What should a painting be?

Hugo Grenville considers the art of image making, and urges you to 'reach down into the subconscious, and deliver something which is heartfelt and dynamic' when you paint

If you had been an icon painter in late Byzantium, you would have had two thoughts uppermost in your mind: the first would have been to communicate your subject as clearly as possible, and the second would have been to ensure that your work did not deviate from the established style. The artist did not exist as an individual, as someone with the moral authority to interpret the great themes of Christianity, but only as a conduit through which the leaders of the church could speak. Similarly, the artists of 20th-century Soviet Russia strove to conform to a permitted style that expressed the big themes close to the mind of Soviet power. Both methods of visual description are immediately recognisable as a coherent 'form' that gives absolute precedence to the expression of ideological narrative, and subordinates any other creative or interpretative impulse. In both cases the viewer is required to absorb a religious or political idea and to acknowledge a source of power. The artist himself is not accorded an identity or personality, and his private feelings are immaterial. If we contrast this with the image of Jackson Pollock pouring liquid paint from a can

ABOVE
Sleeping Nude with Alstromeria, oil on canvas, 36×42in (91.5×106.5cm)

over a huge canvas we can see the other end of the spectrum, where the artist's individuality becomes pre-eminent, and the viewer is left with the language of pure emotion as the picture's subject. And in between these two extremes lies the great canon of western art.

Grand manner

In the late 17th and 18th centuries there was a generally accepted belief that good painting would be found in the development of the language of classical idealism, the 'grand manner' in which the artist could deal with the big moral themes in such a way as to elevate the viewer. The landscapes of Claude Lorraine or Nicholas Poussin do not attempt to copy nature, but rather to idealise it. Turner admired Ruben's ability to use 'glowing colour' to elevate his subject above 'commonality'. John Ruskin believed that painting must be true in two senses: by both faithfully reproducing nature, and by being punctilious in its emotional integrity. He said that fine art is 'where the head, the hand and the heart come together,' which is a useful rule of thumb in determining what is or is not art.

But Turner did not just faithfully reproduce nature; he re-interpreted it so that he could draw out the mystery, the majesty and the poetry of the world around him. He clothed the ordinary in the romantic, his subject really his personal investigation of the mysteries of creation. Although Turner used narrative themes and observed the world around him, they were subordinated to the soaring harmonies of light and colour, redolent of suggestion and ambiguity, poetry and beauty.

Turner links the neo-classical world to the romantic and modern movement. David Hockney described the act of painting as 'how to explore the outside world in an inner way,' by using 'gesture and movement.' Van Gogh saw nature as the 'revelation of a deeper truth,' and certainly expressed this in an 'inner way'. Ivon Hitchens saw the painting of nature as something that would allow each artist 'to reveal one further facet of life for others to see for themselves'.

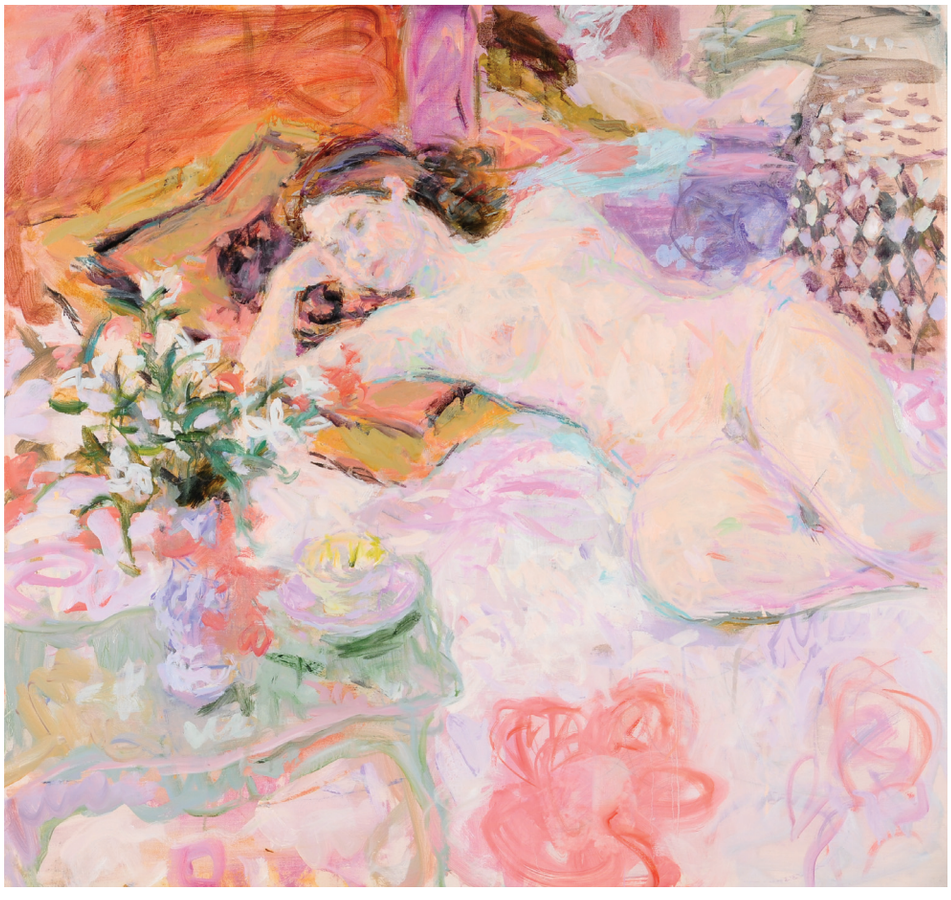
As modernism developed through the 19th and early 20th centuries, grand manner in painting gave way to aestheticism, the idea that it is unnecessary to have a subject, that mood and emotion expressed through colour and shape was a sufficient basis on which to make art; in other words, art for art's sake. Matisse, writing about still life, saw the subject not as a description of objects, but as an exploration of light: 'It is an area where light plays the main role. Colour comes second. It is with colour that you render light, although of course you must also feel this light, have it within yourself.'

Slow art

So, what should a painting be? There is undoubtedly a consensus of thought about what a painting is not. It is not a scientific record of nature; it is not reportage in the sense of attempting to simply describe an event; it is not the act of copying nature, for how can nature be copied? And even less can it be about the act of copying photographs, which is worryingly rather prevalent at the moment. Neither is it advertising or propaganda for the proselytising of political or religious beliefs, which generally requires the artist to suppress their emotions and integrity. Robert Hughes derided contemporary art for being bloated, vacuous, vain, obsessed with 'media values' and commanding meaningless but obscene prices. What especially upset him was the total abandonment of aesthetic quality, and a 'tragic depreciation of the traditional skills of painting and drawing. We have had a gutful of fast art, but what we need more of is slow art, art that holds time as a vase holds water.'

Coherent

Hughes is right. The art of painting is the art of making an image that has within it



'To make a good painting, you need to be engaged at a deep level'

◀ ***Reclining Nude (Musing),*** oil on canvas, 34×36in (86.5×91.5cm)

▶ ***Reclining Nude with Chequered Pillow I,*** oil on canvas, 42×42in (106.5×106.5cm)

sufficient intellectual and emotional substance to last for a long time, perhaps forever. The authority of the mastery of technical form, and the robustly individual visual language present a painterly vision that communicates directly with the viewer on both an emotional and intellectual level, providing an effect that is revelatory and transcendental. And this is the rub of it: to make a good painting you need to be engaged at a deep level, both intellectually and emotionally. It's all very well to try to express your thoughts and feelings, but without a coherent 'form' in which to express them, you will not get far. Painting, like poetry, is about devising a mode of arrangement that best expresses your intentions; painters have to seek out a structural unity in which to express their visual language.

In *Sleeping Nude with Alstromeria* (page 15) and *Reclining Nude (Musing)* (below left) I have devised slightly different forms (by which I mean mode of arrangement) in which to express my ideas. The female nude represents both the fragility and the aspirations of humanity, and the decorative objects and flowers that surround her articulate the profound joy in life of light, colour and shape. The mood of these pictures, their quiet gentleness and sense of reverie is composed: it comes from inside, not from observation. In reality the situation is more anarchic, with the model becoming uncomfortable, the light fading, the flowers wilting, and the artist battling to harness the disparate elements of light, pigments, shapes of object and the behaviour of the medium into a unity of design, a harmony of space and colour. In *Reclining Nude (Musing)* the pictorial space recedes further from the viewer, past the reflection of the nude into another room with its suggestion of fading external light. This introduces a contrast between the sleeping figure and the world outside. By comparison *Sleeping Nude with Alstromeria* takes the viewer firmly to the figure, with only a hint of a larger interior space suggested by the top right-hand corner reflection of the figure in the mirror. Although both palettes are restricted to reds, pinks, earth

Reclining Nude with Chequered Pillow (study), charcoal and chalk on paper, 19×21½in (48.5×54.5cm)

Still Life with Chrysanthemums and Coffee Pot, oil on canvas, 36×28in (91.5×71cm)

greens and violets (no primary blues or yellows) the brushwork here is looser, more lively, less articulated, less stated, with the overall mood seeming more whimsical, more upbeat.

Design

Dante Gabriel Rossetti used to ask his students: 'Have you an idea in your head? Is it an idea that can be expressed in the shape of a design? Can you express it with refinement?' Painting needs an idea, like a poem or a piece of music. You can't just pitch up and paint as though you were taking a photograph. And having thought about what it is you would like to say, you then need a composition ('the shape of a design'), an ordering of objects into a coherent structure.

In *Reclining Nude with Chequered Pillow* (page 17), the design was achieved after a considerable amount of time spent arranging and re-arranging all the disparate elements, and investigating the results through a series of charcoal studies, like the one shown (left). In terms of the pictorial space, the canvas is divided by repeating and intersecting diagonal lines: the line of the curtain intersects the edge of the chequered pillow; the position of the figure creates a pale diagonal shape straight across the composition, counterbalanced by the direction of the material around her thighs, and by the direction of the stool. The key to any strong painting is the design, because once the design is resolved you can apply the paint with confidence, knowing that the marks you make are likely to stay there, instead of constantly being erased. The space portrayed in the picture is not a depiction of a real space, but rather an excursion into a space without time or designation, where the viewer is invited to join the musing figure in the contemplation of light and colour, in pattern and line, and in the nature of simply being. The picture surface is full of movement so that the flat shapes seem to dissolve and reform.

Further exploration

Sometimes the idea you have about the subject is insufficiently expressed in the finished painting, and sometimes the making of the picture leads into new ideas, but in both cases it is often necessary to explore the subject further in a second or third version. I made four variations on the theme of the still life shown here (left and right), with each version employing a slightly different palette, and with alterations to the arrangement of the different elements that constitute the composition. In *Still Life with Chrysanthemums, Roses and Coffee Pot III* (right), the picture of the nude situated

behind the table has been given more prominence, as has the coffee pot, but the most significant difference lies in the treatment of the table itself: much less a dark surface on which light objects have been placed than in the earlier version, it now glows with deep blues and violets. There are no saturated yellow pigments in this palette, just blues and pinks, with the yellows represented by Old Holland cinnabar green light and Naples yellow light, whereas in the earlier version there are no blues, just cool greens (Old Holland cobalt green turquoise), violets (ultramarine violet) and greys (Old Holland blue-grey). In both paintings the whole picture surface was accorded the same prominence.

Each one of us will want to explore and express the subjects that excite us in different ways, but I am certain that the key to making a good painting is to follow the advice of the great painters of the past by engaging with the subject with utter integrity and total conviction. Think carefully about the idea, and then develop a design that will help you convey that idea. Think about what sort of picture you want to create, what the surface might look like, which colours are in your mind, and then, when you are ready to start painting, lose yourself in the act of invention, of creation, reach down into the subconscious, and deliver something which is heartfelt and dynamic. TA

Still Life with Chrysanthemums, Roses and Coffee Pot III, oil on canvas, 36×34in (91.5×86.5cm).

Hugo Grenville teaches at the Studio Hugo Grenville Summer School: for more details see www.hugogrenville.com. Hugo will be exhibiting at Josie Eastwood Fine Art/Cricket Fine Art at 2 Park Walk, London SW10 0AD, telephone 020 7352 2733, from November 15 to 29, and Wally Findlay Galleries, 124 East 57th St, New York, from May 15 to June 7 2011; www.wallyfindlay.com.