

Perspectives on Contemporary Art

The Contemporary Art Movement: A New Way of Looking at the World

By Brian Scott Lipton and Evie T. Joselow, Ph.D.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Tobacco Versus Red Chief*, 1981–82, oil and oilstick on canvas, 78 x 70 inches. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / ADAGP, Paris/ ARS, New York. The UBS Art Collection.

In the aftermath of World War II, Americans looked at the world with new eyes. They were colored by the horrors of genocide overseas and the threat of nuclear annihilation, yet equally alive with a renewed belief in the possibility of economic prosperity and global harmony. The dreams and realities those eyes saw have been reflected by the great artists of the past 60 years: men and women such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Barbra Kruger, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jeff Koons, Cindy Sherman and Julian Schnabel, to name but a handful. These practitioners of the Post-War and Contemporary Art movements are true visionaries; people who were gifted enough to comment on the world around us in ways that the rest of us were unable to fully express.

In 2006, the eyes of everyone from billionaires like David Geffen, to leading gallery owners like Larry Gagosian and Arne Glimcher, to art enthusiasts from all walks of life, are all firmly focused on the works of these innovators. “Contemporary art feels particularly vital today,” says Brett Gorvy, international co-head of Christie’s Post-War and Contemporary Art division. “It is a starting point to an exciting world unto itself. I think people are attracted to contemporary art because it reflects their lifestyle and demonstrates their tastes.”

If art appreciation has always been a subjective affair, it’s never been truer than today. “Contemporary art is a particularly visceral experience,” says Charles Moffett, executive vice president at Sotheby’s. “You either love something or you don’t.” Adds Bali Miller, a well-known New York-based art advisor: “I love contemporary art because it has that special excitement — the spark that comes from being engaged with the way we think and feel today.”

Certainly, there is a broad selection of contemporary artwork to embrace, whether you are a viewer or buyer. Just as the world has moved with lightning speed in the past seven decades, the art world has followed suit, with stylistic movements coming, and sometimes receding, in little more than the blink of an eye. Abstract Expressionism, with its emphasis on introspective work, bold gestures, and preoccupation with color, led off the post-1945 era and dominated much of the next 15 years. But it soon gave way to Minimalism, characterized by its startling use of geometry and austerity; Pop Art, which commented on, celebrated, and even satirized consumer culture; Optical Art, in which the physiological response to visual stimuli is often the work’s *raison d’être*; and Conceptual Art, in which the message often outshines the medium. As the decades passed, there was the birth of Environmental Art, Neo-Expressionism and any number of other subdivisions and offshoots, each of which is an authentic expression of the greater world.

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Yet many art experts have come to believe the subcategories of the period have outgrown their usefulness. "In general, we see these last 60 years being divided up simply into two periods," says Gorvy, explaining the philosophy at Christie's. "The period from 1945 to 1970 represents the influence of the Post-War culture on the art world, while from 1970 onwards, there is an emphasis on a more contemporary vision."

Of all the artists of the past 60 years, few have had as long-lingering an impact as Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993), in large part because he moved from abstract art to figurative art and then back to abstraction over his lengthy career. In doing so, Diebenkorn created a singular body of work that looks like no one else's before or since. He forged his own vision of being an artist by looking at what came before him, but his independent-mindedness enabled him to come into his own style.

"I think one reason younger artists are attracted to him is because he showed them the possibilities of trying different things," says John Van Doren, the co-owner of the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery in New York, which represents the artist's estate..

Adds George Negroponte, a noted artist and the president of The Drawing Center in New York: "His shapes and marks demonstrate how he constantly questioned himself. This is the living dialogue of painting. Diebenkorn is so generous and the viewer is invited at all times to witness his visual journey towards invention. You can see how he arrived at his own conclusions. These paintings are entirely 'felt.'"

It's not just Diebenkorn who appeals to the current-day art lover: financial mogul Kenneth C. Griffin recently purchased Jasper Johns' seminal 1959 work *False Start* for \$80 million, and Steven Cohen, the founder of SAC Capital Advisors, bought Willem de Kooning's 1955 abstract landscape *Police Gazette* earlier this fall for \$63.5 million in a private transaction. "Many of the people who are buying contemporary art today have made an impact in their professions similar to the impact these artists have made in the art world," says Gorvy, explaining the current passion for these works.

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That said, the contemporary art market is not just for people with seven-figure incomes — everyone can become a collector, thanks to a wide swath of affordable works. “Eighty percent of people who are buying art today are buying contemporary art,” says Francis F. L. Beatty, vice president of Richard L. Feigen & Co., a leading New York-based art dealer. “It is incredibly fashionable to own contemporary art. Andy Warhol’s work is particularly popular, in part, because there is so much of it available. He didn’t call his studio ‘The Factory’ for nothing.”

It’s impossible to know who the next Warhol will be, but there’s no question that the contemporary art world is becoming an ever more global one: Damien Hirst, Anselm Kiefer, Takashi Murakami, Yinko Shonabare and Miguel Angel Rios are just a few of the non-American artists whose enormous influence is being felt not just in their home countries but across the globe. Moreover, while painting continues to be a deeply admired medium, photography, sculpture, video art and graphic art continue to climb ever higher into the public’s consciousness. Paul Morris, a founder of the Armory Show, one of the country’s leading art fairs, says one of his favorite artists is R. Crumb, the underground comic strip artist whose work is currently being exhibited at The Jewish Museum in New York. “He is a great draughtsman who brings up challenging subjects, such as sexuality, taboos, and childhood traumas, in his work,” says Morris. “He is perceived as a comic strip artist, when he really should be seen as a great artist, period.”

Even something as commonplace — and illegal — as graffiti is being elevated to the realm of art, thanks to such galleries as Harlem’s Casa Frela Gallery. “There is an underlying message in the words and logos of today’s graffiti, even if it’s not particularly profound,” says curator Lawrence Rodriguez. “Young people are making a statement, even if it’s one we don’t always get.” Indeed, perspective and distance are not just key elements in understanding a work of contemporary art; they are also primary factors in trying to decide who and what will matter 60 years from now. “It’s hard to say if a piece of art is good from viewing it once,” says Morris. “In determining quality, time is truly a luxury.”

But in the here and now, contemporary art is, as they used to say in the 1960s, where it’s at. Says Gavin Spanierman, director of New York’s Spanierman Modern Gallery: “What I like about contemporary art is that it’s all about looking at new things in new ways.”

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