Painting Beyond Language: The Art and Aesthetics of Vivian van der Merwe

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Abstract
The paintings of Vivian van der Merwe do not fit comfortably into the prevailing discourse of the contemporary art scene, nor into that of the late modernist and postmodernist eras in which he developed his style. In order to fully appreciate the work of this extraordinarily fine artist and the major contribution that he has been making, it is necessary to analyse the reasons for the schism that separates his work from predominant current opinion in the art world. This is done by going back to the rise of a scientific paradigm in the humanities during the nineteenth century, as initiated by the German philosopher Franz Brentano. The history of the concept of the avant-garde in art and politics is also pertinent here and is briefly surveyed. Furthermore, Van der Merwe's affinity with the Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions in aesthetic thought are investigated to gain insight into his artistic process and the appropriate way of approaching his work.

Keywords: scientific paradigm, Platonic form, non-verbal thought

Introduction
Zoë Storrar Molteno states that 'Many art theorists have commented that it is near-impossible to write about Van der Merwe's work' (2013). This is because his work does not fit into the prevailing discourse on art. The following article is an attempt to address this problem by investigating the background to the schism that emerged between the artistic tradition followed by Van der Merwe and the one that has come to dominate

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contemporary discourse in the arts. Arguably, the way we look at art as well as the way that we produce it has been fundamentally determined by the latter tradition, which makes it difficult to 'see' a painting by Van der Merwe.

Art, Science, and Verbal Thought

Joe Winston introduces a 2008 article with the following anecdote to illustrate an important point.

> In a recent meeting of the academic staff in the university department where I work, we were asked to state our current research interests. Responses progressed around the circle and everyone listened quietly and respectfully until I stated that my interest was beauty, to which there was general laughter – complicit, not derisory, as if everyone laughing presumed it was a joke (Winston 2008:71).

This attitude towards beauty has a long and complex history, and since it is a key issue in this article, a brief overview of this background is needed. Following Walter Benjamin, Bill Brown (2001: 12) states that 'modernism's resistance to modernity is its effort to deny the distinction between subjects and objects, people and things.' He further quotes Bruno Latour as insisting that 'things do not exist without being full of people' and that the consideration of humans necessarily involves the consideration of things (Brown 2001:12). This leads him to the following discussion of Claes Oldenburg's work with respect to the process of anthropomorphism in the creation of art objects:

> Donald Judd called Oldenburg's objects 'grossly anthropomorphized'. Indeed, they are invariably and teasingly mammary, ocular, phallic, facial, scrotal. But the very 'blatancy', as Judd went on to argue, seems to ridicule anthropomorphism as such. In the same way, the grossly mimetic character of the work draws attention to the discrepancy between objectivity and materiality, perception and sensation, objective presence (a fan, a Fudgsicle, a sink) and material presence (the canvas, the plaster of Paris, the vinyl), as though to theatricalize the point that all objects (not things) are, first off, iconic signs. (A sink looks like a sink.) (Brown 2001:14.)

This approach to the issue of anthropomorphism uses thought of a distinctly verbal orientation, that is, thinking in terms of verbal concepts. Whereas it is very well suited to the analysis of the work of Oldenburg, who operated within that approach to art, it is decidedly unsuitable to the analysis of Van der Merwe's work. Van der Merwe stresses the fact that he strives to move beyond verbal concepts to a domain of purely visual thought, a domain where semantic connotations no longer prevail and are replaced by visual relationships that operate in a fundamentally different way (personal communication 19/11/2020). The fundamental difference between Oldenburg's approach and Van der Merwe's is that of verbal thought and verbally oriented perception as opposed to the nonverbal thought and perception that he talks about. The predominance of a verbal orientation in the arts, as well as in art criticism and tertiary art education, needs some clarification.

In 1866, Franz Brentano (1838 - 1917) proposed a new type of philosophy based on experience rather than *a priori* principles – one that uses the method of natural science, but whose domain is mental rather than natural phenomena: a philosophical psychology that is a full-blooded science of the mind, empirical and descriptive. More broadly, while the *Naturwissenschaften* focused on physical phenomena, the *Geisteswissenschaften* were to be sciences that dealt primarily with the mind, with consciousness, with its acts, contents, objects and its expressions. Thus, he advanced a new paradigm that would make it possible to conduct scientific research in the humanities, and to treat the *Geisteswissenschaften* as full-blooded sciences in their own right. His influence was very widespread, covering a whole range of disciplines. Much of this was due to his students, which included such luminaries as Roman Jacobsen, Edmund Husserl, and Sigmund Freud. Husserl's works in various ways influenced the likes of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, among many others (Ierna 2014).

Freud, along with Jacques Lacan (1901 - 1981), who further developed and adapted his ideas, had an enormous influence on the arts as well as on art education and criticism. Both of them stressed the central role of language as a means of gaining access to the unconscious, and this has had a fundamental impact on the way that artists, art theorists and critics, as well as art educators, approach art. Also pertinent to this point is the fact that both Freud and Lacan, because of their belief that a subject's words were the key to unveiling the unconscious, focused predominantly on literature in their

analysis of art. Furthermore, it is important to note that Lacan's analyses of literature were not exercises in literary criticism as such, but ways of demonstrating how the unconscious can be read (Fróis 2010). In other words, a more or less purely scientific approach to art, with a distinctly verbal or linguistic bias, is fostered by this tradition, regardless of how unscientific (in the strict sense) its methods might sometimes be in the hands of some critics, theorists or educators.

At the same time that Brentano propounded his scientific approach to the humanities, or somewhat earlier, in fact, an analogous movement emerged in the arts. Linda Nochlin has shown that the nineteenth century movement in fine art and literature known as Realism was an attempt to embrace the rising scientific paradigm wholeheartedly. A deliberate programme to strip art of its Baroque afflatus and thereby present an image of the world that is scientific in its sheer lack of imposed cultural values, worldviews, beliefs, and prejudices was at the heart of this movement. This endeavour was exemplified by the paintings of Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier and the novels of Gustave Flaubert, Emile Zola, and the Concourt brothers. In fine art, it reached its zenith in the Impressionist paintings of Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and Claude Monet (Nochlin 1971). Nochlin has also shown that Realism was trans-valuated and thereby perpetuated throughout the Modernist period – re-emerging in various ways in the work of leading artists and movements such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism, Pop art, and, most prominently, in the paintings of Fernand Léger (1971:238 - 247).

As stated above, Van der Merwe stands largely outside this scientifically oriented tradition, particularly as manifested in the human sciences, and the analysis of his art requires a fundamentally different approach. In stark contrast to the 'grossly anthropomorphized' character of Oldenburg's 'still-life' objects – 'oversized and understuffed everyday objects: the mixer, the cheeseburger, the light bulb, the ice cream cone, the telephone, the wall switch' (Brown 2001:14) – those of Van der Merwe reveal a process of anthropomorphism that is subtlety itself. Aesthetic thought, the human aesthetic sense, is projected onto inanimate objects of a deliberately anonymous nature to express or reveal a beauty, a sense of order and proportion that appears to give the viewer a glimpse into Plato's transcendental world of ideal forms.

Neo-Platonism and the Byzantine Connection

Ingrid Pimsner, in discussing the still-lives of Vivian van der Merwe, Giorgio Morandi, and Euan Uglow, cites Norman Bryson, who, in this respect, characterises the genre as 'timeless, universal, transcending local conditions, inhabiting a higher Platonic realm somewhere above and beyond the struggles of history' (Bryson 2017:82, cited in Pimsner 2013:25). She further cites Deon Viljoen as stating that Van der Merwe 'reworks, reconstitutes, recreates and composes simple objects like a bottle, a jug, a dish on a table until an "other" reality appears' (Pimsner 2013:29 - 30). Also, referring to a March 2021 interview, Van der Merwe gave Jane Commin, in which he states that his art is influenced by, and serves as a tribute to, Byzantine art, she makes the point that 'the goal of Byzantine art was to service theology: to portray the idea behind the real. As such, it wrestled with the fundamental question of how a representation can truthfully show the thing it purports to describe'. She further proposes that 'the concerns of Byzantine art can help frame the source of the enigmatic, spiritual qualities that seem to permeate [the sensibilities of the paintings of certain still-life painters]' (Pimsner 2013: 30).

Both the early Christian Church and the Byzantine Church were fundamentally influenced by Platonic thought (Michelis 1952; Otten 2016). 'Once it entered the Middle Ages, Neoplatonic influence was not only disseminated in terms of intellectual content but there was no way that medieval authors could avoid being shaped by it, whatever their intellectual outlook, as from early on Neoplatonism was an integral part of the overall medieval *outillage mental*' (Otten 2016:251)[1]. And, just as Neo-Platonic

[1] The following statement by Willemien Otten is of considerable interest here, even if it applies mainly to Western Europe rather than Byzantium: 'While Freud considered religion a sublimating but ultimately undermining force in, and thereby adding to the problems of, Western civilisation, it seems as if Platonism, in a way that seems the inverse of Freud's claim, allowed medieval Christian intellectuals to regain control of civilization after the fall of the Roman Empire and the subsequent collapse of Christian culture. By undergirding its thought with a firm but flexible metaphysical support structure ultimately derived – if that is the appropriate term for a process altogether more spontaneous than causal – from Neoplatonism, medieval culture followed on the heels of its Christian-Roman heritage' (Otten 2016:251).

philosophy played a fundamental role in shaping Christian theology and philosophy, so Neo-Platonic aesthetics – particularly that of Plotinus – was fundamental in the shaping of early Christian and Byzantine art (Michelis 1952:21). Importantly, Plotinus brought a radical innovation to Platonic thought in that metaphysics replaces dialectics, rendering Neo-Platonism highly amenable to Christian thought, with its spiritual focus (Michelis 1952:27). According to Plotinus, it is through aesthetic contemplation that the soul attains the spiritual realm, so that the artistic and mystical domains become inseparable (Michelis 1952:28-29). 'No philosophy has given such prominence, as has that of Plotinus, to the aesthetic factor' (Michelis 1952:29).

The Romantics of the early nineteenth century rediscovered the spiritual aesthetic of mediaeval art and incorporated this strongly into their aesthetic of the Sublime – of a personal and artistic striving to attain the spiritual through communion with the wild, awe-inspiring aspects of nature. This pursuit was based on the philosophical concept of the Sublime as formulated by Edmund Burke and elaborated by Immanuel Kant. The ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau played a major part in this, both directly as well as indirectly through his influence on Kant (Michelis 1952:23-24; Hampson 1968:196; Cassirer 1970 [1945]:1 - 58).

This Romantic quest for contact or communion with the spiritual domain was perpetuated by major artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – particularly through landscape painting, which led directly to the development of pure abstraction or non-figurative art. This development culminated in the large abstract works of Mark Rothko, Clifford Still, Barnett Newman and others in the latter half of the twentieth century (Rosenblum 1975:10 - 40, 173 - 218). When Van der Merwe was studying for his fine art degree at Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town in the latter half of the 1970s, this process was in its final stage and Rothko, in particular, was a major influence on his earliest abstract works. The painting, *Still-Life Composition* of 2015 (figure 1) shows how this tradition has crystalised in his work.

In terms of Realism, this painting has only tenuous references to a still life. However, one could say that it depicts a deeper reality that can only be perceived through aesthetic contemplation. Even if conceived in more or less secular terms, this reality is analogous to that of a Neo-Platonic otherworld of divine order and harmony, which is imposed, through the

artist's compositional skills, onto the random objects and relationships of our everyday secular world.

Figure 1
Vivian van der Merwe, *[P136] 01/15 Still-Life Composition*, 2015, Oil, collage and wax encaustic on board, 70 x 60 cm, present whereabouts unknown (image courtesy of the artist)

Whatever the artist's exact intentions or worldview, it can be said to form part of this long-standing tradition. Like Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, and several other modernist abstract painters, Van der Merwe uses the careful manipulation of geometric shapes and planes in the painting, to express something that goes beyond the everyday. In the case of all three the above artists, that entailed the spiritual domain (Hughes 1991:202; Rosenblum 1975:10 - 40, 173 - 218). It should be clear from this that analysing Van der Merwe's work purely in the scientifically orientated paradigm established by Brentano and the Realists respectively is problematic.

Art and Politics

I mentioned that the deeper reality depicted in this painting was conceived in 'more or less secular terms'. This needs further qualification. While Van der Merwe is strongly rooted in the modernist tradition of expressing the spiritual in abstract painting, as established by Kandinsky, Mondrian and others, he couches this aesthetic enterprise in more secular (or less overtly spiritual) terms. He sees the sense of beauty as a universal human aesthetic instinct – one that has moral and therefore also socio-political implications, one that helps to create a more humane society (personal communication, 19/11/2020). While this might seem to be a far cry from the spiritual domain referred to above, there is a strong connection, which he elaborates as follows. The aesthetic sense, according to him, reaches beyond language and meaning to express a reality that, in Kantian terms, is unknowable and, in that sense, metaphysical – even though he would not necessarily couch this in explicitly spiritual terms. While he admires their pursuit of a metaphysical ideal through abstract form, he would not subscribe to the Theosophically based spiritual beliefs of Mondrian, Malevich, and Kandinsky (personal communication 19/01/2021).

This approach goes directly against the grain of postmodernist thought, as typically expressed in the following excerpt from an article that Van der Merwe specifically referred to in an interview. Christopher Norris, in discussing a chapter of Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*, states that Derrida makes the point that,

> the discourse on art is always and inevitably bound up with the interests that belong 'outside' the privileged domain of aesthetic

> understanding. Moreover, that discourse has functioned at least since Kant as a pretext for imagining that art gives access to just such a realm of timeless, apolitical, disinterested meanings and values. It would then be the purpose – or at least one purpose – of a deconstructive reading to point up the covert interests and motives in play when critics and art historians lay claim to the authentic 'truth' in painting (Norris 1988:19).

Van der Merwe comments that nowhere, in the intensive discussion of the relevant work of art, Van Gogh's *Old Shoes with Laces* (1886), and what it means, is there any attempt to analyse or discuss the actual visual elements – the brushwork, colour, composition etc. (personal communication 19/01/2021). What emerges from this is that post-modernist thought and particularly post-modernist approaches to art such as this actively undermine the viewer's ability to appreciate a work of art that belongs to the tradition that Van der Merwe follows – regardless of the validity of the deconstructive arguments. By claiming or ostensibly demonstrating that the 'realm of timeless, apolitical, disinterested meanings and values' does not exist and that the belief in or propagation thereof is somehow morally reprehensible (by disguising underlying agendas, political and otherwise), such thought and attitudes obstruct and even destroy the process of aesthetic contemplation that is necessary for the appreciation of such art works.

It would be easy to deconstruct Van der Merwe's work along these lines by arguing that, as a white South African studying fine art at the University of Cape Town in the late seventies, and establishing himself as an artist in the ensuing decades, he was creating just such an illusion of a privileged domain of aesthetic understanding in order to turn a blind eye to the harsh political reality that was playing out around him. And, for those readers who are steeped in the scientific approach to the humanities founded by Brentano and his many pupils, as well as the verbal/linguistic approach to the analysis of art spear-headed by Freud and Lacan, such a deconstructive reading might seem to accurately define his work and lead to a true understanding of it – of what is really 'behind' it. But this would be a contrived illusion. While still at school and living in Dundee, he used to hitch hike to Rorke's Drift on weekends, where he was mentored by Vuminkosi Zulu. A strong bond of friendship developed between them and he was profoundly influenced by Zulu's art as well as by his insights into the

political injustices of the time. The art that Van der Merwe produced at this time shows these influences clearly, both in its style and in its highly charged political content – for which he was almost expelled from school. And, while studying at the Michaelis School of Fine Art UCT, he had ample opportunity to acquaint himself with the theory and practice of political art. Michaelis, at this time, was under the directorship of Professor Neville Dubow, whose central concern was to establish Michaelis as a leading platform for the development of a South African political art that could effectively counter the apartheid culture and politics of the South African government. The role of art in politics is a subject that Van der Merwe spent much time contemplating and discussing. As a fellow student I can remember countless hours debating these issues with him. More than anything else, this was the primary subject of artistic debate for us and our class mates. What prevented Van der Merwe from pursuing a course in political art was not a lack of political commitment or persuasion but rather a profound doubt in the ability of fine art to have real effect in the political arena in the modern age. Robert Hughes gives a lucidly argued appraisal of the role of political art which, since it supports and clarifies the kind of doubts on this subject that Van der Merwe grappled with, is worth quoting at some length:

> The history of the avant-garde up to 1930 was suffused with various, ultimately futile calls to revolutionary action and moral renewal, all formed by the hope that painting and sculpture might still be the primary, dominant forms of social speech they had been before the rise of mass media. In uttering them, some of the most brilliant modernist talents condemned themselves to a permanent self-deception about the limits of their own art. . . . One is used to reading how the Dadaists in Zurich during World War I struck alarm into the hearts of the Swiss burghers with their antic cabaret turns in the Café Voltaire ... but their real impact on Zurich was negligible .... Even when Dada was politicized after 1918, its actual effect on German politics was nil (Hughes 1991:374).

In discussing Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, he elaborates further on this subject:

> Guernica was the last great history-painting. It was also the last modern painting of major importance that took its subject from

> politics with the intention of changing the way large numbers of people thought and felt about power. Since 1937, there have been a few admirable works of art that contained political references .... But the idea that an artist, by making painting or sculpture, could insert images into the stream of public speech and thus change political discourse has gone, probably for good …. Mass media took away the political speech of art .... It seems obvious, looking back, that the artists of Weimar Germany and Leninist Russia lived in a much more attenuated landscape of media than ours, and their reward was that they could still believe, in good faith, and without bombast, that art could morally influence the world. Today, the idea has largely been dismissed, as it must be in a mass media society where art's principle social role is to be investment capital, or, in the simplest way, bullion. We still have political art, but we have no *effective* political art .... It is hard to think of any work of art of which one could say, *This* saved the life of one Jew, one Vietnamese, one Cambodian. Specific books, perhaps; but as far as one can tell, no paintings or sculptures (Hughes 1991:110 - 111).

In the context of the reigning paradigm of politically committed art at Michaelis during the late seventies and early eighties and the actual political turmoil of the country during those years this was very far from obvious, and Van der Merwe's views on this subject were treated with tacit but profound disapproval (personal communication 28/01/2021). Nevertheless, he had the courage of his convictions not to be swayed by prevailing current opinion or by the considerable, if insidious, pressure that was put on students to conform to this paradigm. His misgivings about this paradigm were aired in my presence on multiple occasions (and confirmed in a recent personal communication 19/12/2020).

This approach to fine art, as taught at Michaelis during those years, which analysed art in terms of its social and political functions, and in terms of meaning as generated by economic, social and political forces, was, to some degree, the logical outcome of Brentano's programme of putting the humanities on a solidly scientific, empirical foundation, as well the nineteenth century Realists' concomitant striving to practice their art in purely scientific terms, stripped of all cultural accretions. But it was also, to some degree, the legacy of the concept of the avant-garde. Henri de Saint-

Simon (1760 - 1825) who coined the term, or, rather, was the first to transpose this military term to the domains of art and social or political radicalism, saw the artist as being in the vanguard of a new society. Importantly, this was a key part of his radical religious doctrine of a New Christianity, as expounded in his book *Le Nouveau Christianisme*, published in Paris in 1825. In highly Romantic fashion, he envisaged this New Christianity as being based on a feeling of universal harmony, humanitarianism, sympathy, and love, but he rejected the clergy of existing Christianity as being wholly unsuited to promoting such feeling. He believed that artists, instead, were qualified to become the new leaders of society by moving people to such feeling *by stimulating sentiment* (Egbert 1967:341-342). As naïve as such a view might now seem, it is important to note that it was developed against the backdrop of the Neo-classical programme of creating an ideal society, a fundamental aspect of which was the didactic role of the work of art, which was believed to morally improve society by appealing to sentiment in the viewer (Honour 1967:141 - 146). Saint-Simon was following in the footsteps and extending the logic of Denis Diderot and Jacques-Louis David, both of whom were deeply concerned with the social role of the artist (Egbert 1967:342). In his *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles*, also published in 1825, Saint-Simon puts the following words into the mouth of an artist, in a dialogue with a scientist:

> It is we, artists, who will serve you as avant-garde [his own word]: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas; . . . and in that way above all we exert an electric and victorious influence. *We address ourselves to the imagination and to the sentiments* of mankind, we should therefore always exercise the liveliest and most decisive action; and if today our role appears nil or at least very secondary, what is lacking in the arts is that which is essential to their energy and to their success, namely, a common drive and a general idea (Saint-Simon 1825:341 - 342, quoted in Egbert 1967:343; emphasis added).

Equally important to note is the fact that Saint-Simon was openly acknowledged by both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as a major forerunner of Marxism (Egbert 1967:351). His conception of an avant-garde in

which artists were supreme naturally appealed to a great many Romantic artists. Notable artists, composers and writers who were, for some time, under the spell of his ideas include composers Franz Liszt and Hector Berlioz, and literary figures George Sand, Charles Sainte-Beuve, Alfred de Vigny, and Honoré de Balzac (Marx's favourite novelist) (1967:347 - 348). The followers of Saint-Simon spread his ideas with missionary zeal, aiming to attract converts, particularly, amongst artists and writers. This endeavour was not confined to France – they sent missions to many parts of Europe, as well as North Africa and the Near East, although they were refused entry to Russia (1967:349).

However, a fundamental feature of Romanticism was the cult of the individual and the concomitant stress laid on the individual's artistic sensibility, specifically that of the artistic genius (Honour 1979:16 - 17, 245 - 247). And, this inevitably came into conflict with Saint-Simon's conception of a social movement highly centralized about a controlling elite group. For this reason many artists and writers who saw themselves as avant-garde gravitated towards the ideas of Saint-Simon's chief socialist rival, Charles Fourier – a forerunner of anarchism who greatly influenced the ideas of Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), generally regarded as the father of anarchism, and the first man to call himself an anarchist. Anarchism allowed much more room for individualistic expression in the arts, and unlike the Marxists, the anarchists were much more willing to allow revolutionary politics and revolutionary art to be kept separate. Thus, the artistic avant-garde was, for a long time, attracted far more to anarchism than to Marxism (Egbert 1967:355).

The great Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who, in 1870 coedited an anarchist periodical in Switzerland called *L'Avant-garde*, was greatly interested in art. He had drawn and painted since childhood and was also a pianist who so loved both modern and classical music that he wrote in his autobiography: 'Music ... played a very great part in my development' (Egbert 1967:344, 355). His ideas, both social and artistic soon affected many artists and writers, amongst whom were the great Neo-impressionists George Seurat, Paul Signac, and Maximilien Luce, as well as the former Impressionist Camille Pissarro. Most of the Symbolists, including their leader, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, were likewise anarchists. Paul Gauguin, the leading figure in the group of painters and writers known as the Synthetists, was also sympathetic to anarchism. As the artistic influence of

these artists spread amongst other avant-garde artists, so did their related anarchist beliefs – as far afield as Mexico, where David Siqueiros, José Orozco, and Diego Riviera were sympathetic to revolutionary anarchism. Both Symbolism and Synthetism played major roles in the development of abstract tendencies in avant-garde art. Kropotkin, at the same time that these two movements were getting under way, published his *Paroles d'un révolté* (Paris 1885), in which he indicated that realism was inadequate for expressing the revolutionary idea still lacking in the art of his own day. It is therefore highly significant that many artist and writers who moved beyond Symbolism and Synthetism to greater abstraction held anarchist social views. Amongst these were the poet Guillaume Apollinaire and his close friend Pablo Picasso, who, as a young man had frequented anarchist circles in Barcelona and had taken part in the publication of an anarchist magazine (Egbert 1967:358 - 359).

The views of these anarchist artists on the social role of the artist is particularly relevant to the above discussion of Van der Merwe's position vis-à-vis art and politics. But before engaging with that it is interesting to note that Karl Marx himself was very interested in the arts. As a young man he attended lectures on modern art, art history and aesthetics, subjects to which he paid special attention. He apparently intended to write a book on aesthetics, but his great work on political economy, *Das Kapital*, took up all his time in the end and he never had the opportunity. This unfortunately gave his followers a somewhat one-sided view of his ideas, in which political economy became the predominant focus. In his early work, now known as *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, he writes that man 'creates in accordance with the laws of beauty' and that, in the future society freed of problems caused by capitalism, man will be an artist in production. This is a variation on an essentially Saint-Simonian theme (Egbert 1967:353).

As indicated above, many avant-garde artists such as Seurat and his fellow Neo-impressionists were deeply concerned with social and political issues, which they expressed through their anarchist affiliations, but they did not believe that their art needs to directly convey a political message. This was also true of a number of artists and writers associated with the *l'art pour l'art* or 'art for art's sake' movement, most notably Oscar Wilde, who published an anarchist essay in 1891 and publicly declared himself to be an anarchist. Wilde particularly admired the work of Kropotkin (Egbert 1967:345, 355). Van der Merwe's position on the relationship of art and

politics should be seen against this backdrop. His view that beauty in art has moral and therefore also social and political significance conforms to an intellectual tradition that ranges widely from Neo-Platonism and Kant to Saint-Simon, Marx, and Kropotkin. Marx's view that humans create in accordance with the laws of beauty, and Kropotkin's argument view that realism was inadequate for expressing the revolutionary idea can both be used to elucidate the abstract beauty of Van der Merwe's work. The drive to put the humanities on a soundly scientific footing, initiated by Brentano and his followers, and the concomitant drive for scientific vision in Realism, has had the effect of obscuring this vitally important aspect of the thought that originally underpinned both the social and the artistic avant-garde.

This brings us back to the opening paragraph of this article – about the importance of beauty in art education, and, more generally, about the fact that aesthetic perception no longer plays an important role in the evaluation of works of art, all of which makes the appreciation of Van der Merwe's work problematic. The situation at Michaelis and other university art departments elsewhere in western style capitalist countries in the 1970s was also fundamentally determined by the later history of the avant-garde, a fact that is highly pertinent to the present discussion of Van der Merwe's formative years. The active suppression of the artistic avant-garde in Russia initiated by Joseph Stalin, along with the suppression of the avant-garde in Germany by the Nazis, inspired an increasing number of western non-communist governments to see avant-garde art as a symbol of democracy in the free world. In most western countries, in which the concept of liberty, in most spheres, amounted to little more than a doctrine of self-expression, avant-garde art was sought out and embraced as part of official culture, so that the historic opposition and conflict between the avant-garde and the establishment, in terms of both the 'bourgeoisie' as well as the academies, rapidly disappeared – the very opposition that more or less defined the original avant-garde (Egbert 1967:362 - 363, 365). The following comments by Douglas Cooper, published in 1964, sum up the situation:

> The official culture-mongers of the 1950's and 1960's ... are perhaps more disastrously misguided, though for totally different reasons, than their predecessors of whom they are so ashamed. Their folly has been to think that by cultivating novelty for novelty's sake they are marching with the avant-garde .... Worse still, in order to launch

> the cult of Modernismus, officialdom has made an unholy alliance with vested interests in the form of promoters, bankers, journalists, dealers, publishers and the like. Thus, novel effects and money have nowadays become the primary considerations associated with excellence (Cooper 1964:824, quoted in Egbert 1967:366 n. 76).

By the 1970s this process was complete. Robert Hughes describes it in the following words:

> It was in the 1970s that modernism became the official culture of America and Europe. Supported by tax breaks, enshrined in museums, scrutinized by growing armies of academics and graduate students, underwritten by corporations and government agencies, diffused through the education of rich, smart Americans, collected with ever-increasing avidity, it enjoyed by the end of the seventies the strongest backup that living art has ever had from its society (Hughes 1991:366).

Thus, modernism became the new academic art, backed by officialdom as well as the capitalist system. The resulting emphasis on novelty for novelty's sake, which cultivated a view of art such as Van der Merwe's as *derrière garde*, together with the scientific bias of the humanities and the rising impact of postmodernist thought, made art school and the art environment during the 1970s and 1980s distinctly unsympathetic towards the kind of art that Van der Merwe was developing. If this article has spent an inordinate amount of time filling in this background, instead of getting on with discussing the artist's work, it is because this complex history has had the effect of undermining, even destroying the kind of approach to a work of art that is needed to understand Van der Merwe's work.

Looking at the Paintings without Verbal Thought or Perception

In the following discussion of a selection of Van der Merwe's work, I will try to show that the assumption, more or less implicit in most art history and art criticism and underpinned by the above history, that a work of art can be explained largely through words, and in terms of its socio-political or cultural

context, does not apply significantly to his work. Understanding the work depends almost completely on a visual comprehension thereof that cannot be translated into words (personal communication 26/01/2021). This makes writing about the art particularly difficult. The best that can be done is to circumscribe the aesthetic process involved, pointing the reader/ viewer in the right direction but leaving it to her or him to make the actual aesthetic connections.

Study for Still-Life with Enamel Bowl, of 2006 (figure 2) reduces the genre of still life to its simplest possible form, using, moreover, a deliberately anonymous everyday object with no distinctive features. However, this is not a Dadaist type of statement, in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp's found objects. The treatment of the object and its extremely austere setting – a white bowl on a white canvas cloth against a white wall – has much more in common with the abstract works of Piet Mondrian than with the objects of Duchamp. Duchamp belongs in the tradition that reduces visual art to words and verbal ideas. He is the grandfather of conceptual art, which dominated the scene in the seventies, when Van der Merwe was an undergraduate student, and he was revered and held up as the supreme example of a great modern artist by the professor and most of the staff of Michaelis (personal communication 26/01/2021). However, unlike Duchamp, and like Mondrian, Van der Merwe here communicates through a purely visual mode of thought – it is the visual relationships between the elements that create the aesthetic effect, without reference to verbal thought. Apart from stressing the purely visual nature of the thought involved in creating his paintings, Van der Merwe also talks at length about the analogy between painting and music (personal communication 26/01/2021) and that analogy applies here to a profound extent. With a painter's equivalent of perfect pitch Van der Merwe balances the tonal accent of the black rim of the bowl, supported by a secondary accent of black at the base of the bowl, against the large fields of whites and pale greys, with the intermediate greys of the shadows forming a bridge between these tonal opposites. When put into words that seems very simple, but it is the exact amount of the accent tone that is needed to achieve a compositional balance against the fields of opposite tones that is of critical importance here. To elaborate on the analogy with music: a composer carefully prepares the listener for a climactic note or phrase with subsidiary material that supports it through contrast of pitch, harmony, dynamics or texture. He or she must achieve a relationship of balance between these elements.

Figure 2
Vivian van der Merwe, *[P98] 12/06 Study for Still-Life with Enamel Bowl*, 2006, Oil on board
27 x 23,5 cm, present whereabouts unknown (image courtesy of the artist)

Following the comparison of art and music, a performing musician can only reveal the beauty or power of such a piece by achieving a precise balance between that climactic phrase and the supporting music – in terms of phrasing, dynamics and so on. In other words, in terms of the exact relationships between all the notes. When a musician does not give sufficient thought and attention to these relationships, or simply does not grasp the non-verbal logic that binds them together, the result is unsatisfactory. The beauty or power of the work fails to come through. In the same way, if Van der Merwe had made the lip of the bowl slightly thicker, or had added more black elsewhere in the composition, the effect would have been unbalanced, and the painting would have failed to express the beauty that it does in its present state. This beauty that is expressed through this austere, mundane subject has little or nothing to do with the subject itself, as Van der Merwe himself maintains (personal communication 2021). It comes from somewhere else, from the same domain as its musical counterpart, which is expressed in terms of purely abstract patterns of sound.

By the same token, the warm greys, tinged with Naples Yellow, that make up large areas of the cloth are perfectly balanced against the cool greys of the shading on the bowl, supported by similar cool greys on the white wall as well as on the shaded vertical section of the cloth in the foreground. Through a colour effect known as simultaneous contrast, the warm greys (or neutrals derived from Naples Yellow) that surround the bowl automatically generate, in the human mind, the complimentary colour in the greys on the bowl, so that they appear more blueish than they actually are. The balance between these warm and cool neutrals is achieved with the same sense of perfect pitch referred to before. Likewise, the oval of the bowl's rim, dramatically accentuated in black and supported by the rounded form of the bowl as well as that of its shadow, is played of masterfully, as an accent shape, against the prevailing rectilinear geometry of the rest of the composition. Its placement in the composition and its size relative to the format, that is, its aesthetic weight, is precisely calculated in aesthetic terms. In the same way, the strong spatial accent of the bowl's hemispherical shape is beautifully offset against the flat planes of the table and wall.

Lastly, the crisp linear treatment of the bowl's rim is played off against various degrees of painterliness in the treatment of the folds on the cloth and the borderline between the cloth and the wall. All these elements

combine to create an effect that has the refinement, balance and beauty of a very well-composed string quartet – once you listen past the apparent austerity of the four string instruments you discover a wealth of beauty in the sophisticated relationships between the four voices. Thus, in this humble still-life a sense of a musical balance transforms what would otherwise be a dreary mundane image into one suffused with a beauty that appears to come from some otherworldly domain – whether seen in spiritual or secular terms.

Landscape paintings are extremely rare in Van der Merwe's output. In fact, the following one is the only one that he has done since graduating from university, along with a single interior (personal communication 26/01/2021). *Bosman's Crossing, Stellenbosch* (figure 3), painted on site over a period of one year, has much in common with the above still-life. It is of a deliberately mundane nature: an unfinished skeleton of a building in raw concrete with iron reinforcing protruding from the top of unfinished concrete columns on a featureless strip of road in a relatively poor state of repair. Most people would consider the subject visually unpleasant or downright ugly, or, at the very least, unworthy of painting – unless it is with the purpose of making a statement in socio-political terms or of projecting negative emotion onto the scene in the expressionist tradition. But, just as with the plain still-life object, Van der Merwe here transforms the scene through his mastery of composition into something of transcendent beauty.

Note how skilfully the yellow accent of the drain cover in the foreground, supported by the degraded yellows of the dry grass, is balanced against the vast area of the sky, rendered in a blue that is a split complementary of the yellow in question[2].

This accent is intensified by the cross-hatched pattern of the diagonal yellow lines as well as by the diagonal disposition of the drain cover, which forms a highly effecttive contrast with the stabilising horizontals and verticals of the rectangles that make up the building, while the gentler diagonals of the perspective lines on the building and road, along with the diagonals of the shadows (gentler because they are relatively close to the horizontal or the vertical and therefore do not create much contrast) mediate between these opposite extremes.

The reinforcing iron bars that stick out of the top of the incomplete

[2] In colour terminology, split complementaries are the colours immediately adjacent, on either side, of the true complementary of a colour on the colour wheel.

vertical concrete columns create a delicate staccato rhythm and melodic line that forms a lively and beautifully fashioned counterpoint, along with the columns that support them, with the strong monolithic accents (like powerful chords) of the shaded rectangles in the building.

The softly stated broken white line on the road forms part of this contrapuntal arrangement, and further ties it in with the strong accent of the yellow drain cover through its parallel disposition.

Figure 3
Vivian van der Merwe, *[P137] 05/15 Bosman's Crossing, Stellenbosch*, 2013-2015. Oil on board
122 x 154 cm, private collection, London (image courtesy of the artist)

Here, once again, is a scene that should be 'read' as a piece of visual music, with everyday reality transformed into a world of abstract beauty that seems very far removed from the actual subject.

This way of looking at an image can be described as Platonic – in the sense that the viewer contemplates an actual scene in this world in order to see, in the imperfect forms of this world, the suggestions of an ideal world beyond. But this need not be approached in religious or spiritual terms. The domain of otherworldly beauty that is thus perceived through the imperfect forms of this world could also be, in purely secular terms, a vision of an existence that is possible, and must be strived for, in this world – a beauty that is ultimately about human relationship. This, at least, conforms to Van der Merwe's own perception of the moral, social and political implications of aesthetic beauty. And, as we have seen above, even Saint-Simon, Marx, and Kropotkin thought along these lines.

While the first two paintings discussed here, done in the last two decades, are highly realistic or representational, most of Van der Merwe's work is abstract, ranging from pure abstraction (or purely non-figurative) to abstract paintings that occupy a middle-ground between realism and abstraction. The painting below, *Composition* (figure 4), is a highly abstracted still-life, with only the subtlest of references to the subject matter depicted. But the treatment of the subject, in aesthetic terms, is essentially the same as in the previous two works. A series of overlapping rectangles makes up the main thrust of the composition. What would have been a very rigid composition comes to life through the subtle deviations from the purely vertical and horizontal in most of the rectangles. The vertical emphasis of the rectangles reinforces the portrait format of the canvas, and the sophisticated play of steep and flat diagonals against this creates a highly effective contrast with the most economical of means. A single semi-circular shape provides welcome relief from all this rectangular geometry, acting as a beautifully articulated accent shape, reinforced by its accent colour of warm, pale, slightly degraded yellow. The organic textures on the dark brown rectangle, a piece of wood that used to be the top of a workbench, likewise form an effective contrast with the rectangular geometry through their highly irregular, informal configuration. Van der Merwe subtly introduces the third dimension by building up different layers or planes with wax encaustic, a process that culminates in the bolder three-dimensional presence of the work-bench top. What he does in the previous still-life with illusionistic space and

volume (culminating in the bold three-dimensionality of the bowl) he does here with actual three-dimensional volume.

Figure 4
Vivian van der Merwe, *[P136] 04/98 Composition,* 1986-1998, Oil, alkyds, wax encaustic and assemblage on wood
187,5 x 134,5 cm, Brocades-Zaalberg Collection, Den Haag, Netherlands (image courtesy of the artist)

The exceptionally creative way in which Van der Merwe explores the borderlines between line, form, colour, space, and texture, so that the one category seems to merge into the other requires some further explanation. In *Still-Life with Metronome* (figure 5), line (i.e. contour) and texture can hardly be separated from each other.

Figure 5
Vivian van der Merwe, *[P17] Still-Life with Metronome*, 1995 – 1997, Oil and mixed media on canvas
70 x 61 cm, private collection, Johannesburg (image courtesy of the artist)

Note, for example, the highly textural outline of the rectangular piece of canvas cloth pasted onto the support – particularly on its right-hand side – and how effectively this contrasts with the crisply ruled edges that demarcate some of the vertical and horizontal borders of the off-white shapes that make up the 'L' shape. Also note how richly he explores the expressive/aesthetic potential of a range of lines that mediate between these two opposite poles. Furthermore, line and texture are also conflated with space in the 'low relief' collage work that creates shadow lines and textures on the left side of the composition. The extremely limited palette, ranging from pale tints of very degraded neutrals derived from reddish browns to those of yellowish browns (ochres) with no contrasting colour serves to highlight this play between line, texture, and space, so that the subtlest nuance of textural or linear contrast assumes aesthetic significance. Even contrast of shape is reduced to a set of four diagonals that are balanced against the prevailing grid pattern of verticals and horizontals – with the exception of the single 'C' shaped figure near the top, which, although operating as an accent shape against all the straight lines and rectangles, is so softly stated as to be barely visible. As a result of these calculated restrictions, one focuses on the complex and ambiguous relationships between line, edge, space, and texture. Because of its juxtaposition to the highly textural line/edge to its right, the relatively clean-cut vertical line coming down the centre of the composition assumes new qualities: it can be experienced or read as a smooth texture or edge, while the delicately drawn diagonal pencil line to its left assumes a spatial quality. A whole universe of aesthetic thought and perception, constructed of extraordinarily subtle and sophisticated relationships, opens up. Once again, the way these relationships express beauty is best explained by analogy to abstract music.

Pertinent to this important and highly developed feature of Van der Merwe's work is the following background, as provided by the artist himself:

> When I was a child my mother, who happened to be a trained paediatric nurse, picked up on the fact that I responded in a heightened way to certain textures and frequently showed signs of being obsessed with finding and creating orderly patterns in my immediate environment. My heightened awareness of texture manifested itself through the obsessive use of my thumb to sense and differentiate textures. This obsessive feeling and differentiating

> of texture, using my thumb as a kind of sensory organ, would even on occasion lead to my thumb bleeding from excessive use. I was also hypersensitive to the texture of food and the combination of these factors prompted my mother to seek a diagnosis to this problem. In the early 1960s relatively little was known about autism or Asperger's syndrome, so my visits to shed very little or no light on this apparent condition. I have always known that this heightened or hyper awareness of order and texture later became defining features in my work. I find that the extreme complexities and nuances manifested in visual order, texture, colour and pattern simply cannot be expressed through language or even metaphorical analogies. I have always found the limitations of language frustratingly and woefully inadequate when engaging with painting either actively or passively. I think that this is well illustrated by the fact that while the average human eye/brain can distinguish between approximately 6 and 10-million colours the entire English vocabulary contains a mere handful of words enabling us to talk through associations about colour (personal communication 26/01/2021).

In addition to this, his emphasis on the musical analogy in his painting is further elaborated, in the context of his affinity with Byzantine painting and mosaics, with his predilection for and strong identification with Gregorian chant, particularly those that make a prominent use of the pentatonic scale (personal communication 26/01/2021). The specific character of these chants and how they might relate to his painting can, to some extent, be explained by the fact that the major pentatonic scale is like the ordinary diatonic major scale with the subdominant and the leading note (the fourth and seventh degrees of the scale) removed. Thus, there are no intervals of a semi-tone (or minor second) and the two most dynamic notes in the major scale, which create a strong feeling of tension and a concomitant need for melodic and harmonic resolution, are no longer present. The resulting scale has a more ethereal, stable and 'floating' character – one that is superbly exploited by Claude Debussy in *Voiles*, the second prelude of Book I of his *Preludes* L. 117, to create a floating impressionistic effect. By the same token, a sense of stability, equilibrium, and even and ethereal quality is pervasive in Van der Merwe's work. Furthermore, he mentions the austerity of both Byzantine art as well as that of the pentatonic scale, as used in Gregorian chant, as aesthetic

qualities that he strongly identifies with and expresses in his own art (personal communication 27/01/2021).

The painting below, *Object* (figure 6), can be analysed along the same lines as the previous two, and I will not repeat myself in this respect. What is of additional interest here is the explicit use of the Greek word *eidos*, which is transliterated into Latin as 'idea', but means 'form, countenance, or external appearance'. During his postgraduate studies Van der Merwe spent much time researching the concept of Platonic form/idea. In his own words:

> As a young undergraduate art student in the mid-1970s I felt somewhat naïve and overwhelmed by the torrent of art jargon that one encountered in contemporary art texts, art journals, the art establishment and in art academia in general. I believe it was more or less at this time that the widening schism between formalism and conceptualism reached a serious degree of confusion and conflict. In the avant-garde artworld one of the consequences of this schism was that the term Formalism assumed negative connotations, and was employed to allude to art that was seen conservative and retrograde. Personally, as a young painter I felt very unconvinced by this controversy and felt compelled to try unravelling the confusing threads and to make sense of these conflicting ideas. This took me back to the beginning of the 20th century to the Bloomsbury movement and more specifically to the writings of Clive Bell which, although largely forgotten now, were enormously influential in shaping the Modernist movement. Of particular interest is his book simply entitled *Art* in which he proposes his theory of Significant Form. There were certain precepts in Clive Bell's theory of Form which struck me as being incongruous and prompted me to turn back to the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle and the pre-Socratic philosophers try and understand the origins and meaning of form in philosophy, aesthetics and in art. this quest also took me to the archives of the British Museum in London in 1980 where I researched the unpublished manuscripts of Clive Bell in order to gain a clearer understanding of his Theory of Significant Form. Regrettably these manuscripts confirmed my suspicions that was a central flaw in Clive Bell's theory of Significant Form, a theory which, ironically, had been highly influential in the Modernist

movement. In short, in Western philosophy the word form is translated from the ancient Greek word *eidos* which transliterates into the English word 'idea'.

Figure 6
Vivian van der Merwe, *[P162] 08/13 Object*, 2013, Oil, wax encaustic and gold leaf on board
92 x 77 cm, collection of the artist (image courtesy of the artist)

Van der Merwe continues,

> My reading of Clive Bell's published and unpublished writings revealed the fundamental flaw in his thinking, namely that of unwittingly using the words 'significant' and 'form' to mean exactly the same thing, hence a serious philosophical tautology. This in turn caused me to seriously question the popular art dichotomies at the time, dichotomies such as form/content, formalism/ conceptualism, etc. (personal communication 27/01/ 2021).

According to Van der Merwe he introduced this word *eidos* here as a summary of what his *oeuvre* is all about – form, in the Platonic sense of ideal form. The 'objectness' of the work – it is an old folding mirror with the actual mirror glass removed – ties in with the *eidos* reference in that the physical object that makes up the painting is transformed in Platonic terms as pure abstract aesthetic form. The Greek word is painted in pure gold, as a reference to Byzantine art (personal communication 27/01/2021). Significantly and ironically, this rare introduction of a verbal element, with its Platonic (and Neo-Platonic) overtones, refers to appearance or form rather than to verbal ideas – in spite of the fact that the word 'idea' is directly derived from it. On the question of aesthetic form in his art, Bert Olivier states that:

> He is acutely aware of the long history of the concept of form in art as well as in philosophy and theology, which dates back to ancient Greek times and still plays a crucial role in modern science, contemporary aesthetics and theory. Despite this fact, or precisely because of it, his art is predicated on the possibility of the rediscovery of the true meaning of form in that silent realm beyond contemporary preoccupations with the semiotics of language (Olivier 1994: pages not numbered).

The fact that Van der Merwe does not engage with verbal ideas in his art does not mean that he is insensitive to the potential for poetic expression through the associative power of recognisable images in painting. Throughout his career he has ranged with confident ease between highly representational painting and drawing and total or near-total abstraction.

Many of his most characteristic works, such as *Preparatory Sketch for Still-Life with Corenwyn Bottle, Vase, and Metronome* (figure 7) and *Study for Still-Life with Vase, Jug Bottle and Parcel* (figure 8), occupy a middle-ground between these two extremes and are situated at various positions between them.

Figure 7
Vivian van der Merwe, *Preparatory Sketch for [P57] 08/02 Still-Life with Corenwyn Bottle, Vase, and Metronome*, 2001-2003, Brocades-Zaalberg Collection, Den Haag, Netherlands (image courtesy of the artist)

Figure 8
Vivian van der Merwe, *Study for Still-Life with Vase, Jug Bottle and Parcel*, 2005, Oil and wax encaustic on board, 35,5 x 30 cm, present whereabouts unknown (image courtesy of the artist)

In both these works the tension between the flat picture plane, as reinforced by flat geometric shapes of a mostly rectangular or trapezoid shape, and the illusionistic space that he creates in some areas is exploited – not as an intellectual game of commenting on the modernist preoccupation with flatness and its programme of spatial reduction, but as a highly poetic manipulation of space, volume and flatness. This manipulation achieves its aesthetic impact, in part, through principles of contrast and similarity, which at times spills over into contradiction and ambiguity. The latter two devices are not employed to shock or disturb, in the hallowed tradition of the avant-garde, but rather to intensify an effect of contrast, much as a composer would introduce a chord with enharmonic notes that has an ambiguous relationship with the home key. Thus, for example, the white jug in *Study for Still-Life with Vase, Jug Bottle and Parcel* fluctuates between flat, linear treatment of the spout and handle and the fairly strong spatial quality created by the tonal modelling of the main body of the jug. Likewise, the use of texture in *Preparatory Sketch for Still-Life with Corenwijn Bottle, Vase, and Metronome* is ambiguous in that it strongly draws the viewer's attention to the material presence of the painting surface itself while, at the same time, being highly evocative of the texture of the represented object, the *corenwijn* bottle. The white label of this bottle is simultaneously a flat square that dominates the picture plane and a device that immediately draws the viewer into this complex dialogue between illusionistic space and a flat, reductive modernist picture plane. The richly textured brushwork on this label/ square further enhances this conflict between the materiality of the flat, painted surface and the illusionistic representation of the label's paper texture. This sophisticated and ambiguous play with space, with illusion and allusion, has an extraordinary evocative power – the poetry of everyday objects and spaces is richly articulated in a way that resonates with the viewer's intimations of a Kantian or Platonic domain that might exist beyond the reaches of empirical science and rationality. It should be emphasised, however, that this is an essentially visual poetry, remote from the semantics of, say, a Claes Oldenburg 'still-life' object, and it is best not to try and put it into words.

Conclusion

This article has hopefully gone some way towards revealing the problems involved in the reception of the work of an artist who is operating in an

artistic paradigm that is at odds with a prevailing paradigm created predominantly by the scientific orientation of the humanities, the peculiar history of the avant-garde and its co-option by the contemporary western establishment.

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Painting beyond Language

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