

# Dumb & Dumber: Painting & Illustration

**I'M PRETTY SURE THAT I'M NOT ALONE** in wondering why so much illustration passes for painting. Don't get the wrong idea; this isn't about whether illustration is a legitimate art form or not, it most certainly is. Recent developments, particularly in graphic novels, over the last 30 or more years bear testimony. To give just two examples: Richard McGuire's stunning *Here* of 2014 and Kate Beaton's compelling *Ducks* from 2022 are both infinitely more engaging, delightful and inventive than most current art – and that includes painting. Who can ignore Philip Guston's debt to Robert Crumb? And to top it all, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1992.

There's always been a plethora of illustration in galleries, some of it very accomplished but it's often facile or banal. Why? Because its purpose and meaning are invariably fixed, predetermined and subsequently, finite. The journey is over before it has begun. Determinism is antipathetical to speculation and seldom, if ever, demanding – let alone thought provoking. The intention is to communicate some preconception or fixed meaning. No one (in their right mind) goes to painting expecting to be 'informed'.

Ironically, it's determinism that distinguishes illustration as an efficient and effective form of communication. But effective communication isn't something that's commonly attributed to painting; indeterminacy, speculation and reflection are more familiar traits. An understanding and full appreciation of the difference between determinacy and indeterminacy is crucial to this argument. Determinism – or a lack of ambiguity – is probably one of the reasons why illustration has been taught as a graphic or applied art for countless decades in communication and design schools – not fine art departments. Coldstream\* established this distinction over sixty years ago.

Illustration isn't painting. They differ in significant ways: intentionally, culturally and most importantly, intellectually. Painting is a discourse. A discourse that's distinguished by the way in which the image and the painting as its own object can be seen simultaneously.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the prevalence of illustration and the literal can be partially blamed on the decline in academic standards. Driven down by constant, politically motivated meddling, informed (if that's the right word) by ignorance and prejudice, tantamount to clumsy cultural engineering. In that time art schools have suffered sustained attacks. An assault, which, consciously or otherwise, has reinforced the age-old primacy of text over image. A fallacy that has been happily, if not cynically exploited by the now ubiquitous management culture.

A lamentable state of affairs fuelled by the mistaken belief that art schools were somehow subversive; full of 'communists and queers' rather than the epitome of a liberal and inclusive education, symptomatic of a once healthy democracy. But of course none of this is of any concern to the art market or the political class. What's important is that it sells and makes money. And now education – or more correctly certification – should also make money.

The current crop of artist-illustrators in galleries often relies upon drawing. But it's the kind of drawing that's utterly conventional if not reactionary; characterised by its preconceived sense of purpose – often lending it the appearance of solid GCSE work. This is illustration that eschews any proper understanding or appreciation of language, particularly the vernacular and invariably employs the dominant and least demanding of languages – the quasi-photographic. Clinging to the misguided belief that it's realistic and therefore accessible.

Talking of misguided beliefs, there are few greater than the 'idea' of realism in art. It's an illusion – literally. Painting by its very nature can't be realistic, although it may appear to be photographic in appearance – that is – like a photograph. And here's the rub; what's depicted ultimately is not what's photographed but the photographic representation of the subject – the photograph itself. So, the drawing or whatever becomes a 'second order' form of representation.

The messaging is invariably literal; often self-aggrandising and blindingly self-evident. 'Killing people is wrong' being the general level of message. The fact that there is a message at all is problematic.

This is the artist making the time-honoured mistake that they are somehow gifted with insight or a finely honed sense of social conscience – or antenna. Symptomatic of the mistaken belief that they're 'the smartest person in the room' – coupled with the unquestioning belief that anyone should care about what they think – let alone 'feel'; behaviour that is self-conscious rather than self-aware. Nor is this a matter of figuration versus non-figuration, if only because I don't recognise that dichotomy as real, let alone remotely significant. It's utterly irrelevant when addressing issues of quality and cultural cogency. This is probably why drawings of (rather than from) photographs are so prevalent; photography has come to play an important part in painting in much the same way that scaffolding does in erecting a building. But that's no reason why it should be regarded as a primary source – but a tool.

One of the key factors that distinguishes painting from illustration is the role of the medium. Painting is a discourse; an alliance between the paint, historical and social precedence and the painter. In most discussions of painting too little attention has been paid to the actual stuff of painting and how it behaves. It's role in constructing the object and any subsequent meaning. There's seldom any mention of visual equivalence, ambiguity, analogy or metonymy – all aspects of painting's transformative, if not unique, nature.

Discussion is dominated by subject matter, narrative and historical context – anything but content. The distinction between what is depicted as opposed to what any particular work might be 'about' and what part the medium plays in that transformation is generally unacknowledged. Painting as a discourse exists at the intersection between thought and matter. Painting demands that we prioritise visual rather than literary values. The idea that the experience of looking can govern one's understanding or appreciation of a painting has all but been forgotten. Painting is often at it's best when imagery is ambiguous or emergent – 'at the edge of becoming'.

The reasons we engage with the visual arts are many; often ill-defined and generally speculative – discursive and non-specific. We go to illustration for quite different reasons. Our expectations of illustration are literal, functional and deterministic. We expect information. The idea that we might look at paintings for a similar reason is laughable.

I'm not daft enough to suggest what art is or should be but I'm fairly confident that painting isn't intended to inform, or instruct. But when it does, as in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, it becomes the most debased form of illustration – propaganda. Painting at its best has the potential to stimulate reflection and alter (if not expand) consciousness – even slow the perceived passing of time.

Illustration isn't necessarily mimetic or even pictorial. It has taken many forms. Not so long ago artists embraced critical theory – a rather bowdlerized form of literary theory – and in doing so ended up illustrating fairly hackneyed tenets of the aforementioned theory. And in one sense almost all early appropriationist works – by definition – were illustrative, if not illustrations.

As box-ticking-state-sanctioned art spreads like some 'social' virus, so illustration becomes more prevalent – not to say problematic. Problematic because it heralds a sense of cultural atrophy. This is made all the more alarming as it's accompanied by a disproportionate number of Chinese students currently in higher education in the UK. It's reckoned that almost 30% of all HE foreign students currently studying in the UK are Chinese. A factor that has recently emboldened the Chinese authorities to such a degree that they're beginning to directly influence education policy and pedagogy in Britain. This smacks of cultural imperialism. Conversely, I can't help but wonder what kind of education students are having when they have to constantly refer to Google Translate during lectures.

Nowhere is this more acute than in British art schools. One respected observer several years ago referred to a once eminent college as a 'Chinese finishing school'. This same college recently abandoned the mandatory thesis. Problems of second-language-learning apart – I suspect this is because the Chinese authorities regard the thesis as a means of filling students' heads with 'decadent' western values – like democracy.

I grew up in relative ignorance, so I know a thing or two about the transformative power of art and art education – and why they have to be defended.

\*The first Coldstream Report of 1960