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: The Urge To Solve



Blair Schulman

Uncovering Meaning Through Puzzles and Art

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There's a tagline for a brand of malt liquor from the 1980's and if it seems a little out of place, it's there to make a point; that is, surfaces are deceiving. But that is often what one examines first. Another, more familiar phrase, "There's a sucker born every minute" is famously attributed to (but never uttered by) 19th Century showman PT Barnum. It's less trickery than pointing out how far one is willing to probe to unearth the *raison d'être*. Even though the human species is wired to decode and problem solve from birth, we are oftentimes ready to be manipulated.

Working through one of David Kwong's *New York Times* crosswords (or those done by other puzzle masters like Will Shortz), a pattern emerges and the journey starts to clarify, often giving the solver that last kick in the pants to see it all the way through.

We spend this lifetime conversely reassuring and confounding ourselves by wondering if we have asked the right questions. Sometimes visual art will provide us with answers when we invest in seeking out the artist's meaning, or better still, uncovering meanings that are pertinent not only to us, but extrapolating those meanings into our collective consciousness. The key is not to overplay one's hand and spill all the beans right at the start, shouting how clever this is before the observer has had a chance to make that discovery on their own. The 'aha' moment needs to be organic.

Attentiveness is a reward unto itself. In a conversation on this subject, artist David Titterington notes, "Out of chaos comes order, especially when the artist meddles. It reminds one of the 'pointing out instructions' in Tibetan Buddhism, where the teacher will ask you to stare into your own chaotic mind until you recognize its crystal clear nature, and if you cannot recognize it, they will point it out to you."

This crystallization is the experience we seek. Or at least ought to as part of ones own mental and spiritual evolution. It may explain why chaos and order are the central axioms of our existence. From these theories arise the central problems artists throughout history have sought to resolve.

They can be as incredibly simple as Ellsworth Kelly's 1966 oil on canvas Black/White, one of many series where he explores color configurations and contrasting geometrics. This particular Minimalist work (or Color Field, depending on who you argue with) is simply two large (70" x 140") horizontal panels that define in the most elementary symbiosis where we, as humans, begins and ends. And while Kelly may or may not have been saying exactly that, it is the conclusion I have drawn. Other ideas may vary and should.

On the other end of this spectrum, one can seek definitions in works like Vasily Kandinsky's Composition VII (1913, oil on canvas), a definitive work that expresses "non-representational properties of color and form" but nonetheless prod an emotional response not unlike experiencing a musical composition. We see not just the colors and shapes, but by exploring deeper, are rewarded with feelings that prove more and more satisfying as the relationships stored in our minds connect to these images. It once again becomes the pattern of decoding that our species lives by.

While Kwong may have been overly eager to show his hand to the audience, his points are valid. Humans enjoy both order and chaos of varying degrees. But it is the line between these poles that we really seem to desire; therein lies the journey of exploration and deciding what to do with this experience that really keeps us on our toes.

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David Kwong

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