Exhibition 2011
Sublime & Beautiful
What Is Good Art?
Ethics in the Sublime and the Beautiful: An Introduction

Does good art make for ethical art? Should it impel action against income inequality, prejudice, and tyranny and thus serve as a means to greater moral ends? Alternatively, should art be exclusively aesthetic? Should beauty be allowed stand for itself, by itself, independent of political, ethical, or philosophical considerations? Can art stand alone on both dimensions? Is “pretty” art morally inferior or simply morally agnostic?

This exhibition takes a broad view of the question, “What is good art?” framed around the interplay of the sublime and the beautiful. The relationship between these concepts appears prominently in the aesthetic philosophy of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

For Kant, a judgment of beauty is based mostly on a disinterested feeling. That is, it does not generate any sort of desire toward the object, nor does it necessarily need a goal or ethical end. Kant explains beauty as something with universal validity, but paradoxically there are no rules by which beauty may be defined. In essence, Kant’s view is that the beautiful is beautiful for its own sake. We all agree that a vast natural landscape is beautiful, even if we can’t all articulate the reasons why we think so.

Burke’s definition of beauty is a little easier to follow. Simply, beauty consists of anything to which we are attracted or drawn. Beautiful things, according to Burke, tend to be gentle and pleasant, though not necessarily perfect.

Whereas beauty derives from a feeling of pleasure and may induce calm or contentment, the sublime provokes the opposite reaction. With regard to the sublime Burke wrote,
“Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” The sublime may be ugly or horrifying, and it is generally unsettling without precise explanation. Kant suggests that this is because sublime ideas are simply too vast to comprehend. He writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “Whereas the beautiful is limited, the sublime is limitless, so that the mind in the presence of the sublime, attempting to imagine what it cannot, has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt.” For Kant, the discomfort of the sublime is a good kind of pain.

It is in this capacity to generate in viewers an unpleasant or uncomfortable jolt that sublimity may provide an interesting way of thinking about ethical art. The notion that we need to be shaken out of our habits to see truth has been with us since Plato; many of us have experienced this firsthand. Is the sublime the cornerstone of what makes art change us? Does art best convey a message about how to live through beauty, sublimity, or through some combination of the two? Can we take “merely” beautiful art seriously enough to consider our own lives? Is it possible for truly sublime art to be a force for positive reflection?
In keeping with the mission of the Kenan Institute for Ethics, the What Is Good Art Exhibition seeks to pose questions and foster dialogue at the intersection of the ethical and the aesthetic, but we do not prescribe an answer.

We invite you to join the discussion. You will find space to record your thoughts and comments in the exhibit. We hope you do so.

As you make your way through the gallery, you will find that the pieces have been organized thematically. We hope you will ponder the topics raised by each of these works, as well as the relationships they may have with the works around them. Most importantly, we hope you will ponder what each of these pieces means to you.

Take the time to question, linger, react, and draw your own conclusions.

Sincerely,

What Is Good Art? is a project of Team Kenan, an initiative of the Kenan Institute for Ethics that seeks to bring attention to ethical issues through student-organized programming. Team Kenan programs are for students, by students. Members have launched a number of new ventures aimed at making ethics available, accessible, and appetizing to students.
Distinguished Panel of Judges

Christopher Bass
Vice President at Oak Hill Capital Partners, L.P.

William Fick
Visiting Assistant Professor of the Practice of Visual Arts

Margaret Mertz
Director, The Kenan Institute for the Arts

Noah Pickus
Director, The Kenan Institute for Ethics

Suzanne Shanahan
Associate Director, The Kenan Institute for Ethics

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong
Chauncey Stillman Professor in Practical Ethics in the Department of Philosophy and the Kenan Institute for Ethics

Charles Thompson
Director of Undergraduate Studies, Center for Documentary Studies
The concepts of “sublime” and “beautiful” as well as more general ethical reflections are present in each piece in the show. This guide is not meant to dictate your thoughts or interpretations; it is simply a starting place. We hope you discover previously unnoticed details, rethink the artists’ statements, and assess the piece from another point of view. Most of all, we hope that the art, statements, and our interpretations as curators spur meaningful and challenging discussion. This guide is here as a resource, to provide a spark. Whether you agree or disagree with our analysis, please use our ideas to contest your own.

The first two pieces, *Intermittence* by Sarah Goetz and *At the Museum…* by DeAnne Georges, question our perceptions of reality and the ways in which we view the world. Goetz’s short film shows the way in which memory shapes our lives; how certain, key moments stay with us and others fade out; and
how memory is not always reliable. Georges’ cartoon playfully teases the exhibit itself, challenging the viewer to identify which characteristics make Edvard Munch’s The Scream “good art” and a child’s stick figure “bad art.” Is a child’s perception invalid? As we grow, do changes in our perceptions cause us to disregard important information—or make faulty data central to what we believe?

The second two pieces, Manifest SMOKE by Chelsea Pieroni and Vote Ndio by Kirstie Jeffrey, capture images of politics, revolution, and freedom. In Manifest SMOKE, an Italian protester stands alone but strong while passers-by admire the scene. In Vote Ndio, the struggle of a grassroots movement is tangible in the English campaign stickers, which have been used cleverly to spell the word “yes” in Swahili. These two works offer meditations on political change, which can be liberating and coercive, rote and revolutionary at the same time.

The next set, The Harness by Maria Arroyo, an untitled piece by Eddie Wu, Portrait for 1,000 Shillings by Kirstie Jeffrey, and The Postmaster’s Daughter by Keshav Mahendru, reflect the frosted glass through which we see the world. Arroyo’s
piece shows four images of a woman, constrained by a world of black and white. Interestingly, the “black and white” here is ambiguous, revealing uncertainty instead of banishing it. Wu’s untitled photograph at first seems to focus on nothing more than a child on a bustling street, but further observation
reveals an unconventional and unexplainable situation hidden in the crowd. Wu offers no explanation for the situation he captured, and we find this fascinating and revealing. Jeffrey paid 1,000 Tanzanian shillings to take a woman’s portrait, and so the art is both in the picture itself and in the story behind it. Mahendru’s picture of his great-grandmother not ready for her portrait to be taken shows how we fear being remembered as anything less than perfect and losing control over our own self-image. Together, these visually striking pieces ask more questions than they answer, hinting at something more.

*Selfish Mindlessness* by Robert Valdovinos, *Seal, It’s What’s for Dinner* by Abigail Bucher, and *Thank You* by Violeta Foreman showcase images of society deeply connected to, yet estranged from, the natural world and fellow people. *Selfish Mindlessness* catches the moment at which an alligator bites a discarded can of insect repellent. The alligator acts in a straightforward way—it “preys” on the can. However, it cannot escape the people with whom it shares the environment—people who sometimes show no more conscious thought than the alligator. Bucher’s picture of an Inuit hunter ripping apart the flesh of a seal is gruesome, not only be-
cause of the blood and exposed meat, but because we know the hunter’s job is becoming increasingly difficult as global pressures—environmental, social, and economic—make this ancient way of life increasingly threatened. Foreman’s piece, created out of a string of plastic convenience store bags, draws our attention to the simple—yet overused—phrase, “thank you.” Is “thank you” such a common component of our vocabulary that it has lost its value? Is life like a plastic bag: ubiquitous and utterly disposable?

Marissa Bergmann’s Inverse Uni*verse, Colin Heasley’s Finish Line, and Rebecca Kuzemchak’s untitled work all explore the limits and extent of humanity. In Inverse Uni*verse, Bergmann explores a connection between celestial bodies and corporeal human bodies through photography and an interactive website. The metaphysical and the physical come together in ways that are visually pleasing and practically limitless. Heasley’s installation, Finish Line, represents competitive athletes’ use of steroids and energy enhancers. It is visually stimulating, but the wider social critique embedded within the work raises a sense of discomfort with the measures we take to win. There is irony in Kuzemchak’s piece; mechanically detailed patterns and stitches create a larger piece that states, “I am not a machine.” Our attempts at commonly held standards of “perfection” merely propagate an illusion. And yet, we often
choose to divert ourselves away from this social norm but still show signs of conformity. We find no satisfying solution to this puzzle.

I am not a machine
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Kenan Institute for Ethics
West Duke Building
Duke University