

INTRODUCTION | **Figurative art and
figurative philosophy**

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Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(Macbeth, act V, scene 5)

What is a Picasso-like horse-person doing on the cover of this book, clutching a broken dagger in his left hand; his feet poised at the edge of a chessboard suspended over the abyss of eternity; and his right eye staring desperately at the viewer? The image is taken from Tom de Freston's painting *A Poor Player that Struts and Frets his Hour*. The painting's title is taken from act V, scene 5, of *Macbeth*. In that scene, Macbeth receives the news that his wife is dead. Immediately, he responds to news of his misfortune by becoming philosophical.¹ He is struck by the futility of life, and captures this through the metaphor of a fretful actor whose performance is quickly forgotten. In the painting, de Freston achieves a thick impasto texture in the background that moves between sombre and fiery tones, and which evokes

the feeling of an atmosphere that is too thick to cut with a knife – hence the broken dagger. Such an atmosphere is de Freston’s attempt at capturing the feeling of what it is like to be in the moment when one realizes that, even after the monumental act of regicide, the loss of one’s wife is enough to consign one to a shadowy life of nothingness: the dagger that cuts so effortlessly through royal flesh is useless when standing at the edge of life’s chessboard, seemingly poised over the meaningless abyss of eternity.

So we might understand the horse-person as philosophizing in the painting, or we might understand the picture as the end product of some philosophical speculation that de Freston was engaged in when painting the figure of the horse-person at the edge of the chessboard over the abyss. Similarly, we might understand Macbeth as being engaged in some philosophical activity in the scene that inspired de Freston, or we might understand Shakespeare as using the character to explore some deep philosophical problem.

The painting led me to revisit the play, and to retrieve the battered copy of the Challis Shakespeare edition, published by Sydney University Press, and which I read as a schoolboy, from the top of my bookcase (on the shelf just beneath the oboe case). In A. P. Riemer’s introduction to that edition of the play, he discusses the significance that critics have attached to Shakespeare’s presentation of Macbeth as a person whose actions are an exercise of free will, before Riemer questions such an interpretation of the play:

Yet the hypothesis that *Macbeth* is based on the presumption of its hero’s exercising free will is by no means inevitable; it may be a disservice to Shakespeare’s art to consider the play in such absolutely philosophical or even theological terms. This is not to suggest that too high a valuation may have been placed on the tragedy by previous critics; it is rather to stress that the greatness of *Macbeth* does not necessarily rely on its concern with such issues. Free will is not a theme of paramount importance in the play; to consider it is to speculate about the implications of the play’s material rather than to comment on its actual concerns or preoccupations. Like many of Shakespeare’s plays, *Macbeth* is significantly open-ended: it raises possibilities more

than it determines issues. The hero may be responsible for his crimes or he may be a victim of fate – the emphasis falls not so much on an adjudication between these claims as on the vivid, dramatic, moving and ultimately terror-filled presentation of Macbeth's decline into barbarous tyranny. He is surrounded by images and personalities that highlight this process ... The poetic and imaginative complexity of the tragedy is revealed through such parallels by the subtle use of images and motifs ...²

Free will is undoubtedly an important philosophical concept. However, the centrality of free will to *Macbeth* does not mean that Shakespeare takes a philosophical interest in the concept. T. S. Eliot famously denounced Shakespeare's "philosophy" in his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", while nevertheless affirming the poetical value of Shakespeare's work, on the basis that the poet's task is to use the philosophy of the age to give expression to the poet's own emotions.³ Whatever one makes of Eliot's approach, he is manifestly correct in pointing out that there is something valuable about an artist engaging with philosophical ideas without claiming to be engaged in academic philosophy. The predicament is not limited to poets. The American art critic Harold Rosenberg, in his influential essay "The American Action Painters", denied that painters – even that arch anti-figurative painter Barnett Newman (who sounds rather philosophical in his denunciation of the "props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images" when using paint to express "absolute emotions", in his manifesto, "The Sublime is Now")⁴ – were interested in philosophy: "Philosophy is not popular among American painters. For most, thinking consists of the various arguments that to paint is something different from, say, to write or to criticize: a mystique of the particular activity."⁵

So it would hardly be surprising if something similar might be said about de Freston's figurative painting, in which he uses the "props and crutches" of the images of the horse-person, chessboard and dagger, to explore absolute emotions.

If artists are not philosophers, or are not interested in academic philosophy, many of them are, nevertheless, finding ways of engaging with philosophical problems. This leaves an irresistible opening for philosophers

when they engage with art, either by taking up the baton of the artist interested in philosophical concepts, or exploring philosophical ways of engaging with art, whether or not the art in question is explicitly concerned with philosophical ideas.

Philosophers are no more artists than artists are philosophers. Philosophers are theorists. But, as theorists, they are no more art critics or art historians, than they are artists. Whereas the art critic seeks to persuade us of the value that a work has for the critic, by drawing our attention to details of the work that enable him to provide reasons for his judgement, and the art historian uses historical methods to understand facts about individual paintings, philosophers of art are concerned with the fundamental nature or value of art generally, rather than with understanding or appreciating a specific work of art. Philosophy of art is not necessarily the same as aesthetics. Where philosophers of art are concerned with the nature and value of a cultural phenomenon – “art”, or “the arts”, or one or more of the several art forms – aestheticians might cast their net further afield, in order to understand what is entailed by the peculiar mode of aesthetic appreciation that attends as readily to the sublime, the beautiful, or the picturesque in the natural world as it does to objects created by human agents in pursuit of some cultural phenomenon. And, whereas an *aesthetician* is concerned with the analysis of the nature and value of aesthetic appreciation, an *aesthete* professes to possess a peculiarly keen sense of aesthetic appreciation, whether or not he has any understanding of what he possesses. But what a philosopher of art – or an aesthetician – hopefully has in common with an art critic or an art historian – or, indeed, an artist – is that any of these might also be an aesthete. Those who theorize about art and those who are practitioners of art share a conviction about the centrality of art to their lives, and any of them might profess a special sensibility to experiences of beauty in works of art or in the natural world. These shared commitments suggest that the opportunity to write essays that recruit the insights of philosophy, history and connoisseurship might go some way towards affirming the shared conviction of the centrality of art to life.

This collection contains essays by aestheticians (some of whom might also be aesthetes) and philosophers who do not specialize in aesthetics. They are all contemporary philosophers who were philosophizing during

the period in which the works of art that they discuss were created. Most work in the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy; some work in the German tradition of continental philosophy, or as classicists studying ancient Greek philosophy. One of the contributors has a second life as an artist; another as an art historian. The only condition imposed upon them, in writing these essays, was that they had to choose a work of art to write about, and, in doing so, they had to make a connection between that work and some philosophical issue. No guidance was given as to how they should forge this connection.

A portfolio from which the philosophers were able to select works to write about was assembled by Henry Little and Josephine Breese, the directors of Breese Little. Breese Little is a commercial art gallery in London that specializes in contemporary art, with a significant offsite educational programme, including the Breese Little Prize for Art Criticism and a lecture series at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in collaboration with LSE Arts. The directors of the gallery have taken an active interest in this publication from its inception. The portfolio they put together contained works of figurative art by artists who have exhibited in the last decade. The catalogue of plates in this book contains the works that the contributors chose to write about, from the original portfolio of 116 works. So we have thirteen essays by contemporary philosophers discussing seventeen works by ten contemporary figurative artists.

Figurative art can be defined in various ways. In its narrowest sense, it is art that takes as its subject the human form (perhaps even more narrowly, the accurate representation of the human form). More broadly, however, it is art that is intended to look like *something* in reality. At its most general level, it might be taken to include all non-abstract art. The nineteenth century saw the rise of a new era in Western art history, with the advent of abstract art, and the creation of paintings and sculptures in which form, colour and line were used to create compositions that did not include any visual references to the world. In contradistinction to abstract art, figurative art has come to include any form of modern art that includes links to the real world. In 2007–9, Tate Liverpool held an exhibition, *The Twentieth Century: How it Looked and How it Felt*. On the first floor was one exhibition, *The Twentieth Century: Figuration*, which was concerned with “art that retains strong references to the real world”, and on the second floor

was *The Twentieth Century: Abstraction*, which contained art “that may appear to be without a recognisable subject”.⁶

This collection of essays gains a measure of unity from the fact that each is concerned with an example of contemporary figurative art. But why should the philosophers have been invited to select from a portfolio of *figurative* art, let alone *contemporary* figurative art?

In the nineteenth century, Hegel thought he heard the death knell of art: human spirit had evolved to such a point that art could no longer perform its vocation as an expression of spirit, and so it had come to an end. The death of art, it was claimed in the twentieth century, came in 1917 with Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, or almost half a century later, in 1964, with Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*. But even if art did not die in the nineteenth century, it still seemed, to some, that painting as an art would die, with the advent of photography: on one reading of the history of the art of painting, in the West, the whole tradition had been in pursuit of the quest for mastery of perspective, and now, even though it had finally been mastered, photography would supersede painting as a means of achieving accurate visual representations. And even if painting as an art did not die, it seemed that figurative painting would die in the twentieth century: Dadaism, abstraction and action painting all suggested that art was no longer concerned with visual representation of the world, and, even if visual representation of the world was still important in painting, impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, cubism and pop art suggested that the accurate or realistic representation of the world was not what mattered. And yet, despite the vicissitudes of the last century, this catalogue demonstrates that contemporary painters remain engaged in the figurative tradition. And, if the catalogue of contemporary figurative art demonstrates that the figurative tradition is still alive, then the collection of essays demonstrates that contemporary figurative art still speaks to the intellectually curious in a multitude of different ways. These contemporary artists’ visual references to the world around them can inspire philosophers in their quest to understand that same world.

How ought one to talk about a catalogue of works of art? One might talk about the artists represented in the catalogue, and point out that they are all living artists, born between 1935 and 1983 in America (Colorado), England (Bristol, London, Dilston, Liverpool and Coventry), continental

Europe (one Portuguese artist from Lisbon; one Romanian artist from Baia Mare) or China (Heilongjiang), who now live and work in major centres of art, such as New York, London, Berlin and Beijing, or more remote places, such as Oxfordshire, Cornwall and Devon in England, and Cluj in Romania. Or one might talk about the works themselves: the media used to execute the works – enamel paint on board, pastel on paper on aluminium, graphite on paper or oil (occasionally with acrylic) paint on canvas, board or linen – or the dimensions of the completed works (ranging from 43 × 53 centimetres to 4.2 × 2.4 metres), or the fact that they were all executed between 1999 and 2012. Or one might talk about the subject matter depicted in the paintings: a still life, a semi-clad woman in repose, a wolf haunting an art gallery, a donkey-person nursing a wounded rabbit-person, an architectural study, deserted urban landscapes, abandoned domestic rooms, and groups of human figures engaged in activities ranging from pie-throwing to masturbation. Or one might simply note that one work is untitled, and list the titles that the artists gave the other works: *This Sporting Life*, *Nickelodeon*, *Dada is Dead*, *The Black Camisole*, *Quartet – Stage One*, *Quartet – Stage Two*, *Quartet – Stage Four*, *No Returns*, *The Fall*, *Heaven*, *War*, *The Dane*, *Hegel's Happy End*, *Hendrix's Last Basement*, *A View From A Window* and *Room 100 Chelsea Hotel*. Or one might talk about the value of these works of art: an oil painting by John Currin has fetched \$5,458,500 at auction, whereas it is still possible to pick up an oil painting by Tom de Freston for \$9,400.

This is not an auction catalogue, however, and the essays are not concerned with the monetary value of the works reproduced in the catalogue. That they are concerned with value, but not the monetary value of the works, is to say that they are concerned with the *artistic* value of the works.

In his, *Values of Art*, Malcolm Budd begins with the bald assertion:

The central question in the philosophy of art is, What is the value of art? Philosophical reflection on art would be idle unless art were valuable to us, and the significance of any question that arises in philosophical reflection on art derives directly or ultimately from the light that its answer throws upon the value of art.⁷

Artistic value lies in “the experience a work of art offers”, Budd explains, which is “an experience of the work in which it is understood”: it is not any person’s actual experience of the work that matters here, but how the work ought to be experienced if its meaning is to be understood. Budd then distinguishes intrinsic value of art from instrumental value of art:

the value of a work of art as a work of art is intrinsic to the work in the sense that it is (determined by) the intrinsic value of the experience the work offers (so that if it offers more than one experience, it has more than one artistic value or an artistic value composed of these different artistic values). It should be remembered that the experience a work of art offers is an experience *of the work itself*, and the valuable qualities of a work are qualities *of the work*, not of the experience it offers. It is the nature of the work that endows the work with whatever artistic value it possesses; this nature is what is experienced in undergoing the experience the work offers; and the work’s artistic value is the intrinsic value of this experience. So a work of art is valuable as art if it is such that the experience it offers is intrinsically valuable; and it is valuable to the degree that this experience is intrinsically valuable.

By the intrinsic value of an item I do not mean a value that depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the item – a value that depends solely on its internal properties (its qualities and inner relations) – as contrasted with an extrinsic value – a value that depends, wholly or in part, on its external properties (its relations to other things). My conception of intrinsic value opposes it, not to extrinsic value, but to instrumental value, and I do not assume that something’s intrinsic value is dependent solely on its intrinsic nature. By the instrumental value of a work of art I mean the value, from whatever point of view, of the actual effects of the experience of the work on people or the effects that would be produced if people were to experience the work ... My claim therefore implies that the instrumental value of a work of art, its beneficial or harmful, short- or long-term effects or influence, either on a given person or people in general ... is not the value of art *as* a work of art.⁸

So, all philosophy of art is concerned with artistic value, and artistic value is the intrinsic value of the experience a work of art offers, but artistic values are as multifarious as the experiences offered by works of art.

Each of these essays takes, as its departure point, the experience of a particular work of art, and some value that a particular philosopher finds in that experience. Mostly, the essays are concerned with intrinsic value, although some are explicitly concerned with the instrumental value of a work of art. But even if each philosopher finds intrinsic value in the experience of the work of art, we should not expect each to find the works rewarding in the same way. It is central to Budd's thesis that, although artistic value is concerned with the intrinsic value of a work of art, there are different ways in which a work of art can be intrinsically valuable, because there are different ways in which the experience offered by a work of art can be rewarding. So it is a strength of the collection if the various contributions respond to the variety of values of art.

Not all contemporary philosophers were equally inspired by the invitation to choose a work from the Breese Little portfolio of contemporary art as the basis for a philosophical essay. Some indicated that, had we not confined them to contemporary paintings, they would have been strongly tempted to accept the invitation, especially if they could have chosen the painting to write about, but, as the invitation stood, they declined to view the portfolio. Others viewed the portfolio, but came to the conclusion that they did not really have anything of interest to say, finding some of the pictures obscene, but nevertheless fairly representative of British art and culture today. Occasionally, there was a lament that a promising philosophical project was foiled by images that seemed like pathetic colour-bursts, swirlingly anxious, intertextual, but nevertheless lifeless. So what was it that other philosophers saw in the portfolio that inspired them to write about the works?

Some works spoke to the contributors through a dialogue with earlier works of art. Sometimes, it is to ponder a contrast, such as that seen between Lowry's cheerful depictions of the industrial north of England and Shaw's seemingly bleak and desolate treatment of the industrial north. Sometimes, it is to demonstrate how a contemporary artist, such as Rego, alludes to the work of a master, such as Goya's *Los Caprichos*, in order to convey shared concerns about their common subject – in this case, power

used to kill, rather than to save. Contemporary art might also allow the opportunity to revisit the aims of earlier art, so that, in Ghenie's paintings, we have the opportunity to reflect upon the manifestos of the Dadaists, and their ambitions. We also find efforts to connect up the discussion of contemporary figurative artists' work with the treatment of similar themes in non-visual art forms, such as the poetry of Philip Larkin and the prose of Elie Wiesel and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and in the performing arts, including ancient tragedy (Sophocles' *Antigone*), modern theatre (Meyrink's *The Golem*), film (Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*) and popular music (Leonard Cohen's "Chelsea Hotel").

No doubt, a large part of the appeal of writing an essay for this collection is the opportunity to engage in a "mixed" activity. The contributors cannot limit themselves to a "pure" disciplinary approach such as the abstract speculation of philosophy, the connoisseurship of art criticism, or the historical method of art history. Necessarily, they are forced to cross boundaries in writing these essays, and it is in doing so that they offer us something original and precious. So it is not surprising that they have drawn especial inspiration from the work of interdisciplinary theorists including the German aspirant Hypsistarian writer–scientist–statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), the English "unconverted" Evangelical writer–art–critic–draughtsman–watercolourist–philanthropist–social theorist John Ruskin (1819–1900), Viennese Jewish neurologist–psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), New Yorker Marxist–essayist–art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–94), and the English Anglican archaeologist–historian–Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943).

On the whole, these essays are not intended to be scholarly contributions to academic philosophy. Predictably, however, the contributors find connections in the works of art with the writings of other philosophers, or believe that the insights of such philosophers can be recruited to shed light on the works of art. We find the canon of Western philosophy plucked for its riches: the ancients (Plato and Aristotle), the mediaeval scholastics (Saint Thomas Aquinas), the early moderns (Adam Smith, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel) and twentieth-century philosophers (Sartre, Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Goodman and Danto), as well as more recent work by philosophers such as Gregory Currie, and scholars such as Andrea Dworkin and

Catherine MacKinnon, working in related fields. Perhaps the works of art also offer contemporary philosophers new possibilities for engaging with the philosophical canon.

The essays address a number of standard philosophical problems in aesthetics, including expression, depiction, style, and the ontology of art. They also discuss a number of other artistic issues ranging from the significance of the titles that artists give their work, to the relationship between photography and older art forms, and from historically important approaches to art, such as *vanitas* painting, to more recent developments such as the role of the “artworld”. There are also discussions of aesthetics beyond art, such as the beauty of the natural world.

They also address a range of topics that transcend art and aesthetics. Some of these essays can rightfully be characterized as engaging in social and political commentary, while others examine ethical, religious and legal concepts. Experiences of war, over the century from the First World War to Abu Ghraib, feature prominently, as do the political movements of that century, ranging from Bolshevism and Marx-inspired political movements to Thatcherism, and the plethora of new scourges encountered during that century: the Soviet gulag, television, internet pornography, News Corp. Then there are discussions of concepts such as irony, disgust, apathy, inequality and physiognomic expression, and even the sense of wonder that is at the core of philosophical responses to the world. Together with religion, art and philosophy were the manifestations of human spirit in Hegelian idealism. The dialogue between art and philosophy in these essays admirably gives expression to a range of concerns that are central to life in the West at the dawn of the twenty-first century, and, in one case, addresses concerns of those living in contemporary China, which in turn cast further light on problems encountered in the West.

At the end of the preface to his *Principles of Art*, R. G. Collingwood pre-emptively asks of the theory that he is yet to expound in his book:

Is this so-called philosophy of art a mere intellectual exercise, or has it practical consequences bearing on the way in which we ought to approach the practice of art (whether as artists or as audience) and hence, because a philosophy of art is a theory as to the place of art in life as a whole, the practice of life?⁹

The first page of his book commences, “The business of this book is to answer the question: What is art?” It is no part of the business of *this* book to answer that question. However, it is to be hoped that the treatment of the non-aesthetic concepts enumerated above will speak for itself in demonstrating how these essays are exercises in approaching the practice of art (as audience, if not as artists) as affirming the central place of art in life as a whole, and philosophizing about art as forming part of the practice of life.

In a review of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium’s recent volume *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight* (edited by Noël Carroll and John Gibson), for the *Philosophical Quarterly*, I observed:

The collection is significant for analytic aesthetics in the shift that it signals from thinking about “fiction” as a central concept, to thinking about “narrative” as a central concept, and the fruit that this shift might yet bear. More generally, it demonstrates the developments that are possible in philosophy when its practitioners cooperate to identify a new concept in need of investigation.¹⁰

I hope that, in a similar way, the current collection demonstrates something not just for aesthetics, but for general philosophy, about developments that are possible in philosophy when its practitioners open their minds to philosophical activities through which philosophy and philosophers might engage with the wider world. If figurative art has come to comprise any form of modern art that includes links to the real world, perhaps there is also a place for “figurative philosophy”, comprising any form of modern philosophy that includes links to the big wide world beyond the academy.