Art: The agony and the ecstasy of the human condition

From Francis Bacon's tortured self-portraits and Edvard Munch's terrifying *Scream*, to the radiant beauty of Van Gogh's and Gauguin's depictions of nature and life, art has the power to express the agony and the ecstasy of the human condition when words fail us.

Consider Bacon's and Munch's works (above). While in our day to day lives we block out the reality of the human condition, these paintings expose the true nature of human's corrupted and alienated existence. Indeed, they depict what the Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing so honestly described when he wrote:
“Our alienation goes to the roots...the ordinary person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be...between us and It [our true selves or soul] there is a veil which is more like fifty feet of solid concrete” (The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise, 1967). (See paragraphs 123–125 of FREEDOM*.)

Jeremy Griffith explains the significance of Bacon’s work in his book FREEDOM:

“While people in their state of denial of what the human condition actually is typically find his [Bacon’s] work ‘enigmatic’ and ‘obscene’ (The Sydney Morning Herald, 29 Apr. 1992), there is really no mistaking the agony of the human condition in Bacon’s death-mask-like, twisted, smudged, distorted, trodden-on — alienated — faces, and tortured, contorted, stomach-knotted, arms-pinned, psychologically strangled and imprisoned bodies; consider, for instance, his Study for self-portrait (above, top left). It is some recognition of the incredible integrity/honesty of Bacon’s work that in 2013 one of his triptychs sold for $US142.4 million, becoming (at the time) ‘the most expensive work of art ever sold at auction, breaking the previous record, set in May 2012, when a version of Edvard Munch’s The Scream [another exceptionally honest, human-condition-revealing painting shown above on the right] sold for $119.9 million’ (TIME, 25 Nov. 2013).” (See paragraphs 124–125 of FREEDOM*.)

At the other end of the spectrum, however, are those artists who have the astonishing ability to break the hold of our tortured, preoccupied existence and remind us of the beauty of the world — who offer some glimpse of the magic we will be able to fully and properly access when we are no longer trapped behind the “fifty feet of solid concrete” the human condition has wedged “between us and It [our all-sensitive soul]”.

van Gogh’s The Sower, 1888
Gauguin’s Will You Marry Me?, 1892
Jeremy explains this aspect of art in *FREEDOM*, writing:

“Great art ‘can make the invisible visible’; it can cut a window into our alienated, effectively dead state and bring back into view some of the beauty that our soul has access to. After years of developing his skills, Vincent Van Gogh was able to bring out so much beauty that resigned humans looking at his paintings find themselves seeing light and colour as it really exists for possibly the first time in their life: ‘And after Van Gogh? Artists changed their ways of seeing...not for the myths, or the high prices, but for the way he opened their eyes’ (*Bulletin* mag. 30 Nov. 1993).” (See paragraph 829 of *FREEDOM*.)

So while Bacon and Munch attract record-breaking prices because their honesty has immense cathartic power, it is through the art of masters such as Van Gogh and Gauguin that we are shown the radiant life that awaits humanity now that the human condition has been solved.

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Watch Jeremy Griffith's breakthrough redeeming explanation of the human condition in WTM Email 5, or read chapter 1 of *FREEDOM*. You can also read more of his insights into how humans have used painting and music and other artistic expressions to depict both our alienated state, and the world's true beauty, in chapter 8:11C of *FREEDOM*.

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