Manet — Still Life

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"Clarity, Condour, urbanity and virtous ability to handle paint–such are the qualities which first strike us in Manet's art". A quote by John Richardson still life grapes and figs 1864 Frank Jay Gould collection. Cannes–"The dark rich tones of this painting carry in them the strong popular Spanish influence the light hitting the fruit from the left creates a startling and brilliant luminosity." Said also by John Richardson.

Before we attempt to anaylse the meaning of what's within Edouard Manet's work entitled still life, Grapes and figs, one must first identify, and note, the somewhat colorful events which occurred within the artist life, and note the way in which they must have led his work.

Figs and Grapes, 1864, oil on canvas 21x26cm, Private Collection, Paris

Born in France in 1832, Manet was raised by his parents Auguste and Eugenie–Desiree a society couple, who's social standing resulted from Auguste's successful career in the Ministry of Justice , Paris. Indeed, so successful was Auguste in his chosen field that upon his retirement he was awarded the Legion of Honor. It is thought by many that the importance of Augustes role in both society and the ministry actually intimidated the young Manet, who constantly aspired throughout his adult life, to gain the same level of reverence as that which his father possessed.

Manet's personal background to the analysis of the artists treatment of gender within his work, is apparent to his paintings, they showed deeper side of the artist and what "angle" he saw women.

However, it is the actions of the artists youth which many therapists believe is the key to understanding the ambiguous portrayal of woman within his paintings throw out his career. It was during the late 1850's when Manet was serving as a naval cadet in Rio de Janeiro, that he met a number of slave girls, Manet had openly admitted in letters to his friends the extend to which he found their tropical beauty alluring. Yet, is was not until Manet returned to France that he reveled the true extent of his relationships with these girls, and confessed to the fact that he had been using his time to relate to the girls in an adult way.

The answer lies in the artists life long ill–health, it was in fact Manet himself who first diagnosed although now medically proven to be wrong that the physical pain from which he suffered on a daily basis was the result of a syphilis virus contracted during one of his aforementioned youthful encounters, a misconception which haunted the artist throughout his life . Taking this point into consideration, you must therefore consider the psychological effects that Manet's own feelings of guilt and regret concerning the cause of his illness, (And why he drew the grapes), and consider the effects that it had upon his life and his work, and thus in turn the way in which those feelings influenced his view of women as a whole, but particularly those of ill–repute.

It is even considered by some that Manet's still grapes helped him in his final piece composed almost in the form of his own life and as such, was a painting which assumed the right to be so controversial in content that it pushed at the very boundaries of conventionalism.

While some critics acknowledge that Manet had always wished to paint a Biblical scene as an exercise of his talent, Like such paintings as The

Waitress Serving Beer, Departure of the Forlkstone, and the A Bar at the Foiles–Bergere the application of such a stance that he made with the grapes and how they came to be one when they were two different kinds of grapes, and therefore illuminates the work as nothing less than a painting which exhibits complete defiance to all that was considered appropriate and indeed, acceptable in the eyes of the Academy. This however, it can be argued was Manets' wish.

Manet, Self Portrait with Palette, 1879, oil on canvas 83x67cm, Private Collection

By 1882, after years of constant rejection by the critical elite, Manet's frustration toward the Academy was at its peak, the very sense of having, (what he considered) to be his best work dismissed so entirely, along with his self inflicted sense of failure when comparing the achievements his own life when compared to his Fathers success, drove Manet to paint a piece which acted not only as a final contemplation for the Academy but also as a self analytical challenge to the viewing public. For, who else but a dying man would have dared to question societies treatment of gender by substituting people with the figure of a grape?

It is not until one has recognized the importance of the inter–personal influences behind Manet's painting that one can then truthfully analyze the painting itself, would at first, appear to be a simple group of fruit with inter–groups of themselves and working relationship with the others however, the iconographic message that Manet was attempting to convey through this painting can be identified as being far more complex than a mere still painting. In fact, it would be a valid presumption, to identify that the painting is in fact, centered around three things, as opposed to the apparent dozen.

It is the identification of this third integral character, that being the reflection of the fruit by the light to the left of the viewer, which provides the key to the understanding of Manet's intentions. The very inclusion of this figure by the artist demands nothing less from the viewer than a full analysis of the significance of the painting as a whole. For example, the very fact that the third figure can rightfully claim its own identity is not at first obviously apparent. It is not until the viewer is stood in front of the painting for any length of qualitative time that the inconsistency between the physical positioning of the actual one figure is formed, and its shadow, becomes apparent in back of the pear, for the geographical positioning of the two figures is so contradictory that there is no rational argument which could be upheld to associate the two figures so that they maybe considered as one but as many.

After such a prime example of compositional artistry, one can again be detracted from the very essence of Manet's intentions in reference to his subject matter, by concentrating merely on his application of pain rather than his theory. Manet has clearly meant the viewer to use this identification of identify three main characters as an initiation for the viewers continued analysis of the painting rather than the acceptance of it as mere visual entertainment. Indeed Manet intendTs that within this scene the viewer should adopt himself, irrespective of his or her actual perspective of color., into that of a masculine role when undertaking an evaluation of this work.

With such an assumption on the artist part concerning the level of the viewers ability to see art would at first appear to determine that Manet painted this piece specifically for pleasure and to test his intelligence, his exhibition of talent in terms of the sensitivity with which he paints the contrast and tones of the central grapes, allows his sociological observations to be accessed by the least discerning of art viewers. In this with the still grapes, he paint a variety of life.

Manet's formulation of this piece is expressed further by his granting to the audience of a male persona, which is expressed through the positioning of the pear image so that it reflects that of the viewers own thinking as it dominates and stands in front of the grapes. The successful formulation of this painting by Manet was real upon societies acceptance of its guilt, in terms of both the question of class, and the recognition of the physical and emotional dominance of men over women. However, the questions which Manet was attempting to raise through this painting appears increasingly boundless as one continues to study the piece in depth, to the point that Manet himself is represented within the image of one of the principle characters within the scene.

The question of the true intellectual thinking behind Manet's complex composition of this painting, in terms of social and personal relevance, must be raised, as, for such a emotive piece to have been conceived it would surely have to have been the work of a great master painter, which to this day it is considered that Manet was not, therefore one must then question the credibility of the application of modern day analysis to this piece.

However, the clarity with which one can identify the deliberate questions concerning gender which Manet raises within the painting compels one to defend the artist and to thus consider that his genius has failed, to this day, to be recognized. One possible reason or such a dismissal by society may be attributed to the negative repercussions of the viewers psychological Set. A viewers set is determined by his preconceived opinions concerning an artist or an artist work, which, in turn prevents an honest and objective overview of the artist from ever actually being achieved. Not only does the preconception surrounding the favouirability of the artist govern the extend to which he will be accepted by the viewing public as a whole, but the social and ethical fashions of the time will also have a substantial effect upon the way in which the viewer perceives the piece.

Thus, when one considers the moral climate of Nineteenth century Europe (albeit, hypocritical to modern sensibilities), one can identify that the controversial subject matter that Manet has centered this piece around, and his questioning of the sexual degradation that women were subject to as a result of male dominated fianc, would have been controversial to the point were a contemporary audience would have automatically dismissed it, choosing to believe that the artists lacked talent, rather than recognizing his forethought.

However, it would appear that Manet had a heightened awareness of his viewers psychology and was therefore able to ensure that he devised a composition which would touch at the sensibilities of all of its viewers. For, although Manet may have been ignorant of the viewers set ,in the terms that an artist today would refer to clinical studies, Manet has clearly exhibited a high level of awareness concerning the positive aspects of such a sensibility, that being the audiences power to empathize.

Since the first Greek tragedies, artists have been aware of the ability of the viewing audience to associate him or her self with the plight of the characters displayed before them, Manet too relied upon the viewers natural reaction to cast him or her self in the role of the barmaid, for his painting to be understood, even the very title of the piece, albeit a simple description, instantly transports the viewer into the scene, and initiates the pre–conceived images that each viewer has concerning the setting for the piece.

Every aspect of Manet's painting is identifiably engineered in such a way as to provoke and confront the individual who stands before it. Not only is this painting an example of a highly structured collation of social observations but is a piece which was intended to identify the plight of those members of society who had fallen prey to the hypocritical social injustices of contemporary society, Manet's painting, although embracing the social questions which were particularly relevant to Nineteenth century society, is , in fact so successful in its provocation of audience response, that one could fairly identify that the self analytical essence of the piece, has is in no way been diluted by the passage of time, and still remains relevant some hundred years later.

The very compositional structure of the painting, that being that it is based upon the continual reflection of different colors, and the momentary images of life that they reflect, can be translated as being a metaphor, specifically designed by Manet, by which he demanded that the somewhat cynical viewing public should invert their critical snobbery and thus in turn start to question their own treatment of others.