

I don't like art

Graham Crowley



Graham Crowley
Flower Arranging (7) 1998
Compressed charcoal and oil on canvas
122 x 92 cm

"There is no wealth but life." **John Ruskin**

WHENEVER I HEAR someone say "I don't like art" I feel offended. I've always assumed that liking art was a no-brainer. It gives us so much – doesn't it? An irritating echo of my past perhaps? I grew up in a world from which art was absent. My father thought that art schools were 'full of communists and queers'. We parted ways. The year was 1968.

We didn't think about art. In fact, we seldom thought about anything much. We were artless. I now think we were impoverished. What's tragic is that we didn't have the emotional reserves and intellectual grasp (which ironically art can provide) to even realise it, let alone do anything about it. I'm adamant that my life without some form of creative endeavour would have been hopeless and ugly. Going to St. Martin's School of Art changed everything, particularly me.

"I have a problem. I am an intellectual, but at the same time I am not very clever."

Adrian Mole

When the word 'like' is used in any discussion of art it betrays a facile and casual caste of mind. A lack of understanding and a veiled contempt. I associate the word with shopping or choosing a pizza topping. For me, art is about values. Art warrants respect because it offers us the opportunity to do 'better'. I realise this is contentious, but better, for me, means a society that's comfortable with itself. This involves greater empathy, more reflection, respect and generosity. It doesn't mean wealthier or famous. It means making art because it's worthwhile rather than profitable, and being creative rather than passive. This is probably why Islamists are so frightened of art. It offers us a glimpse of autonomy.

"Painting is easy when you don't know how, but very difficult when you do."

Edgar Degas

I'm no longer sure that I like art. The word art is and always will be problematic. It's the word 'like' that spoils the party. This is one of the reasons why I refer to myself as a painter and not an artist. I regard painting as a discourse and an occupation. One that allows me to straddle the boundary between thought and action, fiction and nonfiction. I've always been at odds with the art world, particularly since its domination by the art market. A reminder – if it were needed – that it's now a major component in a world in which wealth and celebrity have become ubiquitous.

A distinction used to exist between the art world and the art market. Until the late '80s the art world was a two-way street. In one direction there were debates about meaning and value. And in the opposite direction was commodification and product. They coexisted in an uneasy equilibrium fuelled

by misunderstanding and mutual contempt. Artists had a cultural space where they could be their own masters. Now there's only the market, and we're all the poorer for it.

"It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." **Aristotle**

Art schools used to posit alternative values, but now political intolerance and capital greed have changed all that. They no longer educate, they only certificate. I count myself fortunate that I went to art school in '68. I received the kind of higher education which is unavailable now. Being taught by the likes of Peter de Francia, John Golding and Richard Wollheim instilled in me the idea that it takes a supreme effort to not only make art but to discuss it in a succinct and jargon-free manner. Art speak is sophistry.

Maybe that's why I reject current notions of success. I regard the triumvirate of celebrity, capital and media as a threat to an open and creative society. The idea that wealth equates with success is corporate mythology. Art can do better. The kind of art that dominates is art obsessed with self. Art for the hard of thinking.

I get a sense of satisfaction (like no other) when I'm making something. For me, that something is a painting. But once I've stopped work on a painting, the sense of satisfaction isn't because I 'like' what I've done but simply because I 'did something'. Most of the time I don't 'like' or 'dislike' what I've done, but I often regret what I've done. To like or to dislike prevents reflection because it appears to offer judgement as resolution. 'Liking' in this context is invariably euphemistic and evasive. It resolves nothing. It's reminiscent of the sanctimonious use of the word 'interesting', it's a roadblock in the thinking process.

"The book is full of life – not like a man, but like an ant-heap." **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

What matters is that I had the opportunity. Estimations of quality and value shouldn't be reliant upon taste, prejudice or fashion. This is why education is so important. Education is essential in establishing a sense of value and quality. There's no escaping the fact that value is an expression of the social and is invariably political.

The '70s were painfully political. The confrontation was constant. I know, I was there. During the 'cultural revolution' of the late '60s the most influential ideologies were feminism and marxism. Aesthetics had become dominated by conceptualism and conceptual art. Political and philosophical thought was informing and transforming the visual arts. And because of this I regard the history of painting as synonymous with the history of ideas. Some of the theorising was an attempt to decommodify the art object. To take control of production – sound familiar?

I think one of my main problems with 'liking' is that I don't accept that quality is a matter of personal taste or wholly subjective – far from it. It's symptomatic of consumerist values which are wholly inadequate when appraising human

endeavour. It's not an expression of thoughtful reflection. It's an assertion that is both dismissive and condescending. The implication is that art is of little 'relevance' because it's the product of subjectivity.

The sooner we accept that it's a matter of what you know and how you think and not what you may or may not like, the better. Our capacity for reflection and discernment is what elevates us. What's disturbing is that as standards in education decline these kinds of judgements become more acceptable and more difficult to challenge.

"Make it red and move it up a bit." **Anon**

A different approach is called for. A different way of thinking. An art that makes us see things another way and subsequently think differently. Looking gets a poor press these days. Reviewers invariably discuss the subject matter of a painting as if it were illustration, allowing the historical or socio-political context to dominate. Painting isn't illustration, painting isn't even an activity – it's a discourse. The primacy of vision is central to any understanding of painting – and the human condition.

"When I look at people I don't see colours; I just see crackpot religions."

Chief Wiggum – The Simpsons

Whilst I'm broadly sympathetic to the sentiments of the Stuckists, I think they miss their mark because of a series of assumptions and subsequent misunderstandings that have led them to believe that figurative painting is threatened by or in competition with conceptual art. This is a false dichotomy. The opposite is true; much current painting is strengthened by the legacy of conceptualism. An overwhelming paradox governing expressionism and spontaneity is subsequently ignored. This is the decision to behave in an intuitive or aleatory manner which like any decision is calculating and self-conscious.

"A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small parcel." **John Ruskin**

The legacy of conceptual art is a reminder of the complexity of the creative process and the need to constantly challenge assumptions and orthodoxies. This change in awareness has helped contribute to a sense of mindfulness in practice, which is something that distinguishes post-conceptual painting from the post-modern. Wider contemporary art practice has yet to fully grasp this.

This is manifest in the preponderance of video in the Turner Prize, which has always been an expression of curatorial and institutional values. This probably makes video the late 20th-century equivalent of the 19th-century life room, because whatever flourishes in the institutions and academies is by its nature – academic. It is a mistake to think that the appearance of the academic is fixed. The academic is an attitude that manifests itself differently at different times.

"Beauty is and always will be blue skies and open highway." **Dave Hickey**

As Professor of Painting at the Royal College of Art I chaired the entrance examination board. During that time I insisted that we wouldn't play 'Guess-The-Right-Answer', a long-established form of institutionalised abuse. This is particularly prevalent at postgraduate level. It's an ordeal that no one, least of all a nervous candidate, should have to endure. It demonstrates a profound lack of any understanding of education – let alone art. The idea that education is a matter of approval or disapproval (particularly at postgraduate level) is a travesty.

I became alarmed at the number of candidates who said that their tutor 'didn't like their work', as if this was of any material significance. This rather telling statement is symptomatic of a crisis in the teaching of fine art.

"To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palms of your hands and eternity in an hour." **William Blake**

Wherever I now look, this innocuous little word has insinuated itself into critical debate. It's commonly expressed as a judgement but is invariably whim. The amount of weight it carries is disproportionate. It's thoughtlessness masquerading as reflection. It has come to characterise slack thinking. 'Liking' is popular with the 'me' generation. A 'get-out-of-jail-free' card for those who insist that their right to self expression is beyond question; the ring-fencing of assumptions.

This reminded me that some time ago whilst teaching I discovered that if I told students that I didn't like or dislike their work and that I didn't like or dislike art generally, they were (understandably) perplexed.

Instead of approving or disapproving of the painting, text, installation or whatever it was that was being discussed, I would imagine that I were the author of the work in question. I would ask myself why had I made this? What would I now do with it? What was I thinking? This empathic and imaginative method meant that I had to talk about the object in question – as if I were the artist rather than a spectator. I wouldn't approve or disapprove. I would describe, contextualise and analyse.

"The highest reward for a man's toil is not what he gets for it but what he becomes by it." **John Ruskin**

I recently discovered that if I don't use the word 'art' I have to think about what I'm saying as if I'm talking in a second language. This is why in several of the texts in this book I've avoided using the word. I found writing these 'artless' texts difficult at first, but I was ultimately able to produce texts that were more focused, jargon-free and less rhetorical.

"What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

I believe that art has the potential to make us more thoughtful and maybe

even smarter. The sooner, we (as academics) stop worrying about what Derrida had for breakfast, the better. George Steiner has described this behaviour as academic kabbalah. We have a choice; we can attempt to talk about art in the same way that we talk about everything else or continue to cling to our sophistry and sound like charlatans.

I may not like art... but I love painting.

"Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort." **John Ruskin**