

Citation: Saul, Peter. "Abstract Expressionist Still Life." Acrylic on canvas, 2016. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust. U-6563.2016.

Abstract Expressionist Still Life | Peter Saul

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Summary:

In this exercise, our design class was asked to visit an art museum and analyze a piece based on the principles we have discussed in class. In visiting the Sheldon Art Museum in Lincoln, NE, I noticed the colorful, vibrant work of Peter Saul's *Abstract Expressionist Still Life*. Peter Saul was born in San Francisco, CA, where he started his career working on pop culture cartoon references. He is considered to be one of the fathers of the Pop Art movement (Tauer). His work is typically pop art, surrealism, or expressionism, with varying categories on occasion. His work has historically reflected current events, though he claims that more recently he has focused his work to turn away from his political past. The work I found in the Sheldon was done as an acrylic on canvas in 2016. This piece follows his tradition of relating pop art to political events, having quoted, "I have a feeling that abstract expressionism was caused by a certain nervousness that came about because of World War II. I think everybody was drinking coffee and smoking, and it made everyone so jittery they couldn't paint buttons and noses and things, you know; they just couldn't do it. Their patience was shot by the war."

Color Balance:

The piece encompasses a wide range of colors, but the most notable throughout is the use of the red and pink tones that take up the top half of the work. The piece is overall very warm, with yellow undertones throughout the use of greens and blues. The artwork correlates almost directly with the "6, 3, 1" rule of UI (Jeph). 60% of the piece is red (or pink), taking up the primary background color, the two cars, and a majority of the liquid splashing. 30% of the piece is the secondary color (yellow) – taking up a third of the background as well as a few placements through cheese slices or hands holding wine glasses and coffee cups. The final 10% of the piece takes on a variety of accent colors: blue, orange, green, and brown. These colors draw more attention from the viewer since they "stick out", but because the use of these accents is drawn across the entirety of the work, the viewer has to keep looking around the piece with no direct spot to land (see Direction of the Eye for details).

Emotive Colors:

As described above with the 6, 3, 1 rule, the piece is dominated by red and pink shades – which embody the hopeful, immature, energized, nature the piece embodies. The war was distracting and overwhelming – so were the colors and movements of this piece. In the reading by Arnheim, the author describes, "More generally, it is probably the expressive qualities ... that spontaneously affect the passively receiving mind, whereas the tectonic structure of [a] pattern ... engages the actively organizing mind." This reading has some outdated language, but the main idea is that the use of colors to express emotion – specifically in pattern forms – engages more emotional centers of the brain rather than exclusively visual processors. (Arnheim 336) The reading goes on to suggest that the use of colors evokes an emotional response based on the

color's emotive history (red = passion, blue = serenity, etc). The muted colors of green and yellow bring the element of balance and youthfulness to the piece without distracting too much from the red hues. Also worth noting is the blue is the least present color in the piece, which emphasizes how this was a time without much stability or peacefulness for the viewers (relating to WWII).

Direction of the Eye (Motion in the Piece):

Movement is arguably the most influential component of this piece. "The focus is "guided" in a composition... the visual representation of movement, for example, a speeding car or someone running, or the illusion or implication of it" (Meyer) The reading describes how art can easily guide a viewer's eyes to the intended motion of a piece, but in Saul's work noted above there is intentionally no direction for the eyes to land on. There is clear movement in the liquids from the cup and the shrinking and expansion of legs and cars to keep the eye moving towards one end, but the images mash into each other to keep the eye circling throughout the piece. This is what Meyer describes as "implied movement": "We can look at implied movement as an action that is about to occur or the suggestion of a movement. This can also involve the transition between two movements. An example often used is the transition between someone walking and running, or dancing, or someone throwing a ball. This can be depicted by placing the focus on the figure's posture, which can be "off-center" or "off-balance" to convey a sense of transition in motion" (Meyer). When analyzing this piece with the rule of thirds, the grid doesn't line up with any particular subjects in a clear frame or aligned on a powerpoint, this also enhances the motion since there is no comfortable place for the viewer to find an object – they have to continue scanning through the scene which adds to Saul's description of unrest the piece embodies. Even the background of the piece is morphed into itself, giving everything this destructive, melted feeling.

Citations:

Arnheim, Rudolf, Art and Visual Perception, University of California Press, Berkely, 1974, p. 336

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Tauer, Kristen. "Peter Saul Hasn't Run Out of New Subjects to Paint: The 86-year-old painter is showing his latest works in concurrent New York gallery shows at Venus Over Manhattan and Michael Werner Gallery." May 18, 2021, <https://wwd.com/feature/peter-saul-new-paintings-venus-over-manhattan-michael-werner-gallery-1234824379/>