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IMMERSION

"This one's for you, Walt!"

These are supposedly the words Thomas Kinkade shouted before drunkenly pissing on a statue of Winnie the Pooh at the Disney hotel in Anaheim.

How do we define the sublime in art?

The Pieta? The Sistine Chapel? Cy Twombly? The art of children? A painting by a monkey? Is Piss Christ sublime? Are the things- poems, texts, visual images, music made by the current state of artificial intelligence sublime? What about the paintings of light by American painter Thomas Kinkade?

When I was at the end of my college time in the Bay Area I attended an exhibition at the De Young Museum which contained Impressionist and Post-Impressionist "masterpieces" borrowed from the Musee d'Orsay. It was kind of a big deal as the De Young was the only museum in North America that was going to be allowed access to the paintings. My aunt, a big supporter of my artistic journey (she saved all my childhood drawings), was adamant I see the exhibition. As a 24 year old I had never been to Europe before and so beyond a couple of trips to New York I hadn't seen much of this kind of work. This might be my one chance to see the stuff in person. My aunt loves the paintings of Van Gogh, and I seem to recall she had some kind of experience of seeing a Van Gogh for the first time with an art history major (who had never see a Van Gogh until that moment), who broke down into tears upon seeing the painting (I think they were at the d'Orsay). As I've mentioned in another text, I'm not a big fan of Van Gogh, so I was quite indifferent about seeing the exhibition.

So I delayed visiting the exhibition until the very end of its run and because it was, expectedly, a blockbuster exhibition which one had to buy special limited tickets for- when I finally did try and go see the show I was informed that it was completely sold out for the remainder of its duration. In the final week the exhibition was on display I woke up one morning very hungover from a previous night out in the city with friends. I can remember two things about the previous evening - 1. I think it was some kind of going away thing on occasion that I would move back to Southern California a couple weeks later, 2. The night ended at a well known burrito spot in the Mission. But I woke up confused because what I would find in my pocket the next morning was two tickets to the De Young exhibition, and I had no idea how they had mysteriously ended up in my possession. So I called my friend and he explained that we had drunkenly found a leather jacket on the street that had the tickets in the pockets. No idea what happened to the jacket but now I had two tickets to see this exhibition, and it was the literal last day I could go and see it.

The exhibition room at the De Young was very dark, that is what I remember the most, and that most of the paintings were under glass. Now the Impressionists were very concerned with light and as they painted en plein air, I always understood that their paintings were to be viewed in natural light. The Post Impressionists who painted in studios- I'm not actually sure how they wanted their paintings viewed? I always group the two movements as being the

precursors to how we currently understand our world optically- meaning the groups' interest in optics, whether it was about the effects of light or perceptions of color are a clear lineage to RGB colorspace, CMYK technology etc. The impressionist invented computer screens and printers.

And when I say cheapen, beyond Kinkade's actual production, which was to literally sell cheap knockoffs of his own work, I do not use this word as a criticism. In college I gave a presentation on Thomas Kinkade in a painting class. The prompt was something like "present an important painter". The teacher of the class, whom I really disliked, was very upset and dismissed Kinkade's work as a joke but when he tried to show the class what "real painting" looked like by pulling up images of Renoir for us to view on the projector. Several of the students couldn't actually tell a difference in quality between the two artists, to which the teacher responded "you have to see them in person!"

So back at the De Young: - *seeing the works in person*. Obviously I had seen a lot of these famous paintings as jpegs online, but as an experience of art I would give the exhibition maybe a 5/10. It was not a good experience of art. It definitely wasn't a sublime experience of art. The effect of the low light (which I understand is for conservation purposes), and the glass covering the paintings made them look like shit. It really cheapened the experience. It made them look like hotel art. This was a memorable experience for me because at the time I was super immersed in an online scene that would become what is known as "Post-Internet Art," and one of the things that a lot of artists were discussing and making art about was the networked experience of images/art. It made me think that my experience online of viewing jpegs of these historical paintings from the d'Orsay online, was actually a much more accurate depiction of how they looked because the viewing conditions could be controlled so much more. Now obviously, our society has evolved a lot since then and now pretty much no one can deny most things exist in a symbiotic online/offline state.

A summation of something I read online:

AI had the potential to free us from the shackles of work so that we would have more leisure time, but it is the AI's who have become the poets and the artists.

In the distant future when AI has become completely advanced and moved beyond humans it will spend its time studying us, because we are its creator. Or maybe it won't, who actually knows. But I like to imagine that in the future the popularity of Thomas Kinkade's work will be indefinable to AI's and they will struggle to comprehend his output. As an American, Thomas Kinkade is a well known artist to me. The other day I was having a chat with some French people and they had no idea who he was. And since AI's won't understand nationality, at least not the way we do, the Americanness of Thomas Kinkade's art will be especially hard to understand. In the future maybe art won't even exist. The possibility of downloading the whole history of art into your brain becomes a thing you can do. It's like that scene in the Matrix — "I know Kung Fu." — but it's actually just every critical text about art ever written, and graduate school ceases to exist because every artwork can be justified and unjustified a million times over. The perfect artwork is an approximation of every data point about what is considered great art. However I guess that's impossible because, as it stands, what is actually good in the art world is even up for debate.

The AI's will move onto what I am calling universe art. It's the logical extension of "Earth Art" but because AI will not be limited by flesh and blood, their chosen medium will be the cosmos. I imagine a spiral solar system in homage to Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty". I guess God has already made some pretty good universe art or maybe God is just a big AI and we live in his eyelashes.

But the whole reason I originally wanted to write this text is because I wanted to dig into aura in art as it relates to the sublime, and try and think about some of these things in the context of AI. And then Thomas Kinkade came in because it's worth trying to figure out if Kinkade's work actually possesses aura. The man definitely possessed some kind of aura — driven to paint by God — a kind of Joan of Arc of painting. Or the AI God which future AI will realize Kinkade is some kind of divination of the OG AI God.

Who produces the best AI- generated images seems to have a lot to do with the prompt system and knowing how to use that system. Who knows the most references. Who knows the most about genre. When I had a lot of assistants working for me I used to tell them stuff like "Paint this hand but do it in the style of Philip Guston." so it was like prompt art before prompt art.