

Reimagining Innocent by Joe Nalven

Who are the Popes of the art establishment that reign in comfort, clothed in regal clothing? How does the digital artist tear away the veils that define what art should look like in the 21st century? What might art look like if we exchanged brillo pads and rags for blend modes and layers of varying opacity?

Three Periods in Art History

This story begins in 1650 when Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez paints Pope Innocent X.

Next, we time travel to 1953. Francis Bacon is in the midst of a series of painting more than three dozen pope images. The most memorable is Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X – a.k.a. the screaming pope.

Next, we come to 2008 when I created Reimagining Innocent.

This story does not anticipate other commentaries by art critics, curators and collectors. Rather, it is aimed at staking out a conversation about the continuity of art into the 21st century. This conversation relies on three images with similar content but different cultural context, different technique and different media. The conversation does not conclude at the end of this article, but simply provides an outline for many more such conversations, and an anticipation that the history of art will continue to unfold.

Getting the Image on the Medium

Diego Velázquez

Velázquez is painting on canvas. The period of painting on wood panels has already been in decline at this point. He first studied painting under Francisco de Herrera for about a year, leaving him at age 12 to apprentice himself to Francisco Pacheco, studying painting with him for about five years.¹ When Velázquez is commissioned to paint Pope Innocent X, he was in what art historians describe as his third stylistic period. Innocent X (Giovanni Battista Pamphilj) was regarded as politically shrewd and he succeeded in increasing the power of the Vatican during his tenure. His political shrewdness or unsettling gaze of power appears to have been captured in Velazquez's portrayal.²

Velazquez's style during this period is described as follows:

The modelling of the stern impassive face comes near to perfection, so delicate are the gradations in the full light; all sharpness of outline has disappeared; and the features seem moulded by the broad and masterly brushwork. When closely examined, the work seems coarse, yet at the proper distance it gives the very essence of living flesh. The handling is rapid but unerring. Velázquez had now reached the *manera abreviada*, as the Spaniards call this bolder style. This is but another way of saying that his early and laborious studies and his close observation of nature had given to him in due time, as to all great painters, the power of representing what he saw by simpler means and with more absolute truth.³

Pope Innocent X liked the painting enough to hang it. Velázquez received a gold chain and a medal in addition to any commission. His patron was King Phillip IV of Spain, accustomed to war as he was to being a patron of the arts. If we were to key in some meta words, we might select the following: Student/apprentice to painters. Paint. Canvas. Broad brushwork. Bolder style. *Manera abreviada*. Simpler means, more absolute truth.

Does it matter that the painting was done on canvas or that the style had changed to *manera abreviada*? From the perspective on whether Velázquez created a significant painting, of course not. How silly to think such things.

Francis Bacon

Bacon had become fascinated with Velázquez's picture. Bacon remarked about Velazquez's papal portrait, “”[He] found the perfect balance between the ideal illustration which he was required to produce, and the overwhelming emotion he aroused in the spectator.”⁴

One might say that Bacon saw in this aura of authority a possibility of injecting the the agony of existence – of

what Bacon described of "reinventing what is called fact, what we know of our existence — a reconcentration . . . tearing away the veils that fact acquires through time. Ideas always acquire appearance veils, the attitudes people acquire of their time and earlier time. Really good artists tear down those veils."⁵

But Bacon inserted a Nietzschean inner core underneath the veil he lifted. Bacon was far from a court favorite and his far more adventurous lifestyle on either side of WWII could be a study in contrasts of lifestyles compared to that of Velázquez.

In 1953, Bacon was able to graph a photographic still image from Sergei Eisenstein's movie, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), of a nurse who had just been shot in the eye by a Czarist soldier.⁶ Her moment of realization of a world way out of kilter became, in the hands of Bacon, Pope Innocent's reimagined realization.

To achieve his effect, the toolset had changed. This was no longer a painter's set of tools as was used several centuries earlier. Now, the photograph entered the process as well as brillo pads and rags.

Brillo pads to cashmere sweaters, as brushes are joined by rags, cotton wool, sponges, scrub brushes, garbage-can lids, paint-tube caps, the artist's hands, and whatever else he can find in the studio for the application and shaping of painterly passages. . . . Thick impasto coexists with thinned washes of pigment and raw canvas, sand and dust are occasionally used to give texture to the paint. A few works of the 1980s are veiled in the haze produced by applying paint with an aerosol spray.⁷

The style of Bacon's portraiture did not seek an exacting likeness, but an "expressive deformation" as a way of ripping away those accustomed appearances, those veils of illusion we carry around with us. And he was self-taught in painting. So, what of it?

Does it matter that the painting was done with brillo pads, rags, garbage-can lids and the like or that the style had relied on expressive deformation rather than a realist's appearance? From the perspective of whether Bacon created a significant "painting," of course not. How silly to think such things.

Joe Nalven

The reimagining of the Pope in 2008 no longer requires an actual pope. Having a pope or an anti-pope is much like hot/cold — of opposites defining each other. It is time to move beyond this dyadic pair in reconceptualizing Innocent. The concept can be broadened to authority figures in general.

The 21st century need not dwell on religious institutions, the lines of Kings and Queens, on the various literary giants, but can pick up reimagining Innocent in something more material and yet immaterial at the same time. How much more contemporary to say, "we are cell phone," "we are text message," "we are HDTV" or "we are pixel."

Of course, therein we find the lie. There are still authority figures at the head of each communication channel, of each merchandizing store, and of each node in defining what is acceptable as art.⁹

There is a tension in each new defining technology — yesterday, it was automation; before that it was mechanization; and today it is miniaturization and digitization. We feel the pressure of being defined by the automaton, the machine or the digital object. Andy Warhol expressed this well when he said, "Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?"¹⁰

At the other extreme, as we rise up to assert our individuality, we confront the authority. No longer the Pope, but the CEO, the Mayor, or for the artist, the Curator, the Collector and the Art Director.¹¹

The tension today for Everyman and Everywoman is no longer that of Pope Innocent and the Pope Not-so-Innocent, but of the tension of expressing self within the compressed moments of time in which we encounter reality. Bacon's comment of "tearing away the veils that fact acquires through time" takes on new meaning in this digital age. And he might have given over the brillo pad and rags for an image editing program on his computer.¹²

But Bacon is not alive and so it is left to others to reimagine the thread of the discussion. What is it about the fact of art authority that the one who gets the medal and gold chain is the accomplished artist? Who are the Popes of the art establishment that reign in comfort, clothed in regal clothing? How does the digital artist tear away the veils that define what art should look like in the 21st century? What might art look like if we exchanged brillo pads and rags for blend modes and layers of varying opacity?

It is too obvious to say, but one must say it nevertheless, Velázquez's greatness as an artist was not his *manera abreviada* or whatever paints he used or that he did it on canvas rather than on a wood panel; it was not merely the hand — or practiced techniques — of the artist, but rather the composite vision, mindset, techniques, tools, and

media that the artist melds together as his or her imagery ‐ of being able to leap from the mind’s eye to the expressed image. Velázquez did not have to dwell on color, composition, stroke, weight and the like; he knew these things; he could do these things and he was lost in the zone of being himself. This cannot be defined; it simply is. The same for Bacon. Bacon’s greatness as an artist was not his deformations or what paint, brillo pads, rags, sponges or garbage-can lids that he used; it was not his hand that made the art, but rather the composite vision, mindset, techniques, tools, and media that Bacon melded together as his imagery ‐ that leapt forth as the expressed image. He did not have to dwell on all the elements of form and media; he knew these things, he could do these things and he was lost in the zone of being himself. That is what art is really about.

The same is true today with digital artists. And those who can reach out and express images of greatness, well, they will have lost themselves in that same zone of being themselves and using the pixel, the layers, the transforms, the filters, the doubling and redoubling of image and texture, erasing and filling in, moving color and light about with curves, selective color, levels, shadow/highlight and sundry other tools.

For me, Innocent is no longer a pope, but he is still an authority figure.¹¹ The institutional focus is no longer religion, but the world of art. The media is no longer paint on canvas, whether with brush or brillo pad, but recombinant photography inside an image editing program outputted to acetate and laminated on brushed metal. Times change and the artist moves within his culture. It is no longer 1650 or 1953, it is now 2009.¹²

And what do I gaze upon? Or shall I say, what is the vision that I imagine ‐ for in tearing away the veils that surround the fact, I do not get any closer to reality, I simply close in upon my own illusions. I think of Chuang-Tzu in moments such as these.¹³

And so, what do I gaze upon? I look up the stairway to a seated figure, one who has power within the art world.¹⁴ One who is draped in cloth, reminding me of the Pope and his finery. His power is such that his second soul is visible during the daylight hour. The cutting and pasting of various elements in the image editor, each section found on a different layer and redefined by a different intensity of color and light ‐ all of these shape the centrality of the seated figure; the burst of reds and yellows energize the authority of the institution. Against this force field, where do I find my individuality as an artist?

Okay, maybe that is a bit overstated. But I need a storyline. Is there no irony left to the artist? Must his vision be squeezed dry by the critic and the viewer? Or are there still some secrets left?

Why This Tale of a Tub?

Reimagining Innocent is partly the extension of the artist’s play with an authority figure of dubious purity. In times past, the Pope is a likely target; today, it could be a variety of authority figures; but, since we are talking art, why not keep the discussion inhouse and look to our own authority figures?

The dialogue is always about how the artist renders this authority figure and with what conceits -- or deceits. At another level of discussion, the question is about the shifting paradigms in art, whether the impetus is mimicking political and social upheavals or a mere change in the technology of making art. The paradigm shifts are often derided. But once in place and entrenched, we find them surrounded by a new set of veils, a new set of illusions about what art is and does, and what the artist must do in order to continue the process of ripping away the next set of veils.

Today, that paradigm shift is taking place with digital toolsets. Not every rendition is a success, not every digital artist succeeds. There’s still that vision thing . . . and of getting lost in the zone.

Let’s all toast digital artists at whatever computers they are working.

ENDNOTES

I would like to thank JD Jarvis, Vivienne Morgan, Laurie Solomon, and Mel Strawn for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this essay. Any remaining mistakes or curiosities of interpretation are those of the author. I also recommend JD Jarvis’ various writings on digital art, including his chapter, *Following the Path to Digital Art*, in Joseph Nalven and JD Jarvis, *Going Digital, The Practice and Vision of Digital Artists*, Thomson, 2005, Chapter 1.

1. Diego Velázquez, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diego_Vel%C3%A1zquez
2. [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Innocent_X](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Innocent_X) ; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doria_Pamphilj_Gallery
3. NNDB, <http://www.nndb.com/people/913/000071700/>
4. Cited by Richard Moss, *Francis Bacon - A Major Retrospective At Tate Britain*, September 10, 2008,

5. From an interview with Hugh Davies, June 26, 1973 cited in Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, Francis Bacon, Abbeville Press, New York, 1986, p. 110. In "tearing away the veils," one could also look to a psychoanalytic perspective; perhaps underlying the Pope was an image of his father with whom he had strong feelings. See comment by David Sylvester, Introduction to exhibition, Tony Shafrazi Gallery 1998.

6. Ibid., Images after Art, p. 20. See also, David Sylvester, Introduction to exhibition.

7. Ibid., Notes on Technique, p. 113.

8. David Yezzie, Bacon's theater of the absurd, On Francis Bacon at the Tate Britain, London, The New Criterion, December 2008

9. Fred Ross, Chair of the Art Renewal Society, has written several essays that take a distinctly anti-modernist stance. The point here is not how one might champion academic art of the Victorian era versus the succeeding modern art era, but simply recognizing that there are radically different understandings of what art is, what it is intended to accomplish and what standards art to be applied in characterizing each era of good or tough art. Here is a selection of Ross's reaction to modern art to illustrate the great divide in art paradigms:

Just because something causes you to have a feeling of aesthetic beauty does not make it a work of art.

A work of art is the selective recreation of reality for the purpose of communicating some aspect of what it means to be human or how we perceive the world. . . .

The artist takes elements of reality and rearranges them in such a way that he makes perceivable an idea, a concept, an impression of the world. In other words, it is the artist, a human being, who is doing the selecting - not nature and not chance. . . .

But isn't an "abstract" painting by Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock tangible in a similar way to the [such things as rose petals floating in a basin or waves crashing on the shore]? Get close enough to a modernist painting and some patches of paint and blots of color are pretty to look at. Stare at them long enough you might even convince yourself that there is something meaningful in them, like a Rorschach ink blot test. But neither a blob of paint nor a Rorschach test is a work of art, and neither are they truly meaningful. They aren't meant to be interpreted as selections of reality at all. Since Clement Greenburg, modernist critics have always talked about them as "bits of" reality, as if they had their own exalted aesthetic existence. . . .

If art had ever been about this kind of cerebral playing with formal principles it would have died a tedious death millennia ago. But this is what modernist critics would have us understand is "abstract" art.

Fred Ross, Abstract Art is Not Abstract and Definitely Not Art, Art Renewal Society webzine.

Alternatively, one could turn to the 13th century Sufi mystic Jal al-Din Muhammad Rumi for a discussion of comparative aesthetics. Rumi (incorporating Al-Ghazzali from a century earlier) discussed who the better artists were — the Greeks or the Chinese — with the counterpoints being nothingness versus object and color.

10. As cited in Time, Robert Hughes, Man for the Machine. May 17, 1971. See also, Andy Warhol, Annette Michelson, B. H. D. Buchloh, Andy Warhol, MIT Press, 2001.

11. Vera L. Zollberg, Conflicting Visions in American Art Museums, in The Sociology of Art: A Reader, (ed.) Jeremy Tanner, Routledge, 2003. Some illustrative insights into how art standards/exemplars are established:

[T]he enactment in 1936 of a federal tax deduction of art works, permitted the Director to bargain more effectively with prospective donors when he counseled them about which kinds of works to collect. Since donors came to depend upon museum acceptance of their works to validate their tax deduction, they were often obliged to accede to his or curators' advice in order to guarantee that gifts would come to rest in the museum. The result was that curators, acting as experts, gained a more important voice in setting policies, rather, than, as before, graciously accepting anything that was offered. p. 200

Collecting involves the transformation of material into symbolic capital and is, therefore, a process in which museums play a pivotal role. Since trustees and prospective donors are continuing and even increasing their involvement in art collective, whether from aesthetic interest or for speculative purposes, external processes of elite formation will continue to affect the art museum. Its aesthetic policies will result in gains and losses for particular individuals or groups, whether in the museum, or aspiring to enter. As repositories of art, museums are, therefore, willy-nilly linked to an external market whose speculations impinge upon their collections and exhibitions. p. 204.

12. Many who have moved into digital media for image-making have crossed over from other media — painting, mixed media collage and photography. And, of course, this platform is very broad in scope, reaching out to fractal-based

programs and other ways of sourcing electronic images.

13. Chuang-Tzu/ Zhuangzi, a Taoist from the 4th Century BCE, considered how we know things and can communicate them to others. Consider The Happiness of Fish as a different way of engaging reality compared to Bacon's tearing away of veils.

14. To identify all those in the world of art who would be considered an authority would be a daunting task, if not impossible. Even me, at the nether reaches of this world, might be considered an authority since I have been a juror, art show promoter, webzine editor, and book author on digital art. Moreover, many authorities play a vital role in supporting the living artist in negotiating their way to maturity in this endeavor. The argument, like most definitional exercises, are fuzzy at the boundaries; nevertheless, there are the standard bearers of contemporary art who act to define what is acceptable in a way not unlike church- and royalty-commissioned art in past centuries – hence, the continuation of the Pope Innocent X metaphor.

Reimagining Innocent will be unveiled at an art exhibit, Times3 , on April 29, 2009. The figure in the image is intended to be metaphorical and does not reflect the reality of any living person.