# Continuities and discontinuities in art

## "Encounters, New Art From Old": A Millennium Exhibition at the National Gallery in London

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**24 January 2001**

The recent *Encounters* exhibition at the National Gallery in London was a serious celebration of the new millennium. Two years ago, 24 renowned artists from around the world were asked to respond to works of past masters whose works hang in the National and have the results presented in a unique exhibition.

In his introduction to the catalogue, the critic Robert Rosenblum describes art as “an act of generosity.” The exhibition was motivated by the same spirit. The organisers hoped the exhibition would provide, “a special insight into the creative processes of a very varied group of artists, and fascinating evidence of the complex dialogue between artists across the century.”

With *Encounters*, Rosenblum challenges the myth that modern art has, over the last two centuries, sought to burn bridges to the artistic achievements of the past. Rosenblum says, “Like many grand generalisations, this one is both true and false as well as something in between.” He demonstrates that at the root of modern art lies an infinitely creative relationship with the past. Radical innovations in art are driven by a complex of processes; looking with fresh artistic eyes into the past is a vital component of a leap into the future.

Rosenblum gives examples of two artists who lived during major revolutionary changes in society—Jacques Louis David (1745-1825) and Francisco Goya (1746-1828). “If the history of modern art is taken to begin with such masters as David and Goya who, born in the mid-eighteenth century, responded to the irreversible upheavals that marked the next revolutionary decades, then this precarious balance between respecting and destroying tradition is at the very roots of our heritage.”

He continues, “The swift changes of modern history [referring to the French Revolution] demanded constantly new solutions; yet to step into an uncertain future, one foot had to be kept in a secure past. David, no less than his radical political colleagues of the 1790s, was determined to annihilate inherited traditions of Church and State, but he also believed in timeless, ideal beauty...”

Rosenblum examines the apparent contradiction between Goya's copies of classical paintings of the Spanish nobility and his revolutionary works like the *Los Caprichos* etchings. He writes, “Without conscious allusions to these ancestral images of absolute, untroubled authority, how could he have had such success in dethroning pictorially, as definitively as the guillotine, the feeble members of the Bourbon court who, decade after decade, employed his services.”

He makes another more contemporary point; “The sketchbook drawings of Jackson Pollock, for instance, contain one turbulent confrontation after another with works by Michelangelo, El Greco and Rubens... Pollock's plunges into the abyss can also be read as the conclusion of a tradition launched by Turner's worship of the vortex, just as the catch phrase used for Pollock, ‘energy made visible,' might equally apply to the old master.”

Rosenblum is discussing one of the fundamental laws of artistic development. He concludes, “Artists like the rest of us walk in the long shadow of history, to which an entire century has just been added. Given the evidence of the infinite ways in which artists today have rejected, absorbed and quoted this ponderous past, we can be sure that the next century's dialogues with the Old Masters, who will soon include the once young masters of the late twentieth century, will keep us more than alert.”

*Encounters* seeks to prove that the contradictions that provided the spur to great artistic achievement are still at work today. Does the exhibition live up to this aim? I believe it does!

Most of the works of art were spread around the many rooms of the National Gallery and the necessity of travelling through whole eras in art, to explore the exhibition was one of its many pleasures. On the other hand, in the majority of cases the modern works were placed side by side with small colour copies of the “old masters” and this was completely inadequate.

On the rare occasions when an “old master” and its modern interpretation were displayed side by side, as in the case of the “encounter” between Hieronymous Bosch and Bill Viola, there was a palpable sense of creative tension.

It is impossible to discuss all the artists in the exhibition. I would like to concentrate on four of them—David Hockney, Bill Viola, Louise Bourgeois and Frank Auerbach. They are among the most influential artists in the world today and I hope that a more detailed examination of their contribution will indicate something of the state of modern art.

The other artists involved were Patrick Caulfield, Stephen Cox, Richard Hamilton, Howard Hodgkin, Jasper Johns, Anselm Kiefer, R. B. Kitaj, Claes Oldenburg, Cooseje Van Bruggen, Paula Rego, Antoni Tapies, Cy Twombly, Euan Uglow, Jeff Wall, Christopher Le Brun, Lucien Freud, Anthony Caro, Balthus and Francesco Clemente.

Hockney's “encounter” in the exhibition is with the French painter Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) and his painting *Jacques Marquet, baron de Montbreton des Norvines*, 1811. In response, he drew portraits of twelve of the attendants at the National Gallery.

After visiting an earlier National Gallery exhibition of Ingres' work, Hockney abandoned his original idea for an “encounter” with a Picasso still-life and took up the questions raised by Ingres.

Hockney was born in Bradford, Yorkshire in 1937 and studied at Bradford School of Art from 1953 to 1957. It was there that he initially studied Ingres' work. Hockney's first paintings were influenced by the *Euston Road Group*, founded in 1937 by Victor Pasmore and William Coldstream. Their aim was to return to a more realistic conception of painting—neither abstract nor surreal.

As a conscientious objector, Hockney was drafted to work for two years in the National Health Service. He then attended the Royal College of Art and graduated with top honours in 1962. He was one of a number of artists, including R. B. Kitaj, who became known as the Pop Art

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generation. Hockney disliked the label.

After an initial period of abstraction, he began in the 1970s to produce more representational works—drawings and portraits of friends and Californian landscapes which took him years to complete. His painstaking attention to detail had the aim of eliminating any sign of loose brush strokes or any other visible activity of the artist in the painting.

Eventually this meticulous approach aggravated Hockney. Confronting his problems with an unusual level of self-criticism, he concluded that this whole period was lacking the necessary presence of the spontaneous creative act. He has recently said that, in future, this period of his work would be seen as an aberration.

He was commissioned to design a series of stage sets. From then on his work for the theatre became a significant aspect of his art. He has described how he allowed music to influence his designs and this has introduced a lyricism in his work, a freedom, that did not exist before.

During the 1980s and early 90s he explored the use of new technology in art, using faxes and computer graphics. Much of his work during this period was experimental in nature and not fruitful in terms of interesting images.

In the middle to late 1990s he changed direction **,** reigniting his lifelong interest in Picasso, with a series of landscapes and interiors inspired by the freedom of expression he had achieved in his stage designs.

Hockney's theory represents something of an intuitive response to Ingres' work. He was fascinated by the exactness of detail in Ingres' drawings and paintings. To achieve this effect he was convinced that Ingres must have used a camera Lucida, which projects an image on to paper or canvas. There is no agreement amongst art historians that Ingres used this technique.

Hockney used a Lucida in his drawings for the *Encounters* exhibition. They are the first series of drawings of people he didn't already know and are also the quickest he has ever executed. He was both seriously testing his technical ability and attempting to transform his portrait drawing into a more spontaneous act of creation.

The drawings, with gauche, are a definite change in the manner of his portraiture. The drawings combine exactness of detail in the face and hands with broad-brush strokes indicating the uniforms.

There has been a dramatic change in Hockney's work. Through his turn to drawing, he has strengthened his powers of observation and facilitated a deeper exploration of the possibilities of line and form. His conscious desire to examine the relationship between society and art and his empathy with people's suffering have given a more humanistic quality to his work. His use of shade, tone and colour is different from many of his stylised drawings of the past, where the simplicity of line seemed to dominate over the human subject. Here there is an attempt to do something different.

Hockney is endeavouring to contain the firm presence of an individual's character in the quickest and most direct application of the pencil. He has always said that changes in his art take a long time to work their way through. It will be interesting to see what comes from his present interest in Ingres.

The life of Ingres is an example of the unexpected influence one generation of artists can have on another. Eugene Delacroix, the radical French artist, once criticised Ingres' horror of internal human anatomy and the effect this had on his painting in making them the "complete expression of an incomplete intelligence."

These harsh words were uttered around 1841, at the height of a conflict between radical artists and the academic restrictions of the French Salon, where Ingres was a leading figure. However it was the very weaknesses identified by Delacroix, that were so influential on Pablo Picasso and a new turn deeper into reality by modern artists.

Roland Penrose, the British Surrealist and close friend and biographer of Picasso, explains, "It is certain that Picasso has always had a great admiration for the master of Montauban [Ingres], but it was not only the faithful likeness of the model traced with sensitive strokes of a pencil that enchanted him...

"Ingres, with his horror of anatomy, had been content to think of the curved surfaces of his models without regard for the inner structure. He elongated their limbs and rounded their joints in ways that earned him the censure of his contemporary critics. His eroticism and his understanding of the female form urged him to include more surfaces of flesh than can be seen from one point of view...

"It is in fact surprising that this painter who, unlike the Cubists, had a horror of penetrating beneath the surface was close to them in the need he found for distortion, and in his tendency towards a multiple view of the same object." ( *Picasso, His Life and Work*, by Roland Penrose, Pelican Biographies, Penguin Books 1971)

Bill Viola's "Encounters" piece, a video called *Quintet of the Astonished*, is a response to Hieronymous Bosch's *Christ Mocked* of 1495-1505. Bosch's painting is one of a series dealing with the tormenting of Christ before his crucifixion. Bosch's original painting hung next to the entrance to a darkened room where Viola's video was shown.

To appreciate the virtuosity of this video, it is necessary to understand something of Viola's evolution. He was born in New York in 1951. Between 1969 and 1973 he studied at Experimental Studios of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University in upper New York state, where he began using video. Some of his first pieces, produced in 1972, were *Wild Horses* and an installation, *Instant Replay*.

Between 1972-74, Viola assisted other video artists, most notably the Korean Nam June Paik and Peter Campus. He also worked with members of the New Music Group (Composers Inside Electronics). He was exploring the technical possibilities of video art through issues of human perception, searching for forms of expression suitable to his medium.

From 1974 to 1976 Viola worked in Florence, where he explored the latest video and computer editing technology. In 1976 he first studied the extremes of nature in Death Valley (Majore Desert, California). In his work in Palm Beach California from 1981, he used range of camera types. In 1988 he produced his first major response to an "old master"—Goya's *The Sleep of Reason*. Six years later, he was invited to create a video to accompany the Ensemble Modern's in their performance of Edgar Varèse's musical composition *Deserts*.

Throughout his life Viola has travelled extensively and has studied many cultures, religions and philosophies. For the last ten years he has used the latest video technology to re-explore the paintings of the 16th century. He has combined this with a study of the theories on facial expression by the 17th century French Enlightenment painter Charles Le Brun.

Le Brun studied how character can be conveyed through facial expression "as a window to the soul."

Viola was attracted to Bosch's painting, *Christ Mocked* because of its unusual content. The painting is composed of five figures, four tormentors with Christ at the center. Christ's eyes are entirely black. Many critics conclude that this reflects the hate he sees in the corrupt nature of man. I agree with Viola's interpretation—that Christ's gaze is not filled with horror, but with sympathy, even for his tormentors.

The four tormentors surround Christ with weapons and personal insults, pulling his beard, examining him for signs of weakening. Their facial expressions are unsure, disturbed and frightened. Such ill-defined feelings bring the painting to life. This was Bosch's intention, when he chose a half-length portrait, concentrating on the faces of his subjects, eliminating background detail.

At the exhibition you enter a darkened room and sit on benches. A video starts. The composition is similar to *Christ Mocked.* Five figures are standing in a group. Their clothes are modern and the background is mute gray. The actors—one woman and four men—were directed by Viola in a

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forty-five second real time performance which was then slowed down and extended to fifteen minutes.

Nothing seems to happen. The change of expression is almost imperceptible. Before you know it your consciousness dissolves into the emotional relations among the five individuals. Bosch and Viola's images are connected through their extraordinary attention to emotional detail.

Viola's contemporary characters don't have the same unity as in the Bosch painting. They seem to exist in separate universes, where they try but fail to console one another. Initially the actors rehearsed on their own, so that a study could be made of the tension created between individual existence and the human collective.

At first all five figures seem tormented, but the extraordinarily gradual changes in expression begin to bring out the different relations between the characters. Amidst four suffering beings **,** an ecstatic figure rises, contemplative and separated from the rest. Viola has eliminated references to Christian religious symbols but has replaced it with a Zen Buddhist one. This central figure could be seen as indifferent to the sufferings around him, even though this was not Viola's intention.

The video doesn't have the same visual story as Bosch's, but it is utterly absorbing. Viola' has slowed down life, isolated it from its normal environment and distractions, eliminated the inessential and shown us the beauty of fleeting and rarely witnessed reality.

In extensive interviews, Viola explained his interest in the paintings of the 16th century. He saw it as a period of revolutionary change in image-making, comparable with computing and digital imaging today.

Viola is a significant artistic and intellectual figure. He is using technological instruments with the same creative freedom as past masters have used the paintbrush. In his *Nantes Triptychs* on birth, life and death, and his more recent work,Viola has shown himself to be an artist who is dealing with the fundamental themes of human experience.

Bourgeois's sculpture ‘ *Cell XV For Turner'* is a response to Turner's painting *Sun Rising Through Vapour. Fishermen Cleaning and Selling Fish* (before 1807). She has responded to his turbulent portrayal of nature by symbolising elements of her own turbulent internal life. It is not an easy sculpture to understand but requires some knowledge of her work, especially its latest major phase—the *‘Cell'* series.

Bourgeois is a very skilled sculptor. Some of her studies of hands, legs and drapery are exceptional. Her use of the “found object” to represent acute emotional states of mind has advanced sculpture into new areas. However, there is another side to Bourgeois' work, where the image appears to bear no relation to the subject, thus losing any universality and becoming almost impenetrable.

Bourgeois was born in Paris. From 1919 her parents owned a gallery that traded in historical tapestries. To help with restoration work she learnt to draw and became interested in art.

In 1932 she enrolled at the Sorbonne to study mathematics. She was attracted to mathematics and geometry largely because she found in these disciplines the stability and continuity that had been missing in her life at home. She explains, “In mathematics the rules are eternal and the points of reference do not change from day to day.” However, as her knowledge of the subject deepened she became increasingly aware that mathematics was not necessarily fixed and that Euclidian geometry was but one theoretical construct. “The day I understood that there were other geometries besides Euclidian, I experienced a sharp disappointment.

“It was for me the death of a symbol. Mathematics was no longer a safe symbol... so I was in search of a new symbol, a new equation. The new equation was art.”

Until her marriage to American art historian, Robert Coldwater in 1938, she studied at a number of art schools. She came across the sculptor Alberto Giacometti and worked in the studio of painter Fernand Léger.

In 1938 she left Paris for New York City. Initially she painted, but increasingly turned to sculpture during the 1940s. Her first sculptures were abstract in character, but always retained a human quality. While in New York she became friendly with a number of Surrealist artists exiled from Europe and was also involved with the emergence of abstract expressionism. She never attached herself to any particular school.

The first major series she embarked on was *Femme Maison*. In this series a female form and a house were fused into one another. At the time it was a bold statement on the position of women, not only in society at large but in the art world .Other periods of her work have centred on the same theme—the psychological experience of the home and woman's place in it. This is explored in works like *The Complete Silence*, *No Exit, No entrance, Articulated Lairs,* and the most recent *Cell* series.

Bourgeois began the *Cell* series in the late 1980s. This is her richest creative period, one in which she created genuinely disturbing sculpture in which the many themes, motifs, images and ideas from her life are synthesised. She has said that the soil of all her work is her pain and suffering based on her childhood experiences. Her conception of the *Cell* is described by one critic as a “metaphoric repository for memory.” He claims that “In the Cells, the rage Bourgeois derives from such specific memories becomes a more generalised outrage at a universal inability to communicate or to find answers...”

*Cell XV for Turner* is different from her other Cells. It doesn't have the same psychic tension, and its central images are much more symbolic than concrete. The two intertwining spiral sculptures inside a wire metal cage are two souls—”a couple whose lives mesh.” More: “The continuous and unbroken thread of blue water winding its way down and then back up is a metaphor for time and the unbroken thread of time.” The change in colours of the water from blue to red is “to reflect the changing mood of a relationship from hot to cold.”

The various themes, such as the glass jars filled with varying amounts of water and the mirrors which are meant to involve you in her work, are common in her installations. Unlike the other *Cells*, the meaning of each object seems to be separate from the other and not a fluent whole.

In previous sculptures the cage has been used as a veil, a way of defining the space of the recreated emotion, to define it as a complete work of art. In *Cell XV For Turner* the cage acts to hold the sculpture together, not in a psychic sense but to confine it, to give a false unity to a series of disconnected symbols. It is very claustrophobic and becomes a prison cage for these abstract symbols.

I believe *Cell XV For Turner* is a weak piece that reveals some basic difficulties in her art. Some of her works touch on valuable truths. She fails when they become so specific to her own experience that they are impenetrable on first sight, and mundane after explanation. For me *Cell XV for Turner* is a superficial and abstract exploration of her past achievements.

Auerbach's contribution is one painting out of a series of sixty paintings and drawings entitled *Park Village East.*. Park Village East is a simple street, close by the artist's studio in Camden Town in London. What interested him was the similarity of its composition to John Constable's *The Haywain*, a painting that has obsessed him for some time.

Auerbach has studied many artists at the National Gallery over decades and has a particular interest in the English landscape tradition. “Before abstraction, landscape was the abstraction of painting, the field where artists had freedom to release their formal impulses,” and “the sky is the abstract element of the landscape.”

Auerbach was born in Germany in 1931 into a Jewish family. In 1939 he was sent to relatives in England. His parents stayed in Germany and he never saw them again.

He attended the experimental school Bunce Hall in Faversham, Kent. While he was there he showed considerable talent as an actor and enjoyed designing sets for school theatricals. In 1945 he left for London, living with relatives.

He went to Borough Polytechnic in 1945 and came under the influence

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of the artist in residence, David Bomberg. Between 1948-53 Auerbach worked closely with fellow Bomberg protégé Leon Kossof. Throughout the 50s and early 60s he carried out a continuous study of the paintings of Rembrandt. His work was dominated by the dark colours of umber and ochre. His personal loss, the holocaust and the general exhaustion and destruction of the war coloured his work for many years. A sombre pain predominated. He depicted isolated figures and character portraits, only painting a small number of awkward groups.

His landscapes between 1966-73—a series of obsessively painted scenes in Camden Town—freed his colour from darkness and brought a radical change in his work. He, along with Kossof, has sought to paint London—which he believed had been neglected. Since arriving in London fifty-five years ago he has only left it for four weeks.

Auerbach discovers subjects for his art in the simplest of scenes. He wants the subject to "reveal itself afresh." He once said that to take any scene and shift it slightly reveals many new artistic problems. The subjects of many of his paintings are the scenes in and around his home in Camden. He explains, "I don't visualise a picture when I start. I visualise a piece of recalcitrant fact and I have a hope of an un-visualised picture which will surprise me arising out of my confrontation with this fact." He adds, "What I see is what I was looking at when I did the drawing and it reminds me of it. That's what it was for. I see the sunlight and the trees and the hill, so I paint from these by looking at the black and white drawings and the lines signal colours to me."

*Park Village East* is indeed heavily influenced by the composition and painted quality of Constable's *The Haywain*. It depicts a house to the left with a large tree, then a small tree and a road cutting through. The composition of *Park Village East* draws you to it, but the colour drives you back. On first sight its an irrational use of colour that ends in a tangled mess. This is only an immediate sensation—you have to understand his particular form of abstraction. Auerbach's use of colour is a creative response to his subject and not an exact copy. His unusual use of colour is, I feel, a sensual exploration of his memory of the subject.

On the other hand, as Auerbach readily admits, the struggle he put up to free his painting from the composition of the *Haywain* has left its mark. The spontaneous, directness of expression in *Park Village East* is different to past periods of his work. He has always worked on paintings over and over again and each successive stage becomes part of the finished painting. This has to some extent obscured the process itself.

What his *Park Village East* series indicates, with his most recent work, is a freedom of expression that can only be compared to the creative independence and freedom of expression in the landscapes of Van Gogh. Auerbach puts it this way, "All good painting looks as though the painting has escaped from the thicket of prepared positions and has entered some sort of freedom where it exists on its own and by its own laws, and inexplicably has got free of all possible explanations."

Another characteristic of *Park Village East* is its artistic intelligence—that is Auerbach's experience of other artists. The references to Constable are not vulgar or awkward. They never take over the painting. He has explored Constable's vision and subsumed it into his own artistic language.

In one of the most interesting books on the life and work of Auerbach, Robert Hughes concludes, "Like all painting, good or bad, it is coded. Because codes have origins and histories, it subsumes the artist's experience of other art. But the clear purpose of its codes is to clarify Auerbach's struggle, not to 'express himself,' but to stabilise and define the terms of his relations to the real, resistant and experience world: which is what art must do, today as yesterday, if it is to be more than chatter." [Robert Hughes, *Frank Auerbach* published by Thames and Hudson]

"Encounters" was a significant event. To draw conclusions about the state of art today from one exhibition is impossible, but I am certain that the ramifications of a serious approach to the problem of new and old art will be felt in the art world for some time to come.

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