most of these questions are subconsciously answered as the viewer experiences the artwork, but it is still an incredibly important factor that plays into experiencing narrative work. The artwork does not have to necessarily have identifiable objects or anything of that nature, but it should invite speculation from the viewer about a plot that is being emphasized through the artwork.

Context in art can be defined as an aesthetic experience with a special state of mind that is different from the everyday experience. The aesthetic experience is a psychological process in which the attention is focused on the object while all other objects, events, and everyday concerns are suppressed. Situations and objects of aesthetic interest are specified as fundamentally different from everyday situations and objects of everyday use. Perhaps the best example of this contrast is Picasso's famous Bull's Head, an artistic construction made of a bicycle seat and handlebars. Seen from the everyday (pragmatic) perspective, the handlebars and the seat are experienced as parts of a bicycle with specific functions (for seating and governing). Also, as with all other objects of everyday use, they can be judged as more or less beautiful, elegant, well designed, and the like. However, only when they lose their everyday pragmatic meaning (as bicycle parts morph into the new symbolic level combining a new whole, a bull's head), does the aesthetic experience emerge to create a narrative inside the head of the viewer. When focusing on narrative art as singular type of art, context of the painting can raise awareness of an underlying story 'between the brushstrokes' that is aided by knowledge (the previous component) in a narrative artwork.

The emotional sensation that you have from a painting, one of the more obvious components of art, directly affects the story that you come up with in your head. For example, you could be looking at a painting that is blue and you may feel a melancholy feeling, but the man next to you could see that same blue and have him reminded of bright skies and happy days, giving him a happy sensation. The emotional sensation in art is subjective to each and every person, that is one reason it is so complicated to define as a singular thing. Narrative artwork plays on emotional sensation through composition, color, mood, texture, and media to accurately portray the artist's intentions (which are not always found in the beholder).

Artists Who Employ Narrative Techniques

Many artists try to employ some or all of such techniques when creating narrative artwork. Below are three artists who I think embody narrative artwork in a variety of mediums.

One such artist named Dara Scully, a Spanish born photographer whose work focuses on manipulating an image of reality to create a narrative dreamscape. Scully uses her photography to combine fantasy and reality in a single still, which made me want to form an entire storyboard of events based around the one event being depicted, mainly through the questions it poses. The composition of Scully's pieces is very basic, but that allows the eye to focus equally on the characters depicted and the scenery, which is just as mystical as the interactions of the characters. The colors have a very natural sense about them, increasing the idea of natural beauty in these narrative frames. All of her work brings about an emotional calmness while the unorthodox, fantastical context of her characters emphasizes a whimsical nature. Scully's turns the reader's previous knowledge of these traditional figures and reevaluates them. Dara Scully's work properly utilizes the three main components of narrative art in a fun, childish way.

Meghan Howland, one of my favorite artists, is a contemporary oil painter living in Portland, Maine. Working on canvas, she creates figurative paintings with a narrative edge. Her paintings are often dreamlike, and yet carry a weight of something that is slightly more dissonant. The question of whether something is safe or dangerous, loving or hateful, is often unexplained in her work. Equally mesmerizing is her imagery of people being overwhelmed by flying birds. Of course, one might think about Hitchcock's iconic "The Birds" but instead of being terrorized by the birds, Howland's figures seem to be in calm acceptance, almost as though they have drawn them to themselves. . Meghan Howland's paintings seem as if we are catching people in the middle of enigmatic events or strange situations that cannot be explained. Her work encourages the observer fantasize about a possible story within her paintings.

Kiki Smith, an artist that also works with narrative, is California based and is most known for her sculptural work. Much of her art references the human body with an underlying social issues as well as storybook Catholic allusions. Smith's work explores the body as a receptacle for knowledge, belief, and storytelling. Smith turned the figurative tradition inside out by creating objects and drawings based on organs, cellular forms, and the human nervous system. Her bodies of work evolved to incorporate animals, domestic objects, and narrative tropes from classical mythology and folk tales. Her more recent work has derived much from mythology and reflects a darker, more sinister quality to them. She tries to shed light on the darker side of many of the older myths and lore of the stories she works with, rather than representing them as one story. Smith's work invokes a more menacing feeling than the traditional view of the story, her context brings many of the older stories into the forefront of people's minds as current social commentary while playing on past knowledge of well known folk lore and mythology.

I chose to look at all of these artists' works because I wanted to be able to create a narrative piece, which had a fictional, surreal and ambiguous quality to it. Scully uses her photography to combine fantasy and reality in a single still, which made me want to form an entire storyboard of events based around the one event being depicted, mainly through the questions it poses. Howland made me want to work with a multiple figure artwork, mainly because I work with single figures in a lot of my work. Her paintings focus on single figures a lot too, but her multi-figure work almost makes it stronger. And finally, Smith forced me to look at harder questions about human nature and exploitation, which I brought into my narrative that my artwork is based on. Her work made me want to make a statement that could be derived from a story I was telling through my artwork.

Analysis of the Narrative Principals to My Story and Art Work

Every single one of these artists provoked me to ponder a possible narrative beneath the obvious visual representation. I wanted to emulate their success with provocative narrative into my story, so I decided to represent the underlying nature I feel when it comes to human beings.

I tried to employ the three components of narrative artwork in my piece, knowledge, context and emotional sensation by trying to channel the narrative artists that I've previously stated. I tried to assert the knowledge aspect by giving the viewer an obvious representation of hiding and untruthfulness of masks. The masks represent the hidden nature that I so often use when meeting others, despite the fact that I feel quite naked and vulnerable when dealing with others. I used context by enlarging the painting to make the figures somewhat life-size to make it relatable and composition wise, somewhat more significant. Finally, I used emotional sensation by employing dark colors and underlying textures to better enhance the overall meaning that I wanted to convey, which was that I believe that everyone hides behind a certain pretense when it comes to everyday life. I believe that all three of these components were executed to the best of my ability and all aid the viewer in discovering their own narrative within my piece of art, no matter what my actual intentions were.

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