

Kathleen Caprario-Ulrich
Café' 541: The "A" Word Column, January 1, 2020

514 Words, plus links

WHO, ME? (*too*)

Hard to believe another year has come and gone as we welcome in 2020. Still fresh in our imagination, the New Year offers one more opportunity in the finite cycle of our lives to do well and do better—a second, third or sixtieth chance, so to speak.

It's said that the only constant in life is change. However, certain behaviors rooted in privilege and maintained through structurally based biases have permeated our societal skin so deeply that despite an increased awareness and our best efforts, the change we claim to desire comes slowly or not at all, sometimes even reversing direction. In times of uncertainty we tend to long for the "good old days." Good for whom and at what cost for the rest of us are questions conveniently avoided.

A new awareness is evidenced in an increasing number of curated exhibitions that recognizes the often-uncomfortable "baggage" that can be part and parcel of the artworks that we admire and enjoy. Christopher Riopelle, a co-curator of the "Gauguin Portraits," currently on exhibition at the National Gallery in London, has noted that everything, including art, must be viewed "in a much more nuanced context...I don't think, any longer, that it's enough to say, 'Oh well, that's the way they did it back then.'" Wow, that's a refreshing and long overdue statement. The show runs through January 26 and focuses on Paul Gauguin's vibrantly colored, Post-Impressionist depictions of himself, his friends and the numerous tender-age girls he lived with in Tahiti and who gave birth to his Euro-Polynesian offspring.

Ashley Remer, a curator and founder of the online Girl Museum, insists that Gauguin's actions were so egregious that they mitigate any artistic merit assigned to his work. "He was an arrogant, overrated, patronizing pedophile, to be very blunt...I'm not saying take down the works: I'm saying lay it all bare about the whole person." She proposes that we should be savvy enough to discern the good plus the bad and ugly back-stories of the art and artists we love and follow. But are we?

The age and provenance of an artwork influences its cultural value and can mask and make palatable a form of toxic nostalgia. Our ability to discern pathological behavior from inspiration and creativity can be overshadowed by the beauty of a brush stroke; our moral compass is anesthetized by the sheer artistry and formal brilliance on display with underlying attitudes and conduct that many would otherwise reject, swept aside.

Even back in 1979 when Woody Allen's film, "Manhattan" premiered, his predatory relationship with the fresh-faced Tracy character made me queasy. I've come to trust that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach regardless of the perp's, I mean, artist's position in the cultural canon. There are plenty of famous suspects from the past and present to choose from, however, you don't have to look far to find examples of misogyny, racial and gender bias, homophobia or imperialist posturing in artworks created and viewed right here at home—if you have the curiosity, honesty and fortitude for it.

Happy New Year.

LINKS:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/arts/design/gauguin-national-gallery-london.html>

<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kehinde-wiley-tahiti-gauguin-1546054>

https://books.google.com/books?id=DqIJDwAAQBAJ&pg=PR6&lpg=PR6&dq=Tyla+Vaeau+Ta%27ufo%27ou+dallas+and+dee+do&source=bl&ots=8_I0nBSbTy&sig=ACfU3U1z3GiM1Ks0n3KN4q4wqBeUngA-Hw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj7-mnqePmAhXOI54KHcfRDKYQ6AEwCnoECAsQAQ#v=onepage&q=Tyla%20Vaeau%20Ta'ufo'ou%20dallas%20and%20dee%20do&f=false

<https://www.girlmuseum.org/>

<https://nexttribe.com/woody-allens-manhattan/>