WOLVERHAMPTON ARTS & CULTURE

STELLAR: STARS OF OUR CONTEMPORARY COLLECTION LEARNING PACK

Allen Jones, *Dream T-Shirt*, 1964. © the artist

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Contents

Page 2 What is Contemporary Art - or 'When'?
Page 4 Modern or Contemporary?
Page 12 Form or Idea?
Page 14 Viewing and Reading
Page 15 Bibliography
Page 15 How to get in touch

Stellar: Stars of our Contemporary Collection

Stellar presents an overview of recent, current and ongoing developments in British art, as viewed through the lens of Wolverhampton Art Gallery's collection. Many of the works included in this exhibition also featured in past iterations of the prestigious British Art Show – a touring exhibition that celebrates the country's most exciting contemporary art – or are by artists nominated for the Turner Prize, which from 1984 has been awarded annually to the artist who has achieved an outstanding exhibition or presentation of their work. Accordingly, *Stellar* charts the changing face and shifting landscape of contemporary art practice in the United Kingdom. *Stellar* is presented ahead of *British Art Show 9*, which opens in Wolverhampton in March 2021.

Allen Jones, *Dream T-Shirt*, 1964. © the artist

Unlike other art forms, contemporary practice can be an elusive topic to describe; there is no readymade definition and a walk through *Stellar* clearly reveals a wide variety of styles and techniques. A movement like Impressionism may be readily associated with certain methods and subjects, yet an attempt to define contemporary art on purely visual terms would struggle.

The following notes attempt to introduce contemporary art in more detail, with reference to works displayed in *Stellar,* and will also try to answer some questions such pieces may provoke: Why do artists make work like this, what thought processes inspire this work, and how should we approach or analyse such artworks?

What is Contemporary Art – or ‘When’?

Bruce McLean, *Untitled,* 1985. © the artist

Contemporary art generally refers to work made between the recent past and the present day, often by living artists. The precise definition of ‘when’ an artwork may be defined, or dated, as contemporary is, however, open to debate. For example, the Contemporary Art Society was founded in 1910, and the Institute of Contemporary Art has showcased work created from late 1940s onwards. Conversely, some galleries present contemporary art as creative practice produced from the 1970s, while others limit the classification to the last ten years.

A common thread nevertheless connects these timelines: the fact that artworks we may consider to be contemporary frequently explore topical political, social and cultural themes, regularly address identity and issues relating to the politics of representation, and often respond to a global environment.

In addition to its production date, contemporary art can also be distinguished by the fact that it often questions our understanding of how art is defined, what constitutes art, or even how art is made? Bruce McLean’s early commitment to making art from rubbish, a reaction against art-world

Jock McFadyen, *Shankill,* 1984. © the artist

Richard Wentworth, *Boy with Shadow,* 1982. © the artist

pretentions, is a more extreme example. While still experimental, his untitled screen print included here presents a less provocative subversion of artistic convention.

As such, contemporary art might be viewed as a dialogue or conversation with the art of the past, in which artists may respond to, develop, or reject the styles that came before. As the selection exhibited in *Stellar* reveals, contemporary artists use a wide range of media, including: film, installation, new-media, performance and photography, alongside traditional practices like painting, drawing and sculpture. Consider, for instance, two works taken from the Art Gallery's collection of works addressing the complex histories of the Troubles in Northern Ireland: *Sad* by Siobhán Hapska and *Shankill* by Jock McFadyen. Both explore similar socio-political contexts and themes, yet whereas McFadyen does so through a return to a figurative, pictorial style, Hapska's work features found-objects taken straight from everyday settings, re-imagined and re-purposed as part of an artwork. This technique is known as 'appropriation' and is present in several pieces exhibited here. Richard Wentworth's lithograph *Boy with Shadow* is just one example.

Modern or Contemporary?

Gillian Ayres, *Untitled,* 1977. © the artist

Approached in a purely art-historical context, contemporary art can be separated from the era that immediately precedes it, the era known as the 'modern'. It is worth noting here that, in art history at least, the terms modern and contemporary are not interchangeable, but distinct. Modern art, or modernism, is the general name applied to work created from the mid-nineteenth-century, to the post-war years of the mid-twentieth. What follows may be described as contemporary. As such, we might suggest that the term contemporary acquires new significance, in the arts, from the 1960s. It is certainly the case that *Stellar* includes works from this decade.

During the modern era of the early twentieth-century, artists often formed specific movements; issuing manifestos structured around group identities that articulated opinions about how art could reflect the experience of a newly industrialised, mechanized world. Gradually, artists from this period began to move away from making realistic works, that depicted things like people, places or objects, towards an abstract, non-representational style.

By the 1950s, a genre known as abstract expressionism had become dominant. Alongside rejecting figurative or realistic subject matter, in favour of pure shapes, colours and forms, it introduced the notion that the process of making art was of equal importance to the finished work. Furthermore, it suggested that the way an artist used their materials, and the look or form of a final piece, could be of higher value than an artist's ideas.

Among the most famous exponents of abstract expressionism was American artist Jackson Pollock, who poured, dripped and splattered paint onto large, floor-based canvases. His style influenced artists like Gillian Ayres, who features in *Stellar*. Her untitled oil painting belongs to a body of work sometimes described as 'Taschism'. This French word, meaning spot or blotch in English, is the name given to European abstract art of the mid-twentieth-century, in reference to the way paint is applied to the canvas. The gestural, choreographed way artists use their materials is key to the expressive power of abstraction.

Gary Hume, *The Cleric,* 2000. © the artist

From the late 1950s, some artists began to move away from abstraction, and explore new, mixed-media art forms. This does not mean the style was abandoned completely. The legacies of abstract art can be seen in works by Bridget Riley; the untitled piece displayed here is an example of Op or 'Optical' Art, in which complex repeating patterns are used to engage human visual perception and trigger optical illusions. The flat colours and fluid, graphic shapes that comprise Gary Hume's *The Cleric* likewise confirm abstraction's ongoing influence.

Bridget Riley, *Untitled,* 1964. © the artist

One of the first artists to explore new, non-traditional methods was Francis Bacon. He began to add 'found' elements to his works; initially taking inspiration from stills of Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*, and later incorporating Eadweard Muybridge's nineteenth-century photographs of people and animals in motion. Ronald Brooks Kitaj's combination of drawing, painting and photography in *Nancy and Jim Dine*, included in *Stellar,* could be viewed in similar terms. Such experiments helped lay the foundations of the style that became known as Pop, a movement that introduced many of the traits we now associate with contemporary practice.

In the 1950s, the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) supported a series of exhibitions, such as *Parallel of Art* and *Life and This Is Tomorrow*, organised in collaboration with members of the Independent Group (IG). The IG, whose members included Richard Hamilton, believed modern, abstract art had become stale and elitist, and – drawing upon their shared interest in advertising, popular culture, fashion, film and music – set out to re-establish a connection between art practice and real life. In his famous statement, Hamilton characterised Pop Art as mass-produced, low cost, witty, glamorous and commercial; an artform for new, younger audiences.

Ronald Brooks Kitai, *Nancy and Jim Dine*, 1969 - 70.
© the artist

John Walker, *Capitalism Works*, 1977. © the artist

Richard Hamilton, *Adonis in Y-Fronts,* 1963. © the artist

The two works by Hamilton included in *Stellar* introduce broad threads that would subsequently be woven through much of the art that followed. *Adonis in Y-Fronts* is typical of Pop's use of found elements appropriated from everyday non-art sources, a method that would be employed by many artists in the following years. Images from body-building magazines, a *Playboy* fashion-shoot and metal rivets are combined with pictures of classical Greek art. Equally significant is work's focus upon identity, here perceptions of masculinity and male beauty, a subject that would become increasingly prominent. It has been noted that, in recent decades, art's engagement with politics focused upon economics – such as the polemic that drives John Walker's *Capitalism Works* – is joined by a focus on identity politics informed by Feminist and Post-Colonial debates.

David Hockney, *Cleanliness is Next to Godliness*, 1964.
© the artist

Donald Gladstone Rodney, *Untitled ('Cowboy & Indian' after David Hockney's 'We Two Boys Together Clinging',* 1989).
© the artist

Many works in *Stellar* respond to issues of how gender, sexuality and cultures are depicted and portrayed. David Hockney's *Cleanliness is Next to Godliness* is one of the earliest. The scene combines photographs taken from a fitness magazine, with fragments of a print by artist Harold Cohen, to depict a young man standing beneath a shower. The title invites parallels between the male pin-up, with his idealised physique, and a deity. Hockney's work considers the classical subject of the nude in a homoerotic context. Using imagery taken from sources that would have found audiences with gay and bisexual men, it reflects on sexuality and identity at a time when homosexuality was yet to be decriminalised.

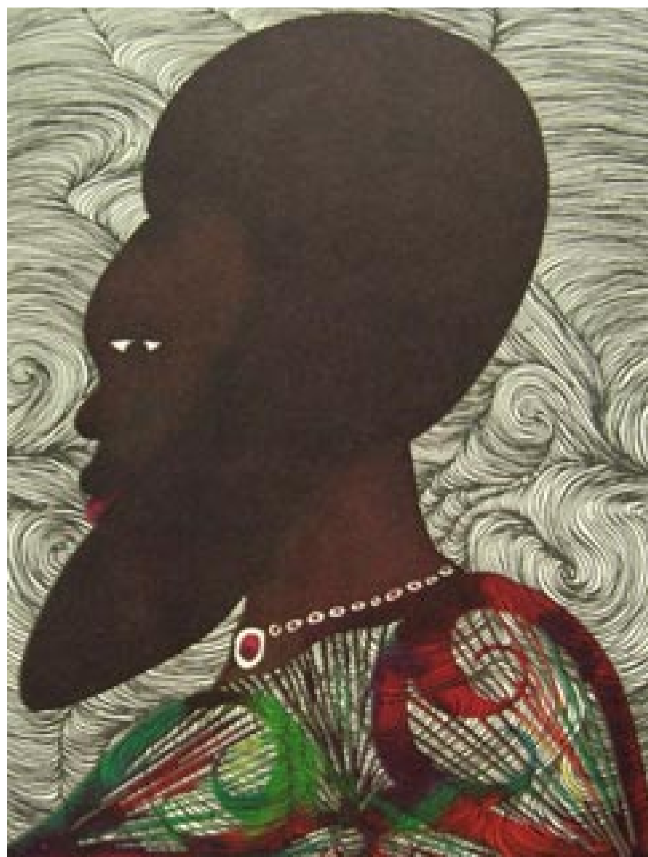
Donald Gladstone Rodney's *Untitled (Cowboy & Indian...)* draws upon an earlier piece by Hockney himself, a work titled *We Two Boys Together Clinging*. Hockney's original combined extracts of Walt Whitman's poetry with a deliberately untutored, naïve illustration of two young men engaged in a passionate embrace. Rodney's work re-imagines Hockney's composition and technique by introducing motifs taken from Hollywood Westerns. These additions move the picture's focus to an exploration of relationships between oppressor and oppressed. Rodney prompts us to question the ambiguities of this relationship. Is the hand the cowboy places on the arm of his companion a gesture of friendship, or control?

Rodney, like recent Turner Prize winner Lubaina Himid, was member of the BLK Art Group, an association of young Black artists which originated in Wolverhampton in the late 1970s as the Wolverhampton Young Black Artists. Their work had great influence upon both the development of art and the growth of the British Black Arts Movement. It addressed racial prejudice and confronted the social and political legacies of imperialism and colonialism in European history and beyond. Such concerns shape Yinka Shonibare's *Earth*. The figure, wearing Georgian aristocratic dress fashioned from African batik textiles, is topped not with a head, but with a globe dating from the nineteenth-century; a map of a world shaped by imperial expansion.

Yinka Shonibare, *Earth*, 2010. © the artist

Wolverhampton Art Gallery has collected further works by Black artists, including the pieces on display by Sonia Boyce and the 1998 Turner prize winner Chris Ofili.

Regal was originally a watercolour study. From the late 1990s to early 2000s, Ofili created a series of watercolour portraits depicting imagined male and female figures, works informed by African culture, black stereotypes, history, and exoticism. *Regal's* original watercolour was scanned digitally and produced using a combination of screen-printing lithographic techniques. The background is printed with illuminous, phosphorescent ink. This was not the first time the artist employed non-conventional materials or mixed media. Ofili's earlier paintings famously incorporated elephant dung, inspired by a trip to Zimbabwe that prompted the artist to consider how he might physically ground his work in both a natural and cultural landscape.



Chris Ofili, *Regal*, 2000. © the artist

Richard Hamilton, *Kent State*, 1970. © the artist

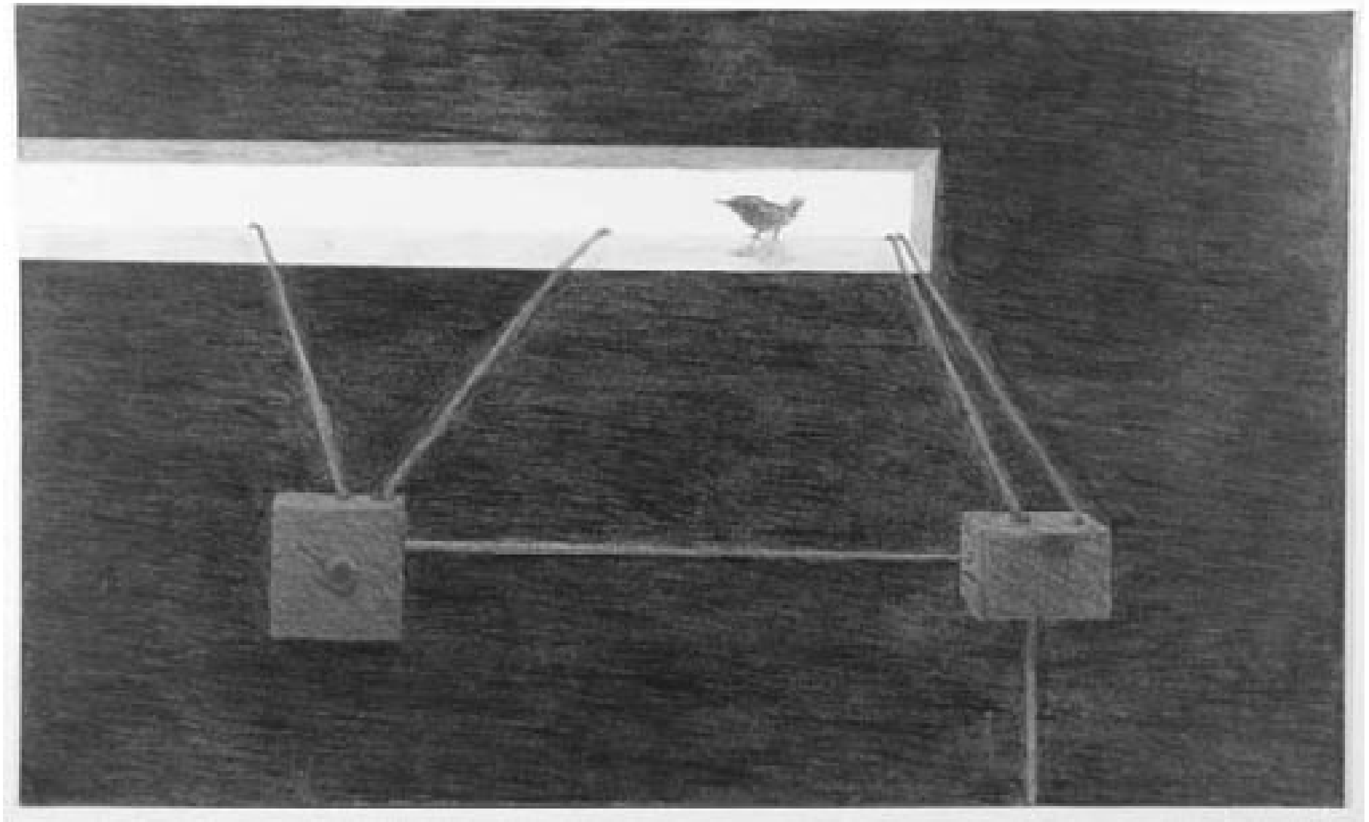
Breda Beban, *Let's Call It Love (Detail),* 2000. © the artist

The second Hamilton work exhibited in *Stellar* also uses techniques associated with Pop Art's interest in mass media. *Kent State* features an image photographed directly from a TV screen; a news report documenting the shooting of a student during a protest against America's military involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia. Subsequent decades would see many artists approach the subject of conflict, yet in a way that would differ from the idealised narratives and grand style of history painting. Several examples are included in *Stellar*, taken from Wolverhampton Art Gallery's Northern Ireland collection and beyond.

In 2002 Langland & Bell won a commission to create new work for the Imperial War Museum. The resulting piece, titled *world wide web.af*, illustrates the bombed ruins of the Royal Palace in Kahbul, Afghanistan, overlaid with squares containing acronyms of international airports. Like Hamilton's earlier piece, their work reflects upon the perceived remoteness of war and conflict, when mass media and international travel alike reduce the distances that otherwise isolate global events.

The sense of loss and powerlessness that pervade Breda Beban's *Let's Call It Love* erodes this distance further still. The work is a film-piece that juxtaposes footage of fighter jets with a turntable playing Chet Baker's *For Heaven's Sake*, in which the lovelorn singer longs for closeness and comfort. The piece is inspired by Beban's own experiences of fleeing the bombing of the former Yugoslavia, with her lover. The artist's emphasis on lived experience encourages us to empathise with a personal story that resonates with the traumatic impact of war.

Form or Idea?



Terry Atkinson, *Wren Perched on Bunker in Armagh*, 1985.
© the artist

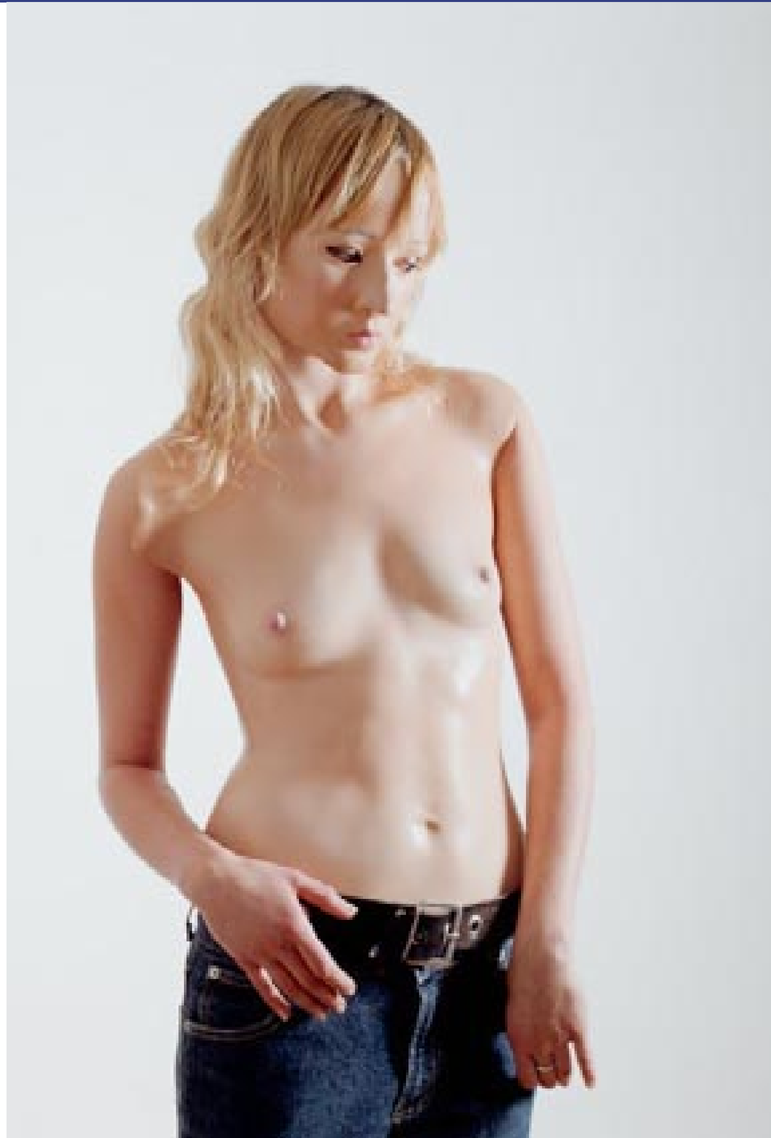
In 1997, Langlands & Bell featured in another survey of, then, newly created British art: The Royal Academy's *Sensation* exhibition of 1997, which showcased works by the generation known as the YBAs or Young British Artists. *Sensation* is relevant, as several of the artists included, such as Gary Hume, Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare and Gillian Wearing, also feature in *Stellar*. The exhibition was provocative, not least because many of the works rejected traditional art practices. Installation, performance and new-media were prominent. Perhaps in anticipation of the outcry that followed, the catalogue essay reflected that art grows from art. In other words, artists have always questioned what art is, allowing art history to be read as a series of breaks with, or leaps from, its own past.

Unlike its immediate predecessor, contemporary art increasingly values ideas above form. Today, artists often work with methods or techniques most able to communicate the thought or concern they want to convey. Sonia Boyce's *Exquisite Tension*, in which the artist chose to use hair as both a subject and metaphor, when asked to create a work in response to themes of difference and commonality, is one example. The topic of hair has often featured in discussions exploring the extent to which societal perceptions of beauty are influenced by Eurocentric ideals. Boyce's resulting work took the form of a performance, in which her own hair is plaited with that of fellow artist, Richard Hancock.

This does not mean artists cannot employ figurative, representational forms of art. Several artists in *Stellar* have done so, notably Terry Atkinson. *Wren Perched on Bunker in Armagh* is different from the conceptual works he developed as a member of the influential Art & Language group, but it displays a move away from the spontaneous creativity traditionally associated with abstract expressionism, and instead employs a considered, theoretical approach; resulting in a drawing that relates to both the Troubles and Irish history. According to legend, Irish soldiers approaching a Viking camp were betrayed by the sound of a wren pecking against a drum – other versions of the story describe the wren beating its wings against the Vikings' shields. The noise roused the Vikings, who defeated the Irish soldiers in battle.

The impact of Conceptual Art was that it not only compelled artists to question the nature of art, it also argued that an artist's ideas would be the driving force of their work. All aspects of an artwork could be planned in advance; rendering the actual making, whatever form it may take, a process akin to documentation.

Gillian Wearing's *Olia* might be viewed in these terms. At first glance, it could be described as a picture, a photograph. On closer consideration, it becomes far harder to define it as such. The work is as much a performance as it is an image. The piece belongs to a body of work in which the artist stages portraits of herself in the guise and identity of other individuals. Using a combination of costume, make-up and prosthetics, she transforms herself into other people: herself as a young woman, her own father, mother and brother, figures from the world of fine art – such as the French born artist Claude Cahun – and in the case of *Olia*, a fashion model. Therefore, each piece marks the realisation of a detailed process of planning, preparation and research.
Her work continues Pop's initial exploration of gender, sexuality and identity politics. Indeed, the prevalence of social media today suggests that questions of how people present, or perform, versions of themselves are becoming ever-more relevant to how we interact with both others, and the world.



Gillian Wearing, *Olia*, 2003. © the artist

Viewing and Reading

Given this focus on experimentation and the articulation of concerns or concepts, it follows that contemporary artworks cannot always be viewed, or contemplated, in the traditional way we might approach a work of art. The viewer is not always asked to reflect upon beauty, balance or harmony, or even to form likes or dislikes. Instead, the viewer is often challenged to actively consider the idea the artist aims to convey.

In different ways, theoretical discussions on the reception of contemporary art have considered the strategies we may use to read and interpret an artwork as if it were a text, rather than view it as a visual object. It is beyond the scope of these notes to attempt a detailed analysis of all the works in *Stellar,* but there are some strategies we might employ as we engage with the works on display.

First, we might ask what are the main details of the piece? What can we see and what might those different elements - whatever they are - represent or symbolise? It is highly unlikely that specific parts or details have been placed or included by accident, so why are they there? Also, look at the other pieces that have been displayed alongside, or opposite, the work you are looking at. Are there any similarities, are there any differences?

Next, we might first ask if there is a theme, or narrative, or if the work tells a story? In a similar sense, we might question if the artist is attempting to make any connections with history or politics? Likewise, we may consider if

Richard Hamilton, *Kent State*, 1970. © the artist

the work expresses feelings or emotions? What does the work make you think about, as you stand before it?

From here, we might consider why has the artist chosen to work with certain materials, techniques or media; what are they trying to say by using them? Today, an artist may select from a seemingly endless list of methods or techniques, so what might explain their choice? In contrast, if an artist has chosen to use more traditional forms of art, why might this be?

Additional insight might be gained by reflecting upon the title of the work. What might this convey? How does the work's title affect its meaning or subject matter? If a work is untitled, why might this be? Why has the artist chosen not to name their work?

Finally, we may consider our own opinions on the piece. What are your personal thoughts about the work, do you agree or disagree with what the artist may be trying to say?

Just as there is no single, overriding definition of contemporary art, there is no one absolute answer to how it should be viewed, read or enjoyed when seen. Art that can be best defined by its plurality of mediums and subjects may also invite and stimulate a range of responses.

Bibilography

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