

The concepts of space and time in the works of Francis Bacon: implications for university fine arts painting curriculum teaching

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Abstract: Francis Bacon, a distinguished British artist of the twentieth century, deeply embedded his artistic endeavors within the contemplative milieu of post-war civilization. Through a unique lens, Bacon revisited the medium of painting, challenging the ubiquitous clichés and pioneering a "third path" in artistic expression. In recent times, the proliferation of technology, such as cameras and smartphones, has simplified the process of gathering materials for artists, leading to a tendency for artwork to increasingly mimic photographs, thereby diluting their artistic integrity. Art academies and comprehensive university art departments are vital in cultivating the next generation of painters. One of the critical challenges for art educators in these institutions is how to effectively circumvent "pointillist time" and the over-reliance on photorealism in student artworks. Drawing from Bacon's exploration of space and time and his expressive techniques, this paper seeks to derive insights applicable to the modern fine arts painting curriculum in higher education, proposing several targeted recommendations for refining creative teaching methodologies.

Key words: Francis Bacon; painting; time; space; creation

1 The concepts of space and time in the works of Francis Bacon

1.1 "Sensation" and the "third path in painting"

Francis Bacon contended that the advent of photography had made the replication of reality redundant, while purely subjective abstract painting risks becoming ensnared in symbolic abstraction. Bacon often stressed that painting should go beyond the mere "process of image-making" to directly affect the "nervous system", navigating through the layers of "sensation". Deleuze argued that Bacon's approach, by substituting pure images for representational forms, charted a third path between abstraction and figurative art, thereby salvaging the relevance of images in the 20th century.

1.2 Time and space in ancient and modern contexts

Throughout the history of art, the discourse on time and space has continued unabated, with each era manifesting these concepts through its unique formal language. Egyptian art pursued the eternity of time and the immortality of the soul by portraying objects from unrestricted viewpoints to capture their perfect aspects, resulting in flattened space and an enduring sense of time. By the later Greek period, art gradually shifted towards mimicking and reproducing the real world, with a focus on light and volume that led painters to create three-dimensional spaces on two-dimensional planes, capturing specific moments in time. During the Renaissance, the dominance of perspective was established, and narrative

compositions catered to plot designs, depicting realistic scenes of specific moments, where space thoroughly dominated time.

In modern painting, the relationship between space and time has again become a significant topic of discussion. Cézanne liberated color from its traditional role in natural representation, leaving traces of time with each brushstroke and creating unprecedented scenes through the movement of multiple viewpoints, reshaping the space of painting. Influenced by Cézanne, Cubism deconstructed the world thoroughly, observing from multiple angles and shifting viewpoints to create a cyclical sense of time, and craft a self-sufficient, temporalized space. Bacon's paintings, drawing new energy from the temporal and spatial characteristics of ancient Egyptian art, forge relationships between figures and backgrounds through contours, and complex motion relationships place time on the same visual plane as touch [1].

2 The predominance of "photorealism" and the dilemma of instantaneity in contemporary painting

As technology has advanced, the ubiquity of cameras, camcorders, and camera-equipped smartphones has reduced the necessity of painting as a means of image reproduction. Although the tension between photography and painting is not a new conversation, it is noteworthy that the phenomenon of paintings that replicate photographs remains widespread in contemporary art creation. Typically, this manifests in two scenarios: in one scenario, the artist, with a strong foundation in realism, recreates photographs with exquisite craftsmanship, and another where the artist advocates returning to nature, mimicking natural scenes through plein air painting, which is, in essence, another form of photorealism.

The trend of "photographic realism" in painting isn't confined to any specific country or area; it is a widespread issue in this age of imagery. Even thematic realistic painting should not merely mimic or reproduce photographs, particularly when it involves translating three-dimensional reality into two-dimensional surfaces and capturing and reproducing "pointillistic time".

Machine-created images are products of "pointillistic time". With each snap of a camera's shutter, a moment is captured as an image, segmenting what are naturally fluid, continuous life scenes into a series of static images, each marked as a discrete instance in time. Painting, in its attempt to replicate instant scenes, merely compresses time into a single moment. In a bygone era devoid of cameras or smartphones, when events could only be recounted through spoken or written words, there was a significant value in painting that precisely depicted specific moments. However, in today's era of image saturation, any representation of a moment in time, no matter how ingenious or novel, lacks broad educational significance in the arts.

However, it is not our intention to set painting and photography against each other. In today's era of rapid technological progress, utilizing images effectively enables us to reap the benefits brought by the technological advances, propelling the evolution of art. What needs to change now is the way we use images. In this respect, the multiplicity of temporal and spatial dimensions evident in the paintings of Francis Bacon offers profound insights.

3 Insights and recommendations from Francis Bacon's paintings for university-level art courses

3.1 Encouraging students to broadly collect, refine, and appropriately utilize materials

First and foremost, students should be encouraged to gather a wide variety of images, ranging from personal photographs, movie and television stills, to various posters, illustrations, and news images found in magazines and newspapers. The broader the sources, the better. Second, in guiding the painting process, instructors should encourage the creation of preliminary sketches, detailed drafts, color studies, and grayscale compositions. Early sketches should eschew

conceptualization, aiming for a direct, intuitive interpretation of reality. This approach helps prevent students' works from merely mimicking or duplicating photographs.

In painting creation courses, we guide students to forge relationships between photographic materials based on their personal sensibilities, shaping the nascent "image" of the painting. Students explore myriad combinations of images to conceive visuals that resonate with specific feelings, fostering the emergence of "serendipity". Providing space for serendipity is crucial for image creation.

3.2 Encouraging students to read widely, identify problems, and define the themes of their paintings

The absence of clear themes and "questions" in painting causes it to become overly attached to reality, leading to a proliferation of "photographic" paintings. These paintings, with their assembled and copied images, obscure the true meaning of painting. Deleuze argued that painting needs to break away from images to form images, and only the establishment of such images can allow painting to fulfill its true purpose [2]. Before starting to create, it is essential to establish a clear, problem-focused theme. Once the theme is set, the painting's "image" can be worked on to make the emotion tangible and visible. The establishment of themes is inseparable from extensive reading. Through reading, we enhance our capacity to think about problems, find a reasonable positioning for our artistic issues, and deepen our understanding and reflection on "humanity".

Painting instruction in art schools is inseparably linked to the development of good reading habits among students. This responsibility should not rest solely on course instructors, but should be integrated into the entire educational system. Art colleges should intensify their efforts to cultivate students' literary and cultural knowledge by offering relevant courses and forming interest groups.

4 Conclusion

Art academies and art departments in comprehensive universities are crucial in nurturing painters. The tendency among art students to overly depend on photographs in their painting education is a significant concern. Addressing how to effectively avoid "pointillist time" and excessive photorealism in creation is an urgent task for art educators in university art courses. This article, inspired by Francis Bacon's exploration of expressing space and time in painting, encourages students to read broadly, identify problems, and define the themes of their paintings. In their daily academic and personal lives, students should enhance their literary and cultural cultivation, and while enjoying the convenience of accessing materials, they should strive to identify issues, invest emotions, and express thoughts in their paintings, thereby gradually developing a unique artistic "vision".

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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