

## Seeing You Through Them

In her early 20s, an art history student on sabbatical found herself at the Tate Modern in London. Amidst a sea of people, she sat, submerged in the deep-hued and mediative colours of Mark Rothko's *Seagram Murals*. Floating in and out of the paintings, the feathery edges and chromatic backgrounds melted in between the molecules of her mind. As the artwork seduced her brain and the intense layers of thin pigment absorbed her energy, she cried. Alone in a room full of people, ironically, she was only comforted by the artwork and its transfixing powers. The others in the room, unaware of the weeping young woman, engaged with the work, having their personal experiences. Some viewed the artwork under furrowed brows, some unbothered, some silently and others loudly. Each viewer brought something unique to the work based on their willingness to see, to fully engage and fall freely into the abyss.

Rothko's art is not unparalleled in evoking mixed emotions. Rather, it's most fine art that begs the subjectivity and interpretation of the viewer to fully allow for the art to infiltrate the viewer's connection to the work. The perception and experience of the audience is fundamental to the reception and understanding of art on a deeper level. The artists bring tangibility to their creative expressions, while the viewer brings the already implied social and cultural allusions to life through their perception and articulation. The artist is enslaved by their need to create and willingly suffers at the hands of their ceaseless creating. They assemble their entire souls into their work, as a mode to express the inexpressible. As viewers, being able to see, receive and understand the gift of the artist's soul in this tangible form, we are truly experiencing what the art is giving to those of us who choose to truly *see*. Understanding this allows for an in-depth

revelation of the emotions evoked by the art through one's interpretation influenced by lived social and cultural experiences.

John Locke analyzes perception through human's interpretation and understanding of their everyday life experiences. He views the notion of perception as deriving from human interaction and environmental conditions which form our ideas. In terms of artwork, Locke's theory helps us to understand how people's perception of art can be determined by lived cultural and social experiences. Therefore, the idea of the viewer can be seen as an abstract concept where the audience's perception and reaction to art can morph through time as societal norms and lived experiences change, while the artwork remains static and eternal. The popularity and interpretation of the work will thus adjust to cultural changes, while new generations approach the work with different perspectives, experiences, values and expectations. Hence, art is coloured in one's personal preferences developed through experience and exposure. Metaphorically artwork is a mirror for the viewer, reflecting our lived experiences and perspectives that allow us to interact with the work on a deeply personal level. The artist's intention of their work is forever unchanging, however, the audience's interpretation of it can shift alongside their invariably changing perceptions. Therefore, depending on what you see in the reflection, you will get differing experiences from the work despite the static intention. Art is multifaceted, fluid, it shifts with you, allowing for infinite perspectives and interpretations without the work ever wavering.

Due to this notion, a retrospective of work by Philip Guston, intended to travel to a handful of museums in 2020 was postponed. There presented a concern that the Ku Klux Klan imagery

reflected in his work, done with the intent to criticize racism, anti-Semitism and bigotry, could potentially upset viewers or be subject to misinterpretation. The decision was made last June during the rising support of the BLM movement and outpour of racial justice protests across the United States. The worry of the artwork being misunderstood or perceived by its audience as inappropriate or racist given the current social, cultural and political climate, prompted its postponement. Even though the well-documented and clear intention behind the artwork remains static, the fear of the audience's potential misinterpretation due to their current social experiences demonstrates the power of art and its ability to reflect back what the viewer understands from it. It is people's lived experiences and interactions that prompt their relationships and understanding of art. Art is meant to spark conversation, alter perspectives, change viewpoints, raise debate and express the inexpressible. This can all happen without the art or the artist's intent changing, therefore, supporting the notion that art is a mirror, and the viewer sees their own personal, social and cultural interpretations in the work. However, being able to understand the intent of the artists, allows for the audience to connect to the art on a deeper level, and therefore understanding their own evoked emotions and what the art means to them at that exact juncture in their life.

For the young woman crying into her lap as Rothko's paintings held her in their embrace, she subconsciously felt overwhelmed by the beauty of each poetic brushstroke. Nearly 30 years later she returned to face the work that once brought her to tears, but this time as a different woman. Returning as an adult with internal growth from life-altering experiences, such as the death of her parents, divorce, motherhood and her journey with art, she encountered the work armed with new knowledge and interpretation. She perched in the now nearly empty room, not only in the

company of the familiar art but that of her fifteen-year-old son, searching for the oppressive emotions she encountered during her first visit. Contrary to the tear-churning experience, she was met with the luminosity and uplifting lambency of the work. Moments later she left the exhibition feeling happy and complete, contrary to years prior being overwhelmed with sensations of sadness and desperation. The emotions she once felt as a young woman were replaced with an inner awakening and joy. The artwork remained the same as it did 30 years prior, but her relationship with the pieces drastically shifted due to her personal growth and what she saw in the metaphorical reflection. During that first visit, she felt the artwork's energy alongside her own reflected back. She could feel and relate to Rothko's tortured soul emanating from within the work, as she too felt depressed, fearful, and uncertain in her youth. That young 20-year-old is now an art dealer, a prolific collector, a gallery owner and my mother. From the art itself and what she brought to it; my mother received what she needed both times in her life. Upon return, with her growth and knowledge gained from within the art world and her personal lived experiences, she was able to feel a whole new energy from the work as it reflected back to her a new understanding and appreciation for their beauty. Through the deep understanding of the artist's intention, she was able to comprehend the emotions she felt mirrored back at her. This second visit for my mother finished the lesson she began 30 years prior, that art can trigger and invoke a sense of emotion and illicit an understanding of it, within the viewer, contributed to their life experiences and perceptions. The artwork had presented another dimension to my mother, providing an experience that enabled her to see the equal importance of the artist's intention and the emotions the art can evoke within the self. Simplified, properly understanding and interpreting art is all about what you're willing to see and explore within yourself. Rothko's exhibition and many other artworks by a multitude of artists are not only a reflection of the

artists' state of mind but also a mirror for the viewer to interoperate through their own psyche and perspectives.