



{ The work that waits

Story Steve Lopes

IT IS A SHORT-SIGHTED assumption that we always have to be hit between the eyes or have an immediate response for a painting to have merit or to be important.

Is there any point in trying to analyse or work out what makes a good work of art? The most engaging works always have a special magic to them that remains unexplained. Good works operate on a number of levels—they tend to reveal themselves over time, they are content rich and have a painterly fullness.

With contemporary art there's sometimes a suspicion that if something looks good, then maybe it's not so good. There is often a moral superiority about work that is not good to look at—is it beautiful, ugly beautiful, or beautiful in its ugliness?

Perceptual painter, Alex Katz, once told his students at Yale that as contemporary artists they could count on the viewer's attention for around seven seconds. What artists and even viewers can be sure of,

though (and it takes a while to learn), is that we should be striving for an authenticity and a roundness of emotional and visual experience when creating and appreciating good work.

A case in point on the 'magic' of a good painting is the humble work of Italian artist Giorgio Morandi. When one passes a Morandi painting in a major gallery it doesn't seem to fit the dialogue created by surrounding works. Other works can seem to call out more instantly. His small still lifes don't exactly cry out to be seen; they just give a gentle nudge of recognition or a quiet appeal to the visual senses. Contemporary abstract painter Sean Scully wrote about the experience of viewing a Morandi still life at the Tate Gallery when he was a student.

"One day I'd see it and I'd think, this is great," he wrote. "It's really weird. And then another day I'd see it and I'd think to myself that he was an idiot. And so was the Tate for putting it up all the time. And then another day I'd see it, and I just didn't know

what to think. It wasn't exciting, yet it was exciting, exciting in its resistance..."

Morandi forged his own space, one that didn't previously exist. Morandi's humbly stated art of simplified figuration and subject matter during an era that was characterised by a wholesale march towards abstraction was in itself an act of defiance. Scully went on to say, "His 'opposite' subject was painted apparently meekly in colours that were pale and seemingly tired, as if defeated at the outset of their contest with international abstraction. Like a boxer who fights each round without getting up from his seat in the corner of the ring. As if, in a sense, to make a demonstration of rising for the contest would be far too conformist and compromising.

Morandi paints in pale, nearly dead colour, which itself cannot or will not rise to full spectrum. It will not reach across space to communicate visual power, but makes you reach across space towards it... the painting does the waiting. It invites you to



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walk past it and ignore it. It is only after you have seen many other paintings that you return to it, with your doubt. Morandi embodies the patience and the diffidence of history.”

“Quieter works sustain us as they don't editorialise; they look at the world without emphasising”

Morandi was born in Bologna in 1890 and lived most of his life there. He lived all his life with his three sisters and from the age of 20 divided his time between a small flat in the city at Via Fordazza and a family country house in Grizzana until his death in 1964. Even though his work had a dialogue with the spirit of the modern 20th century, Morandi stubbornly refused to deal in a way with the newly discovered views of abstraction or participate in the way that it was heading during his time. He approached his painting without bold statements of intention, dealing with the potentialities of the future and what painting could be. His intent was never loaded or big stated like the influential New York school of American abstraction. Most other minimal works had power, seemed bigger.

His apologetically hung paintings always seem to be shadowed by the paintings surrounding them—but the important thing is they never lose their vitality. Morandi's work calls you in, deceptively simple one might say. Just as you think you've had enough, you have to have one more look.

This visual experience is reflective of what good painting can be. It relies upon more than just a mere idea or concept. It needs courage and by that I mean a certain type of spirit, the courage to be bigger, much more generous than the initial idea. Morandi's paintings look that good because they are that good. In a Morandi the subject and the feeling become an embodiment. It's not about decoration but more to do with the roundness of the visual experience, the compressed embodiment of content.

Great artwork doesn't always have to have shock value or make a big noise. It's important that with the amount of spectacle we are exposed to in the art world that slower, more subtle works also have the chance to work their magic on audiences. Not everything has to be reinvented. Sometimes a subject that allows the human being and the human hand to enter and slowly transform it is enough. The works that wait and grow or emanate out are capable of absorbing every nuance and enable us to grow with them as human beings and also as artists.

These quieter works sustain us as they don't editorialise; they look at the world without emphasising. If one regularly goes looking to be shocked, to be impacted upon by art, rather than to be engaged at some human level then isn't it like looking at TV ads all day? In a rapidly changing world, art no longer offers the sanctuary that it once did. It's up to the viewer to engage and fight more for their own human experience where once it wasn't as necessary. A good work of art needn't 'hit you between the eyes' to ultimately have an impact on you. Some works are more subtle in their quest for appreciation. No viewer should be a passive target. ■

Steve Lopes is a painter and printmaker represented in the National Gallery of Australia.

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- 01 *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1956, oil on canvas, 40.5 x 35cm
- 02 *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1959, oil on canvas, 18 x 30cm