



It's pretty, but is it art?



ART IN FOCUS
by Emerentienne Paschalides

Between 31 August and 3 October, The National Gallery of the Cayman Islands was home to *From Within*, an exhibition of works created by participants in the workshops of the Gallery's Outreach programme. This programme is designed

for people under pressure, such as those who have learning difficulties, prisoners or women who suffer from domestic abuse. The paintings, some created by children, have sparked a great deal of curiosity, but also prompt the cautious debate as to their artistic worth: they are pretty, but is it art?

The exhibition, which featured a mixture of drawings, collages and paintings, highlighted the National Gallery's commendable educational achievements, but it also asked: what is the purpose of art as a therapy? What does it bring to a community?

At some point in their lives, some people find themselves overwhelmed by the intensity of their emotions which are difficult to face by themselves. Art workshops offer an opportunity to explore these intense or painful feelings in a supportive environment.

But should the works, which are therefore the results of a strangely communal yet private process, be put on display?

One response is that an exhibition can instill confidence and give a great sense of achievement to people who need to feel their worth recognized by society.

But the question remains as to whether these works can be classified as art and whether they should have found their way into an art gallery.

At the opening of the exhibition (and increas-

ingly thereafter) I found myself attracted to a particular collage, which was untitled and which was the work of an unnamed and unknown artist.

My approach to a picture always follows the relatively empirical and conservative standard, i.e. the longer the viewer is held by the image, the better the image is. In that particular work, textures immediately caught my attention. I love the neatly wound string and the way it contrasts with the rough edges of crumpled foil and torn paper. More importantly, I find that the relationship between these two opposites – neat/messy, controlled/explosive, inward/outward – is summarised in a single strip of unstitched fabric which is finding its way diagonally and across in successive carefully applied folds.

Additionally, this painting shows great dynamics: I can move around it and zoom in and out, thanks to the repetitive circular movements in shapes and twirls of paint, which project towards surreal areas in the background and take me outside the frame while strong black outlines and the diagonal division bring me back into the image.

So yes, the image is pretty. But is it art?

The question brings to mind a poem by Rudyard Kipling, "The Conundrum of the Workshops", whose opening stanza describes Adam's first artistic experience in the form of a graffito:

And the first rude sketch that the world had seen was joy to his mighty heart

Till the Devil whispered behind the leaves, "It's pretty, but is it art?"

From then onwards the poem tells how human beings theorised and argued over the meaning of the word art, while developing amazing artistic skills and achieving the wonders that we all still admire today.

On reading the poem, one senses that humans are getting further and further away from what they seek and Kipling confirms this in his closing speculation that maybe one day, *By the favour of God we might know as much as our father Adam knew.*

Perhaps, then, my question is devilish. Perhaps critics are devils themselves in their persistent labeling of what is and what is not "art". Then what did Adam know that we don't?

The answer is brief: he knew of an intuitive beauty that cannot be learned and that we are born with, that has been forgotten and that is free to grow, the contrary of our de-humanising creations and de-humanising questions.

So was it art?

Yes, if you looked with Adam's eyes and remembered how to marvel with Adam's heart. Then you would have discovered that behind these paintings there was a rare and unusual creative process – timid, of course, but fresh, spontaneous, expansive and whole-hearted, delighting in its self-discovery – a process which alas is often forgotten by the more hard-headed established artists of today.

This article is based on the lunch lecture given by the author on 27 September at the National Gallery. Lunch lectures relating to the exhibition then current are given at 12.15 pm on the fourth Wednesday in each month. Refreshments and admission are free.