Naturalism And Abstracted Devices In Art

Both naturalism and abstracted devices, although highly contrasting in nature, revolve around the exploration and distortion of reality. Naturalism aims to portray something in its genuine entirety and focuses on detail, reflection, and physical appearance. Whereas abstracted devices draw on distortion to portray an impression of the world. Abstracted devices defy the strict structure of naturalism and allow distortion to bleed into realism. In works by myself, Andrew Salgado1 and Floris Van Zyl2, naturalism is evidently corrupted by abstracted devices to explore a metaphysical interpretation of reality. The overarching theme of my works is the exploration of identity in a reflective sense as well as a more personal, abstracted sense.

Smother (Figure 1) by Andrew Salgado is a large-scale oil painting of a close-up portrait. This work features a naturalistic portrait painting disrupted by expressive, impasto brush strokes to depict the artist's own struggle and conflict with identity. Salgado is Canadian, and as a result of his own sexual orientation, his works stem from experiences dealing with sexuality and identity. Due to a personal struggle with mental illness, Salgado aims to depict the effects these issues have on a person. Smother poses questions about masculinity, and much like my own work Abate, it aims to instigate a change in gender ideals by confronting societal norms. Intense brush strokes create a stark, minimalistic background to draw attention to the figure's face.

Furthermore, the intensity of the blue hues shrouding this work becomes symbolic of mental illness (specifical depression), and its impact on a person. Messy, chaotic brushstrokes indicate a struggle and conflict with identity, and the elements of naturalism reflect the artist's state of mind. The splatters of blue overwhelm the rest of the face, thus symbolizing the immense, defeating nature of the mental illness. The close-up image of the face becomes personal/intimate and conveys the fragility of the human mind and body. A naturalistic portrait is obscured by abstracted elements and transforms the work into an amalgamation of physical and metaphysical themes.

Similarly, my own work Abate (Figure 2) features a multimedia drawing of a naturalistic figure drawn over accumulated fragments of paper. Wings are drawn expressively on the back of the figure and a surfeit of portrait drawings are intertwined with the loose pieces of paper. Like Salgado's portraits, this work retains an overall sense of naturalism tainted by elements of abstraction to allow the emotional content to seep into reality. This work revolves around the role of gender expectations in modern society, and portrait drawings of both genders it indicates the inclusivity of these issues, and how they apply to not one specific gender. With minimalistic backgrounds, the focus of this work is on the human element, much like Salgado's work. The drawing is unframed, or 'undone', and instead rests atop a recreation of an animation table.

In art, angels are typically seen as female, and this creates a contrast between the male figure in the drawing, indicating the qualities in men society deems as 'weak'. However, angels also lend the figuring power and aim to idealise the qualities rejected by society. With the figure positioned facing away from the viewer, it hints at the negligence society retains for the issues that inspired this work. Order is extracted from chaos, and the stains of coffee splattered throughout the portraits hint at social unease and disruption -- these form the abstracted elements of the work. Inner vulnerability is portrayed, and the figure is reduced to an unguarded

state. Applicability of gender expectations and restrictions emerges from the profusion of portrait drawings littered throughout the work and reveals the immensity of people affected by such subjects. In this work, naturalism aims to create the illusion of reality, and the components of abstraction obstruct this illusion, and ultimately allow the work to lean into the metaphysical.

In a similar vein, Bright (Figure 3) by Floris Van Zyl is an oil painting of a figure comprised of bold colours and dramatic, impulsive brush strokes. A predominant theme in Van Zyl's work is to take things apart and make realism abstract. This reflects the given theme thoroughly, and the unraveling of naturalism is a prime feature in this work as

lifelike colours are warped by bold, highly saturated shades. Influences of artists such as Van Gogh3 are evident in this work as the expressive use of colour and brush strokes seem to imitate his style.

A personal exploration of spirituality is distinct in this work as the artist's own confusion was mirrored in his works.

The artist aims to achieve an unconventional painting style by painting outside the lines and turning conventional painting abstract.

Correspondingly, this work conveys the idea of letting go of judgment, expectations and conventionality. It translates the untying of thoughts and feelings into his art and my own work mirrors identical themes. Van Zyl allows the paint to 'happen' rather than attempting to influence or control it, and the work is subsequently raw and unfiltered. Warm, fiery colours symbolize the chaos of human thoughts and emotions, and the deep shades of red appear in both the figure and the background, thus posing a question of humanity's place in relation to their surroundings. Due to the exploration of spirituality, the work retains a sense of existentialism. Uneven lines and freckled applications of paint create a sense of disarray and fragmentation, which ultimately lends itself to the unwinding of strict social expectations and prejudice.

Comparably, my own work Out of Date (Figure 4) features a drawing installation comprised of eight A4 pencil drawings pinned atop a board to resemble the creative process an artist goes through when planning a new work (much like Abate's own composition). This work also focuses on a naturalistic representation of people, but detaches itself from the personal content of the work and revolves more around society as a collective whole. With a fragmented composition, this piece revolves around the progression of modern society with regards to technology and the dissipation of value placed on older types of media throughout this progression. The multiple drawings pinned to a board are indicative of the creative process an artist goes through and resembles concept sketches.

Continually, the amassment of drawings creates a layered reality, and the viewer is able to glimpse into fragments of time that have since passed. This work poses a question about obsoletion, and how creators may lose their importance in society as technology continues to progress without human input being as crucial in the creation process. The quantity of sketches connotes the increasing magnitude of this issue. Stains of coffee imply age and reveal the gradual degradation of the drawings which further accentuate the topic of obsoletion. Much like Salgado and Van Zyl's works, this installation exhibits an issue that affects a vast number of people -- specifical creators in this context.

Salerno (Figure 5) is another of Andrew Salgado's works, and this installation features a large-scale oil painting displaying the fragmented form of a woman. Due to the artist's own sexuality, he experienced an excess of societal neglect, and his works were inspired by a hate crime against his sexual orientation. Subtle movement and bold tones are incorporated into the painting, and the geometric forms address a fragmented identity. Salgado's work is commonly regarded as emotively expressionistic, as abstracted segments of the work allow the emotional content to blend into the figure. The idealisation of the figure suggests that the woman is part of a superficial, visual realm and hints at society's inordinate fixation with beauty and physical appearance. The geometric embellishments that flourished throughout the artwork create the illusion of a glitch -- this creating flaw in society's ideals of beauty. The fragments additionally indicate the figure's insecurities, but they are merely alluded to rather than directly confronted.

In addition, Zhang Huan's4 Family Tree is another unconventional approach to abstracted art. This work features a series of photographs in which the artist painted traditional Chinese characters on his face until the layers eventually created an amalgamation of ink that shrouded his skin. The work revolves immensely on the human element of the work and distorts the pure naturalism of the photography into increasingly abstract letterings.

Ultimately, artists such as Andrew Salgado, Floris Van Zyl, and myself include paramount themes of identity in a society that still retains an essence of restriction. By contorting naturalism into works containing abstracted devices, a balance is created between the mesh of the physical and the metaphysical. These works expose the effect such societal restrictions have on a person and aim to allow the emotional content of a work to seep into the reality of its appearance. Such works portray the gradual unraveling of these ideals and unify those who are affected as a collective whole. Through subtle, understated techniques, these themes ultimately reside under the surface of the artworks and are represented in the flashes of abstraction that disrupt the traditional naturalism of art.