Contemporary Art And Spirituality

Modern day art can be described as a spiritual by virtue of its revelatory, revitalising and contemplative capacities. However rather than reminiscing on the relationship between modern day art and religion, one should ponder on, the nature of the dialogue between art and spirituality, how do the two come together and what form and medium does the art take place?

The spiritual is extremely evident in contemporary art, unfortunately rarely acknowledged. The range of latter-day art is not strictly limited to paint on a piece of paper, multimedia brings forms of encounters that can occur outside the gallery and a variety of spaces which emit audio-visuals articulating the spiritual. These ranges of forms create different demands on the viewer, creating a greater sense of intimacy both physically and psychologically. As the intimacy and interest increase, heightened awareness, a feeling of being present and a sense of embodiment also increase. Through this it can be seen that there are many interpretations of spirituality in art as there are viewers.

In the 21st century, spirituality has become a bigger priority and increasingly more important to various different cultural discourses, which include contemporary art work. Often when art is being described as being ‘spiritual’ it can either be a cause of religious/spiritual tradition. Whether or not the artwork itself is representative to a specific religion or not, spirituality provokes the feelings that were stirred or probed by the art; Viewers may reflect on the meaning of life which often lead on to existential questions such as: ‘Why are we here?’, ‘what happens after life ends?’ or ‘what is the point of life?’ The powerful spiritual sense also gives the viewer the sense of belonging they may be craving.

An example of the colossal amount of spirituality in latter-day art work is the late 20th century painting ‘Three studies for figures at the base of a crucifixion’ created by Francis Bacon. This piece enlists religious representation of traditions while exploring modern condition; its intensity makes a claim for art being sacred and as a nostalgic plea against the disenchantment of the world. Bacon’s work is rich with spiritual idiosyncrasies and historical facts. This artwork alone is a salutary reminder to appreciate faith and its many manifestations.

The traditional relationship between art and spirituality has not only been demonstrated in contemporary day art but has been mediated in historical circumstances. In typical western day art prior to the 20th century, spirituality was usually encompassed with religion, which was periodically problematic for some people involved; the relationship was fractious.

Before modernism, circumstances were very different for artists as they were bound by society by being obliged to work for the service of the church. However in the present era, artists are free to combine genres, mediums and styles into their piece. Some represent a variety of global issues and subjects, such as specific societal issues, whereas some are more universal and relevant to each era. Some artists have a more mixed approach to spirituality where individual aspects from private beliefs, traditions and personal experiences are amalgamated. The most meaningful and powerful spirituality is not strictly limited to religious art.

Most present-day artists find themselves drawn to worldly sources, motifs, metaphors and

symbols, while encountering these in the real world, transformation occurs. Bill Viola is a well-known multimedia artist who frequently uses ‘normal’ everyday people in his illustrations and videos, taking the viewer to an experience far beyond the mundane which conveys the fact that art has the power of moving viewer/s to extraordinary places.

When viewers talk about art being described as spiritual, they rarely pick out a specific tradition, but are responding to the encounter with the piece itself, its imagery, qualities and how this was made apparent to them. Perceiving these feelings about art is often hard to describe using words how they are feeling, individuals usually resort to emotional language, analogies or stories to describe their responses, these emotional states prompt reflections of a spiritual nature. Individuals who experience these feelings are implying that there was a temporary alteration in their psychological and physical state, which set them apart from the ‘real’ world; making that art experience sacred.