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Visual arts

Comparative study

Student C (HL)

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Comparative Study



Artwork by me
Mushrom Society. Lino Print. 2011



Artwork by me
Maternity. Ceramics. 2011

Introduction

This is not an essay. I would say that it is probably closest to an online 'brochure' to 'sell' my two years of exploration in the best way that I can, to a 'client' who will look for specific qualities in what I have to show. Since this is part of a Visual Arts course I have carefully considered contrast, repetition, alignment, proximity, categories of type¹, balance and unity to ensure that my work is clear and effective without a utilitarian 'business' look with centred alignment, underlined headings, default typefaces, double spacing, multiple frames, orphans or widows.



Artwork by me
Elderly Woman Planting Seeds. Image Transfer and Acrylic on Crumpled canvas, 2013



Artwork by me
Two Worlds and a Broken Bridge. Water Colour and Ink, 2011

Connections

During the two years of the IB course I have made many connections between my own work and that of other artists using a wide range of sources. These include: literature, books, magazines, videos, TOK presentations, visits to exhibitions, newspaper articles, websites, visiting artists and personal contacts.

The following screens will explore these connections in an integrated way as I analyse and compare different works of art and explain how my own development as an artist was influenced by them. I believe that this is a more natural way to show this aspect of the study, rather than a separate section at the end. The 'holistic' nature of the course seems to me to suggest that art analysis and subject related research should flow from my own work. I hope that this study will show the variety of different ways that I have used the work of others to inform my own. Sometimes I have looked at work to help me to define and refine the best techniques; at other times I have been intrigued by the reason for the artwork being made in the first place and, perhaps naturally curious about people, I am always interested in the human stories.

My Earlier Work and 'Other' Influences

Much of my artwork deals with *introspection*, where I explore different parts of myself as an individual in an attempt to ultimately understand and communicate to others what it means to be 'me'. The cultural context is crucial in order to understand my work. For example, in my 'mushrooms' series I was influenced by a common mushroom species, *Pleurotus eryngii*, which was first cultivated in Japan, my home country, in 1993. My mother used *eryngii* as a nickname for me as a child. Perhaps I was unusual? This oddly shaped mushroom looks different from usual 'button' mushrooms, therefore it became representative of my individuality which has sometimes led to feelings of *alienation* from my peers and others around me.

Torn Between Two Worlds was another way in which I chose to express that struggle through a surrealist - influenced approach. In this piece, the veins which connect the head to the ground use a varied textured line which I learnt from the work of a Filipino visiting artist, Christina Dy² who specialises in large scale charcoal drawings of hair. It took me a long time to find the right combination of media to effectively express the feelings of 'other worldliness'. At the time I didn't realise that my choice of muted colour was to visually connect these pieces so that it appears that they could have been part of the same location and time.



Artwork by me
Alienation. Water Colour, 2011



Artwork by me
Torn Between Worlds. Water Colour and Ink, 2011

Later, I developed the concept of *alienation* further in work which considers my connections to the wider context in which I live: a Japanese National at an International School, in the Philippines. *Weaving in and Out of Conformity* is a wire and pearl sculpture which expresses the struggle which I have sometimes had to accept the status quo as defined by others. The idea was developed with reference to the well known waves and waterfall prints of Hokusai³, although I learnt the technique from a very inspiring workshop which was held at school by Rencie Santos⁴, a visiting artist.

Santos is a well known Filipino jewellery designer who works in a sculptural way, producing bold and surprising designs. He spent a few days with us showing techniques and encouraging us to 'think outside the box' using connections to our own experiences as the starting point of each piece. For ideas he told us that he looks for visual or cultural connections with places which he has visited, or events which he has experienced. He also showed us a unique collaboration with Mark Kucharski⁵, a British photographer, who selected 60 photographs for Rencie to produce a jewellery piece from each one. These were put together side by side in frames in a very successful Manila exhibition. It was interesting to see a good example of creative connections being made and how the two most unlikely media could work so well together.



Artwork by me
Weaving In and Out of Conformity, 2011



Artist: Rencie Santos
Twister, 2009.



Artist: Mark Kucharski
Nagaraao, Philippines, 2009

My Chosen Artists



Tamara Lempicka, 1928.



Martin Parr, 2000



Don Salubayba, 2009

For this study, I have chosen to consider in depth a piece of work from each of three artists: Tamara Lempicka, a 1920's Polish-Russian painter, Martin Parr, a contemporary British photographer, and Don Salubayba, a contemporary Filipino multi media artist. When these three are seen side by side it may seem a strange choice. What possible connections can be made between them? Of course, each of these artists has a huge body of work from which I could choose images, so why I chose these may be another mystery. When I go on to analyse each one separately, I hope that will become clear.

All three artworks have people in them shown in the context of an environment chosen carefully by the artist to add some 'cultural' meaning to the figures. Of course, a painter can invent every part of the background and juxtapose one with another but with photography, even in the 'new media' world of computer based photographic manipulation, the sense of reality remains one of the unique qualities of the medium⁶. So how can I claim that the choice of background in Martin Parr's work, like the others, was 'chosen carefully'? Because this photograph was one of thousands taken over a four year period then selected for one of 125 photographs to be printed in the book⁷. How carefully the model was chosen is a different matter: more on that later. But one thing is certain: in all three pictures, balance is achieved by careful composition which connects the viewer with the people in the picture. Even Salubayba's more distant, indistinct figures are facing forward and seem to be looking out at us for some reaction.



Tamara Lempicka, 1928.



Martin Parr, 2000



Don Salubayba, 2009

The background in Parr and Lempicka's pictures are similar in the way they clearly show a scene suggesting a leisurely weekend at the sea side. Salubayba's is much less clear. He indicates a sense of space through atmospheric perspective with an appropriate falling off of saturation in the colours, but the 'content' is more symbolic than descriptive; more expressionist than illustrative.

All three works have a warmth in them which suggests a 'human' situation, rather than something geometric, mechanical, abstract or mythological. In all three the colours are strong and there is no doubt that the Lempicka and Parr pictures are 'clearer' than Salubayba's. Does this suggest a clarity of thought, or a lack of it? Is Salubayba's work more 'effective' because it is more complex in its multi layered, highly textured and less detailed approach? Wouldn't that be a great TOK question! And if we accept that it is more effective (or better?) due to its ambiguity, should it be worth more? Of course a painting would be worth more than a photograph, wouldn't it? Not necessarily. A quick 'google' search reveals that the 'winner' at the moment is: Andreas Gursky: *Rhein II* (1999) which was sold in 2011 for \$4,338,500⁸. Maybe Salubayba needs to have his work stolen to increase its worth, like the *Mona Lisa*⁹, or have it 'discovered' by other artists in the way that Hokusai's *Great Wave Off Kanagawa* influenced Whistler, Van Gogh and Monet after Japan started opening up to the world in 1850's¹⁰.

But despite the differences, I think Martin Parr found the most important connection in the title of his 1992 book *Signs of the Times*¹¹. If I had to choose one quality which connects these three very different artists, it would be how well they have expressed the culture of the time and place in which they live. I believe it is this quality which defines an artist best and it is this quality which connects these three.

Tamara de Lempicka

Courtesy of www.tamara-de-lempicka.org



Tamara Lempicka. *Portrait of Arlette Boucard*. Oil on Canvas, 1928

Lempicka's success was built on painting portraits of the rich in an *Art Deco* age which emphasised wealth, consumerism and modern technology¹². After moving with her husband, Tadeusz, from Russia to Paris, in 1918, where she learnt simplified colours¹³ and a structured approach from Maurice Denis and the geometric forms of Andre Lhote's 'Neo Cubism'¹⁴, she started to develop her own unique style, which eventually made her a fortune.

"Never has a career founded on fighting diarrhoea been depicted so glamorously"¹⁵, wrote Peter Davies, in reference to Lempicka's portrait of Dr. Pierre Boucard, a French bacteriologist, who became one of her main sponsors. That picture shows a microscope and a test tube, but the dramatic lighting, suave clothing, neat grooming and furtive glance, suggests that he may have something to hide. This is typical of the ambiguous expressions which Lempicka (a bisexual) gave the men in her paintings, perhaps suggesting mistrust.

On the other hand, her women sitters are usually shown with a confident, defiant stare, like in her most famous self portrait *Tamara in the Green Bugatti (1925)* and this portrait of Boucard's daughter. This was a significant statement on the portrayal of women in painting who (John Berger points out) had been treated as objects for the pleasure of men in classical paintings such as Titian's *The Venus of Urbino' (1538)* then showing the "realism of the prostitute" when Monet shocked the art world with his *Olympia (1863)*¹⁶.

Arlette Boucard here is shown in the classical reclining pose, but this rich girl needs nothing from men. She is the epitome of a woman enjoying the good life of the day: beautiful, independent and carefree with an uncharacteristically illustrative background showing the family boat in the French port of Deauville¹⁷.

Usually, Lempicka's high society sitters are placed in front of cubist abstract angular shapes or 'a futuristic stage set of skyscrapers, a 1920s fantasy of big city sex'.¹⁸ But not all of Lempicka's women were portrayed so favourably. When her future second husband commissioned her to paint his then mistress, *Portrait of Nana de Herrera (1929)*, Lempicka created an ugly, distorted frowning figure draped in transparent clothing.

In *Angered by His Surroundings* I made an early connection with the high contrast, muted colours, ambiguous facial expressions and exaggerated tubular limbs which I particularly admire in the work of Lempicka. This piece was made when asked to link our local culture and environment to the work of a well known artist. I chose Lempicka because of the strong impact that her paintings always have with their clear highlights, chiaroscuro, illusion of three dimensions in the treatment of form and texture of her figures and the distance between them and the background. I also wanted my message to be confrontational in the same way that her figures always appear. The work was meant to express the idea of a child 'lost' in the developing streets of Manila. Of course, anyone who has been to Manila, the most densely populated city in the world¹⁹, will know that it is impossible for a person to be alone on one of the city's streets.



Artwork by me
Angered by His Surroundings. Water Colour, 2011

His loss is not necessarily literal, but more symbolic, since he is looking out of the picture for an answer to what his role is in this place with its modern green shopping mall on the right behind him, the large rich ancestral home on the left and the church in the distance at the junction of two possible roads to: who knows where?

I experimented with different media, finally deciding on watercolour with pen. I was successful in blending colour for better unity and creating a strong perspective, but never quite achieved the clarity which Lempicka was so proud of in her work: "A painting must be clean. I was the first woman to paint clearly and cleanly – and that was the reason for my success."²⁰

The boy in my picture is poor. The only time Lempicka painted anyone who was poor was towards the end of her career when she persuaded Baron Kuffner to sell his properties in Europe and move to the USA so that they could escape the fascist uprising in Europe. There, she struggled to find a fresh approach with work like *Old Man with Guitar* (1935) and *Mother Superior* (1939) and, later, some desperate attempts at abstract art. The critics were not kind and, until her work was rediscovered in the 1970's, the one time 'Grande Dame' of art deco had to settle for being the 'Baroness with the paintbrush', a minor attraction at Hollywood parties.²¹

Martin Parr



Martin Parr. Weymouth, Dorset, UK. Photography. 2000

Martin Parr is best known for the highly saturated ‘visual extravaganza’ of brutally well observed colour photographs initially inspired by the picture postcards of John Hinde²². Another early influence on Martin Parr was the documentary work of Robert Frank. *The Americans (1958)* “showed me that the medium can interpret feelings as well as describing places”²³. A long time supporter of photography books, his first major work was *The Last Resort*, a series of photographs taken between 1983 and 1986 in the working class seaside resort of New Brighton, Liverpool, England. This was at the height of the Thatcher years where rapid social changes were

taking place in Britain, but some areas were ‘left behind’. When the exhibition opened in Liverpool everyone enjoyed the humour and directness of the photographs of people enjoying themselves at the seaside, despite the littered, untidy, decaying, surroundings. But when the same exhibition opened in London, Parr’s work was severely criticised because they said he was a ‘middle class photographer exploiting the working classes’. Parr defended his work by saying that he is interested in “photographing and exploiting *all* classes”²⁴ and to prove it, he produced another book 3 years later, *The Cost of Living*, which took a similarly direct (and critical) look at the middle class. In the words of Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography*, “Often something disturbs us more in photographed form that it does when we actually experience it.”²⁵.

The seaside was a theme which Parr would return to often in later years. *Weymouth, Dorset* was produced as part of a series from 1996-2000 called ‘Think of England’ in which he moves in close to get details of everyday life. Still prominent is his signature use of brilliant, strongly saturated colours and flash, perfectly balanced with just enough ambient light²⁶. The beach in the background is more tidy than the New Brighton one but then this is not the ‘Industrial North’ in the 80’s; it’s the ‘Retirement Belt’ of the South West at the end of the 90’s. The woman is out of focus. This is surprising for Parr who is usually meticulously careful with technique and composition. I think it is the only time that he has thrown the foreground out of focus. But, for me, it adds to the impact. It doesn’t matter who she is, just that she is there: another anonymous part of the scene.

Martin Parr's influence on my work

Pained Faith and *Self Destruction* are about the uncompromising catholic faith which many Filipinos have. I wanted to express my feelings about how, if we unquestioningly devote ourselves to a belief, we can become obsessional to the point where we are no longer in control.

I became aware of this recently while following the debate in the Philippines on the Reproductive Health Bill. President Aquino has been determined to get the law passed during his term of office, despite the condemnation and protest from the Catholic Church. In a sense, people who oppose the bill are only hurting themselves, because the RH bill can give women the right to control their own bodies. This is particularly important within a cultural context of a strong paternal society and a country which has one of the highest population growth rates in the world and one of the biggest gaps between rich and poor.²⁷

I decided that the best way to express this strength of belief was to show a 'devoted' woman in church. I had never been into a church before, but I was determined to accept the challenge to produce some powerful Documentary Photography.

I discovered the work of Martin Parr and I could immediately see the connection. His work has always been controversial for showing a 'reality' which lots of people either haven't noticed or would choose to ignore: a perfect art reference choice for my own controversial piece. From Martin Parr I learnt that you have to plan carefully, taking lots of photographs from all angles, some wide and some close up. After a while of taking general photos of the setting and going back on two different occasions, I gained confidence and moved in close, thinking that this would be the only way that I could really show the strength and devotion of this woman.



Artwork by me
Pained Faith. Photography, 2013

Don Salubayba



Don Salubayba. *A Game of Mahjong with My In-Laws*. Mixed, 2009

In an interview²⁸ which I had with Don Salubayba, he explained that *A Game of Mahjong with My In-laws* is based on a time when his in-laws were attempting to teach him how to play the Chinese card game 'Mahjong'. They are shown as aliens, a symbol for outsiders, because they were all talking at the same time and he couldn't understand them. 'Planting' the father-in-law firmly to the ground and expanding his tree roots towards the edge of the canvas, gives him strength and authority, even though he is carrying his wife who reveals her diseased lungs. But, Siddharta Perez, the exhibition curator sees more in this story: "Apart from the context of Filipino families, Salubayba touches upon the unchanging, unspoken norms played out by families in general: the authoritarian element, the pull of individualism and push of communal obligation, all the other implied can-do's and cannot's."²⁹

This is a complex, mixed media piece using actual family photographs with emulsion based image transfer. It was produced for an exhibition called *The Peculiarity of a Familial Atmosphere* at the Valentine Willie Fine Arts in Singapore and is part of a series of eight works about different Filipino familial issues and characteristics.

I asked Salubayba about the symbolism which he uses. "The apples, I often use as a symbol for colonisation. The Spaniards colonised us through religion, Adam and Eve: forbidden fruit. The Americans used education, A is for Apple. So it has been a recurring image for my work. Though here, the juggling of the 3 apples, represents the multi tasking by the man. The rectangular pieces are Mahjong pieces with their symbols, mostly direction: North, South East and West. Religion is represented through the rosary held by the figure on the far left."

Well known for his multimedia and performance work, Salubayba often uses puppets to tell traditional folktales: "With puppets, I work with gesture. There are no facial variations, so I rely on posture and movements to convey the message. I use a similar approach in my paintings. The face gives away too much and we sometimes forget to look at the whole picture."

The Development of 'Self Destruction'

My final work brings together the influence of all three artists in this study. As you can see from *Pained Faith, Self Destruction* started as a close up photo from my 'church' series. The composition and viewpoint of this is similar to the photographs taken by Martin Parr for *Common Sense*, at the end of the 90's in which he experimented with close up photography 'taking a forensic look at everyday items'³⁰, rather than concentrating on showing the people who used them. That book was concerned with consumerism and, to some extent, so is my work, since it shows the effects of a mass culture which leads people to accept that what they have and what they do is the right thing.

Although the photograph showed a tension in the way the hands were clasped together in prayer, there wasn't much light in the church and I couldn't use flash, so it was not as powerful as I had hoped. I wanted to create Lempicka style contrast, perspective and colour while retaining a heightened sense of reality in the woman's neck and a neutral, almost incidental, background. I also wanted to emphasise the tight grip of the fingers to the point where they looked as if they were drawing blood. I thought of this from the annual self flagellation and crucifixion rituals that 'devoted' people go through at Easter in the Philippines.

I tried a number of different approaches and media but they were not giving me the effect that I needed. It was then that Don Salubayba visited us and showed how he used multi layered image transfer and mixed media in his own work. As well as an appropriate technique, he also gave me an important incite into cultural aspects of Philippines history, an area of work which he is particularly renowned for. This was perfect. I now knew that the combination of photo transfer to give the underlying sense of reality, with strong, varied pen and ink lines to create the bleeding veins and some acrylic paint to intensify the contrast and form of the fingers was going to effectively communicate my idea in the strongest way possible. This gentle old lady had now been transformed into someone with almost unlimited strength to harm herself and, by implication, others too.



Artwork by me
Self Destruction. Image Transfer, Acrylic, Ink., 2013

Footnotes (Sources)

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Illustrations:

Don Salubayba, Rencie Santos and Mark Kucharski used with permission of the artist. Tamara Lempick: Neret, Giles. Lempicka. London: Taschen, 2000. Print. Martin Parr: Williams, Val. *Martin Parr*. London: Phaidon Press, 2005. Print.



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