



"A sea of people walked up, stared and left looking confused and slightly cheated. I felt like a true modern artist."
- Banksy

The Mind's Eye

By Sylvia Karcz

In the year 2004, Marla Olmstead became an overnight modern art sensation. Her solo exhibitions drew in surprisingly large crowds, her paintings were selling for hundreds – and then gradually, thousands – of dollars, and for many, her name became an international media staple associated with such art greats as Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock.

She was four years old.

Go ahead. Be amazed. Be jealous. Be confused. I mean, everyone else is. After all, it's not every day that a child's work (let alone a four year-old child's artwork) is compared to that of some of the world's most renowned modern and abstract artists. Her paintings were selling for what could easily be a grown adult's annual income. Some say she's a wonder-child; an artistic genius. And if you look at her paintings, there's no doubt that the girl does indeed have some skill. Her work is definitely impressive, and definitely Pollack-esque. But what separates her, a modern art prodigy, from "any old kid" who likes to paint? Is she really worthy of standing in the midst of artists who spent lifetimes realizing their creative processes and perfecting their individual crafts? Artists who created art not merely to make something look nice, you know – for fun – but to compose a much bigger picture, one that challenges the viewer to go beyond what lies directly on the surface, to delve into the mind of the actual artist?

The answer is probably no, just like the adult with a knack for painting pretty flowers just to paint pretty flowers isn't worth international buzz. But then again, that's where the entire 'modern art' debate begins. Who gets to decide what is and what isn't art? Is modern art entirely separate from the "trophy cabinet" pieces that hang in multi-million dollar museums and galleries? Is it all just one big con-game, fooling spectators and buyers alike into making something out of nothing? Ultimately, the answer may never be clear, but then again, that's part of why it's called *modern*. Progression, ladies and gentlemen... the limits are endless.

And that's exactly what people have to realize when it comes to understanding this often-controversial arena of visual expression. Modern art – or whatever your term of choice may be – is not just something that *looks* modern and abstract and innovative, but rather, an entire means of arriving at a certain, often personal, realization. More often than not, it's an idea, and the art itself is a way to enter the public's higher conscience. As Pollock himself said, "It doesn't make

much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement."

So whether it's a white urinal tilted 90 degrees, like Marcel Duchamp's piece "Fountain" (which was named the most influential work of modern art by hundreds of leading art "experts"), Damien Hirst's "Mother and Child Divided" (a cow and a calf cut into half sections and placed in separate glass containers of formaldehyde), or Tracey Emin with her stained, disheveled bed (properly entitled, "My Bed"), some of today's most notorious modern artists are redefining the way in which creativity can exist in the world of art and are making the public see what they see on their own terms. And sure, it doesn't always work. Sometimes you just *don't* get it. Sometimes, you're just not meant to. But that's the beauty of free will: you can either take something for what it is, or leave it and move on.

I know what you're thinking: but there has to be boundaries. *It's just a urinal*, you want to scream. *It's JUST a urinal*. Well, yes and no. Although we live in a world where it appears that almost anyone can be an artist and almost anything can be considered art, there is indeed that often unexplainable something that separates the good from the bad and the genius from the, well, non-genius. Not everyone has the ability to rationalize the completely irrational (or, at least attempt to rationalize it), and not just anyone has the initiative to blend the realms of what we know and what we will never understand in such an innovative matter. And in the end, that's what truly characterizes modern art. It's about making art personal, not commercial. It's about asking questions and constructing binaries that may not make sense to audiences at first, but maybe, just maybe, allowing them see what the artist sees in the end. Shock. Confusion. Intrigue. Repeat when ready.

So with that said, is Marla Olmstead the next modern art wonder? Who knows. Is Marcel Duchamp's urinal the greatest piece of modern art in the Twentieth Century? Decide for yourself. Because the fact of the matter is that no one has the right to tell you what is and what isn't art. Subjectivity, ladies and gentlemen. If you like what you see, great. Buy it. Put it on your wall. Go and tell your friends. But if you don't approve, for whatever reason, stop making a fuss about the state of modern art these days, and just let it be. It's that simple. And if worst comes to worst, you know where the door is.