

The Pursuit of Happiness

We are all chasing this - let's be honest, rather vague - concept of being truly happy. Mindfulness, slowing down, embracing living in the moment, are all recent "trends" in our society where everyone is constantly striving to better themselves and how they are perceived. Current trends, at least in a lot of social circles, seem to have us move on from consumerist hunt for that happy feeling to a more inward search. Still, the goal remains the same even if the strategy changes: Finding joy.



What we seek to express through the art we create or engage with, is a deeply personal and subjective process. Art has, and always had, the ability to question what we regard as normal and desirable; it can act as a mirror as much as a pointing arrow for our desires and wishes. It sets ideals, and knows to question them at the same time. Beauty is not always the answer, and especially since the early 20th century, idealistic beauty and exact representation were no longer what paintings needed to portray. Abstract Expressionist painters like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko sought to find the 'sublime', the god-like ideal of perfection in their painting; other painterly movements were after the absurd, the real, the surreal, the questionable.

"Abstract painting attempts to visualise the invisible world of emotion and thought, experience and pathos - the way we move through this world and the feeling we have of it are the most

*important aspects of life, yet are not visible. A painter can get us to think about this complexity through colour and line.”*¹

Photography and film then brought a return to reality (or the deceit thereof), and fast-forward to today, we find ourselves over-exposed to images everywhere, often instilling one idea of ‘how to live your best life’ after the other. At the same time, we are overly aware of the troubling times we live in. The perpetual over-exposure to the harsh reality of humankind and the state of our planet as much as to the social-media fired and highly stylised perfection of other people’s lives (be it real or a complete farce) makes many of us long for an escape.

Art is essential to the human condition: its ability to question, represent, transport, challenge and transform us plays a crucial role in how we perceive our environment and how we communicate, let alone its impact on our overall well-being. On a personal level, engaging with art is now scientifically proven to be beneficial to our physical and mental health (UK doctors can apparently now prescribe exposure to visual art and music in support of medical treatment for their patients²). For our society, it is exactly how the great Toni Morrison has described the artist’s role in times of crisis in her recent essay for The Nation³: *“I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence.”* This reminds me of the infamous Churchill quote, his supposed response to being asked to cut funding for the arts in favour of the war effort: *“Then what are we fighting for?”*

It is at the essence of the art and the artists’ contributions to society that the arts are to challenge and question, to raise awareness and show perspectives, and just as importantly, to bring hope and show possibilities. Don’t succumb to the malevolence; step up to combat it.

Evan Woodruffe’s bright, abstract, and often multi-layered paintings seek the very feeling many of us seem to have lost when leaving childhood: the feeling of pure, uninhibited joy. Often large scale and brimming with colour, texture and abstract form, our eyes are guided into a world of possibility, hope, and change. *“I believe in producing something in opposition to the media of destruction we are daily faced with. Art helps remind us that humanity is also full of moments of joy, beauty, progress”*, says Evan of his practice. This rings true for the observer as much as the artist himself. I imagine Evan painting, losing himself in these vibrant fields, dreaming up reveries drenched in yellow, green, pink and a dot of calming blue, moving and ever changing, and I can’t help but think that the process itself must be rather therapeutic. Talking to Evan is a lesson in positivity; the patterns in his paintings seem to follow a conversation that is always guided by hope, kindness, a smile and a firm belief in the good. Unlike pleasure, joy’s fun but temperamental cousin leaning towards excess and self-obsession,

¹ Evan Woodruffe, 2019

² <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-doctor-prescribing-art-classes-future>

³ <https://www.thenation.com/article/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/>

the essence of joy lies in its purity: it is a deeply emotional response, which can hardly be foreseen nor artificially produced. It is spontaneous and sweeping, at times of an intensity that makes us forget our physical selves. You can imagine this when looking at Evan's work - forgetting time and space (and the apparently rather frosty temperatures in his studio) while adding colour upon colour, pattern after pattern, maybe aiming to catch this feeling that is both cause and product of the act of making.

"Joy is the antithesis of the Daily Grind. Joy is being able to be oneself without remorse or shame or threat. Joy is freedom. It can lift us out of our day-to-day struggles and give us the strength to face another day." Looking, watching, absorbing Evan's paintings - you may find yourself getting lost in the colourful vibrance of the stories to be discovered, and if you allow yourself to, you will find a lot of hope, and, most importantly, *joy*. Evan's own joy in making art radiates from each work, and it is rather infectious.

Annie Pokel, 2019