



A sense of perspective

Resistance to modern art is neither local nor recent, so just how sure are you that you would have bought a Van Gogh when no one else was?

A FEW MONTHS AGO MY EDITOR CALLED. "I want you do a 4 000-word article on art as investment. Are you up for it?" With the bravado of the uninitiated I jumped at the opportunity. "Yes of course, I would love to." Not that I knew anything about the topic, but I had just finished a thesis, so I knew how to do research and I was extremely interested in the subject.

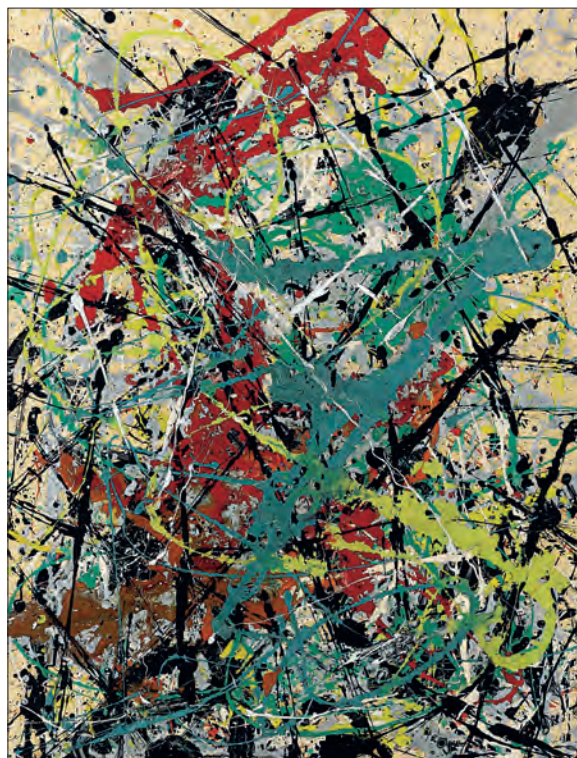
Very, very early on in my attempt to glean some ideas from friends, colleagues, other interested parties and books, I realised that this topic is a minefield, a quagmire filled with personal opinions, egos, individual tastes, eccentricities, snobberies and vested interests. At the one extreme, there was the dull politeness of the terminally "cool" and, on the other, the bombastic outspokenness of the precariously clueless. I was looking for the middle-world.

What is art? What is good art? Must art be beautiful and what is considered beautiful in art? Is art only art when it is intended as such and made by artists? And, specific to my point, does merit translate into value – is "good" art necessarily a better investment than "the rest" – because the thing that seems to get one into trouble fast is saying that some art is bad!

Does one, for instance, have to like something because it is good? On the other hand, does personal taste in any way suggest merit? Is it necessarily good if it fetches a high price (is the market a legitimate judge)? How closely related is the success of an artist to the amount of marketing that is done on his or her behalf – in short, can hype talk art into becoming beautiful and desirable? What role does "shocking" play? And who decides? Is there still some sort of canon whereby good, bad and indifferent art can be judged or measured independently? What makes for a better investment: old masters or young contenders? And where to start?

"Did you see the Marlene Dumas exhibition?" became my standard opening line to fellow art enthusiasts over the past few months. Why that question?

Well, as the highest-selling living female artist in the world, Dumas most certainly is our proudest art export (she moved to Amsterdam in 1976), her big South African retrospective was auspiciously timed to coincide with my project and, let's face it, Dumas's work is difficult, sometimes even shocking. But to



REUTERS

Number 16 by Jackson Pollock.

that fact few of those consulted would assent.

Of all the people I asked this question, only one responded with, "I love her work, I loved it from the moment I walked into that gallery." My respondent was an art major 25 years ago.

Everyone else started their answer in exactly the same way: "The video was brilliant." To those who were not there, let me explain. An hour-long video on the life and work of Marlene Dumas ran continuously in one of the side rooms, off the main exhibition halls. It started every hour on the hour. The darkened room and well-known medium of film offered a reprieve from the dense and complex works of art displayed outside.

It gave an overview of her artistic and, to a certain extent, her personal life and showed >>

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>> her in the process of creativity. And it was brilliant! In all fairness to my friends, my initial reaction was exactly the same: I loved the video. You see, it was easy. It did not challenge.

Unlike her art, the woman is open, direct, outspoken, garrulous – sharing, talking about her work in a free and spontaneous manner; unlike her art, which kept one guessing, challenging one with dark subject matter and extraordinary technique. And a challenge often results in resistance. As in life, this is true for art as well.

Splattering paint

RESISTANCE TO MODERN ART IS NOT LOCAL OR recent. Even in New York, the capital of sophistication, those who love abstract art still have to defend it to this day. Last year, I had the privilege of spending a morning in the Metropolitan Museum in the company of a well-known art historian and specialist on the abstract painter Jackson Pollock. His anecdotes made us all laugh, but behind it was the certainty: if you like this, you are going to have to defend it.

He told us how the Met hosts “corporate evenings” as part of its fund-raising efforts. For a fee, important companies can bring their employees or clients to the museum after hours to look at the art undisturbed and without being bothered by the hordes.

On such evenings, volunteers are assigned to the various rooms to talk about the art located in that room. As none of the other specialists is ever willing to take the Pollock room, he inevitably ends up there.

The evening then takes its natural course: they (these giants in suits who make million-dollar decisions every minute of their day) enter the room, look up at the massive Pollock that fills the wall and stop dead in their tracks. They don’t like this: it’s big and it’s challenging and when you are at war all day, this is nonsense.

“So you call this art?” Always this question first. To which he then replies in the affirmative. “You mean to say that if I remove my vehicles from my garage, spread a canvas on the floor and start splattering paint all over the place that I am making art?” Well no, in that case you will only be splattering some paint on a canvas in a garage, but if you did it in 1950, before anyone else thought of it and your name was Jackson Pollock, it would be considered art today.

To our guide, the challenge was to defuse the anger that incomprehensibility engenders. As I said, he had a great sense of humour and that helped. “To those of you who feel the way your colleague feels, I would like you to contact my dad as I am sure that you will have lots to say to each other. He is of the exact same opinion. But to those who are interested to know why the art world really takes Pollock’s work seriously, I would like to invite you to stay with me.”

Our guide made us all stand in front of the painting to look at it – in complete silence. “The fact that there is nothing to recognise is what’s upsetting,” he

suggested after a minute or two. Nothing to hang a proverbial hat on. “The artist is inviting us to engage with this work on another level.” Pollock titivates and teases with technique. “Look at what he did. Did he dribble, throw, splatter? Did he use one colour at a time? Can you picture where he stood when he threw the paint?”

And before we knew it, we were enmeshed, enchanted, entranced. I remember shedding a tear (pathetic, I know), but there it was: the brilliance, the bravery. This man knew that the world would question him, mock him, say that he’s mad, that this is not art. Yet he had to do this. It was his way of looking for the answer, and in the process he redefined the boundaries of our artistic existence. He walked to the beat of his own drummer, stayed true to his own vision. That’s artistic integrity.

Nobody who has ever had the privilege of such an experience could ever again say “I hate that” about Pollock or any other artist for that matter. “Hate” has simply become superfluous.

When we are confronted by something we do not understand and for that reason want to dismiss it, perhaps it is wise to remember what Charles Baudelaire said: “Relative to genius, the public is a clock that runs slow.”

Is it one of those bizarre anomalies of the art world that, despite the general resistance of the public, Pollock and Dumas are two of the top-selling artists in their respective genres? Or is it because of that fact?

Are you perturbed and bothered by contemporary art? Do you find it difficult to understand, weird, shocking, distasteful, even ugly? I presume one is allowed to feel a certain indignation by some efforts. Who indeed did Duchamp think he was when he put a urinal on a pedestal and called it art?

Are you lamenting the fact that you did not live in the time of Van Gogh, Matisse, Cézanne, Picasso? Are you sure that you would have bought their work if only you were alive then? Think again. These works – today such an accessible, pleasurable and popular part of our artistic landscape – were shocking at the time. “The boldest were unable to stomach his paintings,” the art dealer Ambroise Vollard commented after his first exhibition of Van Gogh’s work in 1895, five years after the death of the artist. Vollard did not sell a single painting at the exhibition. (Van Gogh never sold a painting in his lifetime, but the story goes that Theo, his brother, bought a painting pretending that someone else had bought it in order to pep up his depressed artist brother.)

I do believe there is something like good, bad and indifferent art, but I also want to plead for artistic tolerance – for respect for the processes and products of creativity, because sometimes only time can tell which is which.

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