



## A Shadow of The Divine Perfection

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In fourteenth century Southern Europe during what has become known as the Renaissance, a significant change occurred in the technical approaches to art-making (to more classical methods and functions). This change also greatly influenced the way in which high culture viewed the body. For hundreds of years, predominantly Christian Europe had avoided representations of the body that might offend the sensitivity to what was viewed as God's most beautiful, yet corruptible, creation: the human body. Renaissance art returned to the principles of classical Greek beauty and harmony only to bring with it a contentious relationship with the religious dogmas and mores of Christianity.

Michelangelo, the great Florentine artist and sculptor, is often quoted as saying "the true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection." In his work, we see generous amounts of body and skin, much of which was intended for display in sacred locations and to represent culturally valued stories and ideas. In his day, he was referred to as Il Divino, or the divine one, because of his ability to create a sense of awe and wonder through paint and stone. He

and his contemporaries struggled with finding a balance between representations of the body that were uplifting and those that would be seen as lewd or undignified.

Representations of the body in art generally reflect the prevailing attitudes surrounding it. Though high and popular art (even counter-culture art) differ greatly in their intents and approaches, we can use them as a measuring stick to understand something about the cultures and times from which they come. I'm no art historian, but it is not difficult to see the trendline of art from the Renaissance to today and see an increasing hatred for the sacred, a desire to celebrate the ugly, and a stimulation of animal appetite. This is as true in dance and theatre as it is in photography and sculpture. Shock value and originality are valued above beauty and meaning.

Years ago, I came across a quote that has come to carry a great deal of meaning for me and my work.

But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence . . . truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

Ludwig Feuerbach, quoted in Guy DeBord "Society of the Spectacle" Preface, Chapter 1.

Though originally written in 1843 as a critique of Christianity, this passage accurately describes the current state of popular and high art. This is nowhere better displayed than in online experiences and activities that draw so many in and away from reality and authentic experience. Today, many would rather text someone than have a face-to-face discussion. There is a veritable online existence that draws many individuals to leave the real world behind and escape into the realm of fantasy and living someone else's life. For centuries, literature, theatre, and film fulfilled this role but only to a limited and controlled degree. This idea also helps us understand the nature of pornography. Pornographic representations stimulate the appetite and carry the appearance of eternal principles of love and beauty. However, they are merely a shallow representation or counterfeit of reality meant to lead precious souls into dark and destructive choices.



I have often heard that the difference between art and pornography lies in the intent of the work. At a fundamental level there is little difference between a nude statue by Rodin and the contents of a dirty magazine. Both are intended to provide the viewer with visual stimuli, influence the senses, and cause reflection. The distinction between the two can be difficult to navigate. How can the intent of the work be adequately understood? Is nudity in any situation acceptable? Judging from the amount of news I see surrounding the banning of certain images or statues in public schools and museums, this controversy is far from decided.

This is also the reason that dance has forever been a problematic art form. As an art form based solely on the movement of the body, dance has had a myriad of conflicts with religious beliefs and practices. Dance, specifically and generally, has been considered sinful at various times and places in history. Even today in our own culture there are some who see dance as extremely problematic. Yes, there are some styles and examples of dance that have crossed the line into the inappropriate. But any effort to generalize will diminish the beauty and power that might

come from it. We don't ban all photography simply because someone made questionable choices.

The issue is that of projection. We project our own understanding, knowledge, and experience onto the things we see in the process of meaning-making. In the poetic preface to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the author wrote, "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." For me, an understanding of my eternal identity, a knowledge of being made in the very image and likeness of God, and experience with profound learning, enlightenment, and personal revelation in dance settings helps me to comprehend and appreciate dance. Someone with a different understanding, knowledge, and experience will have a dissimilar comprehension of the same occurrence. This extends far beyond dance. It has to do with anytime we see anything, particularly the body.

In the last 20 years or so, our understanding of the inner workings of the brain has seemingly more than doubled. The scientific and psychological communities are making great progress in understanding how we sense the world around us and turn that data into perception and meaning. Research into visual perception has helped me better understand how our minds view the body and how I can, as a dance artist and teacher, negotiate the rocky landscape of perception and meaning.

In 2005, a groundbreaking study was published by a group of Italian researchers through the American Psychological Association on the discovery of what has become known as the premotor cortex and mirror neurons of the brain. What they discovered was a fascinating way in which the brain views the body and movement. A mirror neuron is one that is fired whether an individual performs an action or sees it done by someone else. To oversimplify, in the process of viewing a body in action (or goal-related motor acts), our brain creates a sort of sympathetic understanding, or kinetic learning, of what we see, as if we had done the action ourselves. This process is easy to understand when you consider how seeing someone laughing lightens our mood. It's what makes us flinch when we see someone get hit in the face with a ball. It's what makes the physical comedy of Rowan Atkinson so relatable. These visual sensory inputs convey meaning about what we are seeing and can produce a very physical reaction as a viewer. Our brains follow movement in co-operative way

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and store this manifestation and its meaning for us to recall and use later if needed.

When we see a body, we are quite literally joining with it in a cognitive or spiritual sense. This joining is a natural reaction that permits us to sense and protect ourselves from threats, and learn from the experience of others. By the same token, it is this unification that causes so much trouble for art and dance. If someone is unprepared for what they see or those viewings run contrary to experience or understanding, then confusion and distaste will occur. However, if someone is interested about and prepared for the experience, the visual and performing arts have a unique way of connecting us to our spiritual selves and bringing indescribable meaning and transcendence.

When I viewed Michelangelo's Pieta in St. Peters Basilica for the first time last summer, this process became very real to me. As I looked at the gentle folds of Mary's dress contrasted with the twisted and tortured body laid across

it, my mind and body were brought into a unique harmony of understanding and physical sensation. My spirit understood both the pain of Christ's Atonement and death as well as the serene and consoling expression found in Mary's face. My body provided a physical and sensational component to my understanding

that felt tangible and unmistakable. Together, my whole soul was taught something profound that day. I was not particularly conscious of the scantily clothed Christ laying across Mary's lap. Could it have been the same if Christ were wearing more clothes? Perhaps. But that was not my choice to make. All I could choose was to engage with it or walk on. Engaging with it permitted my life to be profoundly influenced by that experience.

I'm not claiming to have any answers to the question about the appropriateness of the body in art. I'm not a scientist that understands how the brain works, nor a philosopher who asserts an understanding of taste, judgement, and aesthetics. Nevertheless, I am a living, breathing human that understands the world around me according to my experience within it. I am also a child of the most creative and powerful being in the universe, who allows me to feel of his presence and to catch brief glimpses into the eternal realm of truth. One of the truths I've come

to know is that having a body is part of the divine design. Therefore, gaining more knowledge and experience in ways to use that body properly, creating beautiful and meaningful things, and helping others in their mortal journey are central to my existence. It is my great privilege and honor to help students in my classes discover that they are more than a mere shadow of the divine perfection, they are the embodiment of it. ❖

#### References

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