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## Is This Cheap Kitsch Art? Analyzing What Aesthetic Value Is

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Critiques can be used to help students in art classes understand the processes of production and the meanings of artifacts of visual culture, such as dollar store objects. Aesthetic evaluation can be used to engage students in the process of understanding cultural production through active interpretation of individual objects. Observing and discussing the aesthetic traits of these artifacts from the dollar store can reveal their visual antecedent applications, revelatory implications, and abstruse fascination for the buyer. The interpreter may also observe that these artifacts have an underlying concept, a metaphor, or a trope to that can be used to draw meaning from their aesthetic imagery (Gude, 2008). Art educators can teach our students to reflect on these dollar store artifacts to see them as part of our visual culture. How can this be instituted?

### **A Short History of Kitsch**

First, how would art educators approach these kitschy items to teach an art lesson in aesthetics? Dollar store items can be integrated within our art education curriculum to understand the item's function, design, and concept compared to traditional art forms through art critiques. Dollar store items are often seen as a so-called low art form. High art and low art are two different social classes of art that are usually distinct in their class, concept, and style. According to modernist paradigm (Rawlingson, 2009), high culture includes art that is held in the highest esteem, usually by the cultural elite. The concept of high art promotes sophisticated, coherent, well crafted, original, self-critical, consciously aesthetic work that exemplifies moral and political good. High art concept is also the product of disciplined, critical training and process in the visual arts that makes the art more valuable (Rawlingson, 2009).

On the opposite ends of this spectrum is low art, which is labeled as unsophisticated art, overdecorated, uneducated, unimaginative, and mass-produced (Rawlingson, 2009). This low art form is usually called kitsch and it started at a popular level with the age of industrialization when consumers became interested in owning something that was affordable and accessible (Olalquiaga, 1998). Kitsch is frequently framed as bad art that portrays images that are fake, tacky, overdecorated, mass-produced and does not promote any sort of creative critical thinking in the customer.

The origin of the term kitsch came from "the 1860's among Munich artists and dealers, for whom it meant cheap artistic stuff" (Morreall & Loy, 1989, p. 63). Kitschen is a German word that means to cheapen and make do (Morreall & Loy, 1989). During the Industrial Revolution, kitsch was born when factory workers and the middle class wanted to decorate their homes like the rich to gain status, but when they could not afford original art, they bought the mass-produced copies of fine art (Morreall & Loy, 1989). The popularity of lithographs, photography, 3D sculptures and paintings were devoid of originality devaluing them as imitations (Olalquiaga, 1998).

In present times, some segments of society still buy high art for decorating to show or gain status. Others, who may not be as educated or financially well off buy kitsch from the dollar store for the same reasons as their ancestors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; people in general know very little about fine art, have not developed a sense of aesthetic awareness and they simply want to decorate their homes and show off artsy objects (Morreall & Loy, 1989). Kitsch boomed when the lower classes wanted to emulate the rich (Morreall & Loy, 1989) and could afford copies of mass-produced art. However, the shoddy workmanship, bad design, and the downright hideous products made up for the cheapness of price and sacrificed any awareness of what sophisticated design involved.

### **Approaching Contemporary Kitsch Through Critique**

Dollar store kitsch could be considered instant art, which means people who buy these items may have immediate satisfaction during the purchase but possess no special knowledge or understanding of the piece (Morreall & Loy, 1989, p. 67). But dollar store art does have meaning and could be interpreted as symbolic communication. The Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) model of art criticism, which allows students to find connections between form and meaning, would be useful when facilitating critical thinking of these dollar store objects. The leading questions might be: How meaningful is this piece and what does this image mean to the culture of consumers who purchase this dollar store item? The purpose would be to help learners understand how to evaluate not just the objects themselves, but also the concepts involved in marketing them in the context of visual culture. Also in critiquing dollar store kitsch, students may analyze how issues of race, class, and gender can influence identity and the production of images from mass culture. An example would be comparing and contrasting dollar store kitsch to traditional art forms. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) describe developing a curriculum that allows this model of art criticism as social, community-based, and extrinsic.

Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) describe making art for meaning and its symbolic communication. Their model of art criticism allows the viewer to analyze the art medium (form, character, subject, objects), *technique* (composition of the elements and principles of art), and its *contextual* use (does this form represent anything beyond its form such as pure expression?). Klein (1992) describes advertising as a form of socialization and part of our construction of knowledge about how individuals see themselves and others. A practical suggestion to consider when applying Anderson and Milbrandt's model of art criticism would first include asking students how the dollar store items make them feel. Other questions to include: Do the colors and images provoke a certain emotion or appeal to the viewer? Is the design of this object related to its function? Was the object effective in conveying a particular message to the target audience? Are there any obvious or indirect symbols in the object that have meaning to the students? These questions can lead to authentic socially situated instruction (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) if the instructor listens well to the students and returns the discussion back to the students by asking open-ended questions. The instructor should welcome any feedback or opinion from the students and should encourage multiple interpretations because students may reveal elements that others may not have noticed. Anderson and Milbrandt address the idea that people make art as a form of communication. Students make their own meanings based on their own identities and experiences. This can also include constructivist learning which requires that the exchange of dialogue between students and teachers are imperative to the comprehension of art criticism. This educational significance can also promote image-making, aesthetic appeal, artistic visual culture and artistic techniques, art historical reference to images, preferences on race that may address the way other cultures see beauty, how beauty changes, and how it influences an individual's self-esteem.

McFee (1998) describes the concept of culture as the values, attitudes and belief systems of a group of people that embody their human behavior, patterns, and the structure of their environment. In this context, the concepts of culture in mass arts can influence the way people think, feel and act and how society determines its aesthetic, ethical, moral, spiritual, cultural and environmental values (Gaudelius, 1997). Art educators could initiate a class discussion of how dollar store objects may or may not influence an individual's identity, who the target audience is and how the composition and placement of designs, colors, or patterns could show some type of symbolism. The student generated dialogue and the interpretation while observing these dollar store items may influence various reactions when shared with others (Bassey, 1999). Sharing

dialogue that involves how mass arts may or may not affect identity will give students the opportunity to develop post-modern views of art as a creative enterprise.

Also, on a multicultural level, these dollar store items can give us a broader knowledge of the dominant forms of artistic expression and how we borrow images and ideals from other cultures and their diverse artistic traditions. Each society, sub-culture, and social and economic class has symbols, art, artifacts and environments that identify its social standing through the arts (McFee, 1998). Critically examining subliminal advertising from mass arts, then, may uncover symbols and artifacts that influence an individual's identity (Chapman, 2003). Art educators can facilitate discussion using Anderson and Milbrandt's (2005) critique model and spiral them into other questions that may arise from the discussion. Following from the first stages of the method (reaction, description, and formal analysis), contextual examination is crucial to an examination of dollar store objects. Questions to ask might be: What is the personal, social, psychological function of this object? Describe the connections between the elements and principles of design and their contextual functions. What cultural understanding contributes to the difference and similarities of form and expression between, for example, a dollar store dog sculpture and a sculpture of a balloon dog by Jeff Koons? Koons is an American artist who produced a sculpture of a balloon dog in reflective stainless steel that was a huge sculpture the size of a small building. It was part of the *Banalilty Series*, which looked like it had kitsch aesthetics (Warren, 2008). How would this artifact be meaningful in different cultures?

This contextual examination would lead to meaningful interpretation and evaluation. Questions might include: What is this dollar store artifact trying to communicate? What does it symbolize? How can you compare and contrast your ideas with another artwork (past or present) when viewing this object? What do you feel or think when you see this artifact? What does this artifact mean to you? Does this artifact from the dollar store have aesthetic value? Why or why not? Does it have other ideas or meanings embedded beyond the aesthetic for its own sake? What is it about this dollar store artifact that makes or does not make it art? If it is art is it good art? Does that matter?

### **Student Kitsch Critiques**

Critiques enable students to engage in discussion based on what they consider to be of aesthetic value in dollar store artifacts. Even if the student does not find any part of the dollar store artifact to be aesthetically valuable, he or she can develop an understanding that aesthetic quality may be discernible and allows them to disagree and discuss ways on how they came up with this interpretation and evaluation. The following examples are from high school students who discussed their descriptions, analysis, interpretations and evaluations of dollar store artifacts.

**Student 1****Figure 1:** A Whale on Waves from the Dollar Store*Description*

Three waves; the smallest one on the bottom and the bigger one on the top. There is a black killer whale on the top part. There seems to be value of different shades of blue on the waves. I see movement because the top of each wave is curled over. There is symmetry in the composition of the waves, but the whale is tilted towards the left side, emphasizing the part of the object as the first thing you see.

*Context*

I think that the concept is about nature and wildlife, which is why it only has waves and one whale. I think that the message is obvious. There are no other forms, shapes or elements that look out of place besides what someone sees and expects in nature. I think that the concept here was to show that the killer whale isn't really something scary. In this object it seems to be more like a friendly whale such as in SeaWorld.

I interpret this object as not having a function at all. I think this object is for someone that really enjoys watching nature shows on TV where they have whales. I think this object could be used as a paperweight or something placed on a desk for decoration. When I see this object I think of something at a souvenir shop. I personally would not own one or buy one, I am not sure that this can be considered art unless it was made from something interesting such as glass but I think it looks cute. This definitely isn't considered fine art because the paint is not painted on the object nicely since it's mass-produced. I think poor people that can't go to SeaWorld buy this stuff. There is no ocean or sea around Texas, so I think people that can't afford to travel buy this stuff because they wish they could go.

### *Interpretation*

When I see this object I think of a Wyland painting where there is exaggerated colors and exaggerated placement of the marine life. Compared to other paintings and artists that I learned in class, I think of the print by Hokusai, *The Whaling Scene on the Coast of Goto (1830)*. There is also simplistic [sic] color and emphasis on the movement of the whale. There are also exaggerated lines showing the water splashing and in this dollar store object the water looks like it's splashing upwards to push the whale up. I think that it's very similar.

### **Student 2**

**Figure 2: Flamingo and Lighthouse Object from the Dollar Store**



### *Description*

This looks like a funny pink flamingo standing on a circle of sand. He is no ordinary flamingo because he is wearing sandals, wearing a lei made out of flowers, and holding a swimming tube. Wrapped around his legs are green vines that go all the way up to his body. One wing is holding the swimming tube and the other wing is touching his beak as if he were laughing. I see texture on its wings and on its body. There is also texture on the sand and the leaves. The color pink has very small value in it and there are no different shades of green on the vine. Next to it is a lighthouse that is painted black and white on a circle of land with a small house and a bunch of green bushes below. The stripes are painted really sloppy. There is symmetry with both pieces because they are both tall and balanced. I see there are different greens on the bottom of the object but the lighthouse itself has no shading or value with the colors to it.

### *Context*

I am really not sure what the concept of this is together. Separately, I see that the flamingo is supposed to be funny and absurd because flamingos don't hold floating tubes or wear leis or sandals. It's supposed to be humorous. But the lighthouse, it looks more serious. The only connection that I can see is that both of these are on or next to the sand on the beach. I am not sure why there is such a difference between both of the forms, shapes and colors of this, other than the fact the person who made this wanted to show that the flamingo was the most interesting part of the object because of its size and color. It's almost as tall as the lighthouse. I think that this piece is more like a humorous piece. I don't see this as being art at all other than the fact that ceramics can make objects like this. There is no function of this piece other than to make someone smile or think of it as ridiculous.

Who knows who buys things like these? I think someone who has a sense of humor will buy something like this. I think this piece was made just for that person. I think I would buy something like this as a joke gift but that's about it. I think a lot of old people like to buy this stuff.... It seems that old people like pink flamingos. I don't see anyone young wanting to buy this kind of stuff unless they are like, 6 year old kids. This is more for girls then guys. Pink is what girls like.

### *Interpretation*

When I think of corny pieces like this, I think of Jeff Koons' work "Michael Jackson and Bubbles." I mean that piece is just as ridiculous as this one. The paint isn't painted directly on the form evenly or properly. It just looks silly. I think when I compare the two works, I see that the forms and shapes are exaggerated. The monkey Bubbles' head is too big and so is Michael Jackson's head for his body. The flamingo is too big for its size compared to the lighthouse it's a giant. It's wearing sandals and the pose of the flamingo touching his beak with his wing as if it were giggling is just as absurd as the pose of Michael holding his monkey on the floor. Both are silly and exaggerated on purpose to be silly. It's definitely part of visual culture.

### **Conclusion**

In retrospect, the students' contextual analysis, interpretations, and evaluations of the dollar store objects could have gone deeper, but they are a good start toward understanding the role of these objects in visual culture. What is clear, however is that there is a role for art educators is to introduce students to the techniques of empowered experiencing and empowered making that create deeply engaged experience possible (Gude, 2009). Art educators can teach how culture is shaped and how to shape culture by providing our students with the tools of contemporary aesthetic investigation. Through such signifying practices we make meaning of our lives and we make meaningful lives—with style, with purpose, and with pleasure (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). For this reason, quality art education curriculum must always situate its projects within relevant historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts in order to teach students sophisticated contemporary concepts of constructing and deconstructing meaning. Equally important to sharing the history of a medium, subject matter, or theme with students is engaging them in understanding some of the aesthetic and conceptual questions that lie embedded in art and artifacts.

It is clear from this examination of dollar store art that art educators and students can have many different interpretations and judgments on the concepts and meanings embedded in images. In the examples given above, Anderson and Milbrandt's (2005) model for critiques gave students the opportunity to reflect upon values contained in dollar store art. The process

described allows the students to promote higher levels of critical thinking within the artistic, social, cultural, and historical context. This will in turn, engage the students to think about the images, shapes, feelings, concepts and symbols within the object that may influence their sense of what visual culture is.



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