

Comparative Study: Combining Art and Language



Visual art and the written word are often seen as two sides of the same coin, both artforms in their own right and equally adept at describing creative concepts, yet to combine the two is seen as controversial, it often feels taboo to use words in visual art. In this study I will evaluate three different artists that break this taboo: Barbara Kruger, Adrienne Pierluissi, and Kelsey Becker. These women use language in their paintings and prints in differing styles, but all ultimately use words for the same purpose: to further and enhance the meaning and message they have created with their work.

Cultural Context of Barbara Kruger

Born in 1945, Barbara Kruger grew up with the heavy sexism of the 1950s, and the revolutionary movements of the 1960s. She began her work as an artist in the 70s after working in the magazine industry, which is what allowed her to apply graphic design influence into her satirical prints in the 1980s, discussing societal and political issues including feminism and commercialism, while being very closely tied to the reproductive rights protests, and the March for Women's Lives.

Much of her work emphasizes the problems in the society she grew up with, such as the intense commercialism, and more often women's rights. Kruger used her art to discuss the ways her culture was held back by Reaganomics, and the way her entire gender was oppressed and silenced. Through her bold posters and sharp comments, Kruger communicated an idea of female uprising and spoke out against the discrimination she had faced her entire life.



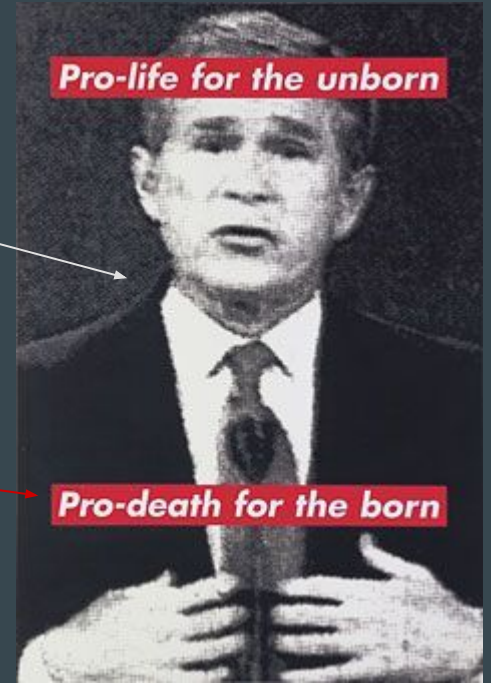
'I shop therefore I am', Barbara Kruger

Annotation of Barbara Kruger



'Your comfort is my silence', Barbara Kruger

- Bold, strong political commentary
- The use of old-fashioned or 'vintage style' images suggests the idea of old magazines that often uphold what she is protesting, creates a juxtaposition between the oppressor and the response of the oppressed
- Red is a very strong color, red usually used for things of importance or something that needs calling attention to
- Use of 'your' and 'my' in *Your Comfort is my silence* shows self-insertion or taking ownership of the message presented.



'Pro-life for the unborn', Barbara Kruger

Formal Response to Barbara Kruger

"Do you know why language manifests itself the way it does in my work? It's because I understand short attention spans." -Barbara Kruger



'Your comfort is my silence', Barbara Kruger

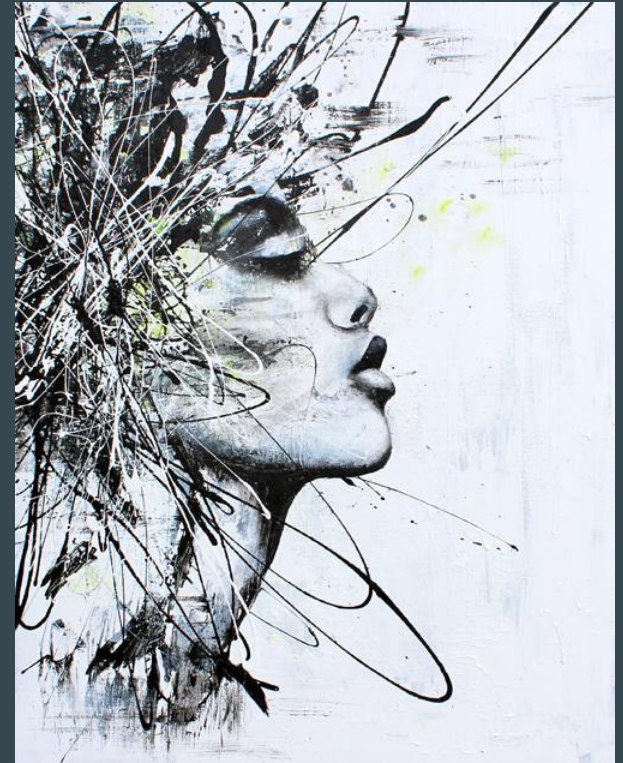
Kruger's use of language is much stronger and more pointed than any of the other artists, almost crossing the line from fine art into propaganda. I think her limited use of color brings a sense of simplicity to the pieces, cementing the idea that these messages are not as complicated as people make the issues out to be, and the choice of red for the text conveys a sense of urgency and importance to her words. Also, use of first-person pronouns such as 'we' and 'my' ties the artist into her work, eliminating the possibility of sarcasm or irony, she is presenting her complete support for her words.

In *Your comfort is my silence*, there is a very clear message presented about the idea of silencing a minority for the comfort of the elite, about the way women in particular are taught that they are to sit and look pretty but never to speak for themselves in the interest of preserving the power and comfort of men, a message delivered even more forcefully with the bold red color and the central image of a man's head. The shadows and sharp contrast concealing his face give the work a very ominous and sinister feeling, furthering the idea of being silenced by a terrifyingly powerful group.

Cultural Context of Kelsey Becker

A self-taught artist from the Midwest, Kelsey Becker is an acrylic painter whose style is self-described as abstract realism. She combines influence from both genres to create a dynamic contrast in the majority of her work. Beginning as a professional painter in 2011, her work has moved from illustrative, brightly colored and intricate paintings to a blend of highly realistic portraiture and Jackson Pollock-esque abstraction, as seen in *Girl*, left.

Becker has also dealt with severe anxiety issues and a panic disorder for the last ten years of her life, something often reflected in her work. Her subjects are often young women similar to herself, and a common theme among them is this contrast between seemingly calm and relaxed faces juxtaposed with erratic, raw color exploding from their heads, as seen in *Girl*. This element of her work seems to describe the feelings of panic and anxiety she deals with everyday, presenting a cool facade to hide her inner turmoil. This concept is further demonstrated in the style of the work, with the figures she uses very clean, smooth blending and classical realism, while the rest of her painting is distinguished by its rough composition and spastic movement.



'Girl', Kelsey Becker

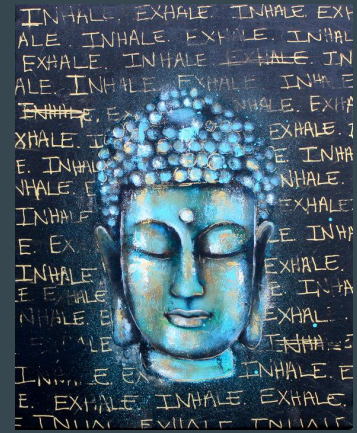
Initial Response to Kelsey Becker



- 'Painting Dying', Kelsey Becker

Kelsey Becker very clearly integrates words into her series, *Painting Dying*, and single works like *Inhale Exhale*. She mostly uses verbs directly related to the subject of the painting. The words almost seem like a description of the painting or an explanation of her intentions when painting it. The clear-cut words are very different from the abstraction in her painting, kind of adds a sense of defining or purpose to it. At the same time they're just as rough and imprecise as the rest of her style, this could add some unity to the piece.

These paintings often combine very realistic, detailed forms with abstract, spontaneous elements. I think it creates this very interesting juxtaposition between reality and imagination. The abstract qualities also give character to the figures depicted, each painting has a different sense of movement and personality.



'Inhale Exhale', Kelsey Becker

“I’d describe my style of painting as abstract realism. I’m walking a silver line between reality and my dreams. I’m trying to merge my abstract thoughts into the world that surrounds me.” -Kelsey Becker

Post-Interview Response to Kelsey Becker

After investigating Becker's work on my own, I had a chance to interview her about her series *Painting Dying*, and her painting, *Inhale Exhale*, as well as her artistic process and inspirations. After this interview I learned a lot about her as an artist that changed some of my thoughts on her work. She opened up to me about her panic disorder, which for her is something she describes as a cyclical process, experiencing emotional highs followed by debilitating anxiety, which is also reflected in her artistic process. She explained it as "I'd have these periods of incredibly motivating painting sessions where I could just paint and paint for hours on end. It was like the ideas were flowing out of me, sort of like a faucet ... But usually those only last a few weeks or months before I inevitably feel drained. Like there is nothing left in me to give." This process was reflected in her work as a literal cycle of painting and dying. The same thing is demonstrated in *Inhale Exhale*, perhaps more closely tied to her anxiety issues, but again showing the cycle her life goes through with her energy and emotions going up and down in a pattern. Becker also compared her work to a journal or personal diary, using the repetitive process as a therapeutic release and way to confront her inner thoughts. By formulating her feelings in her work she was able to better understand herself and confront subconscious issues.

"Without the bad, there is no good. Without the downs, there's no ups. Without darkness, there is no light." -Kelsey Becker



'Inhale Exhale', Kelsey Becker



'Painting Dying', Kelsey Becker

Cultural Context of Adrienne Pierluissi

Adrienne Pierluissi is an artist living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, whose artwork mostly focuses on abstract paintings. She began painting in the early 1980s in college, drawing on her extremely religious and academic childhood, before moving to New York for formal artistic training. She began as a figural, very classical artist in 1987, developing and evolving her work over the next seventeen years, and shifting into abstraction in 1999, deriving inspiration from Abstract Expressionism and Geometric Expressionism.

“Abstraction should be breaking out of these rigid ways of thinking” -Adrienne Pierluissi

In 2015, she began exhibitions of a series of paintings begun six years earlier: 52 large-scale paintings of her abstract interpretation of a field of poppies, presented in a row outdoors, moving through each of the four seasons. Her original vision for the exhibition was for them to be displayed outside alongside the natural scenes they depicted, but their size presented the considerable challenge of trying to find suitable frames or stands for them, so instead Pierluissi decided to create the stands herself by learning to weld metal and constructing custom stands for each one. This began her series of five exhibitions throughout Wisconsin and Chicago, each on view only for a few hours.



Poppies Exhibition #1, Adrienne Pierluissi

Initial Response to Adrienne Pierluissi 'Poppies: Four Seasons'



- 'Summer 14',
Adrienne Pierluissi

Pierluissi's series of oil and acrylic paintings also integrates words into art. Her style is very loose, a cross between Abstract and Impressionistic. Her style blends color and movement in a way that doesn't initially look like Impressionism, but upholds the same ideals, like focusing on the color and feeling of the landscape rather than the detail and proportion. The colors themselves reflect the same style, by using many different shades and tones of each color layered over each other, Pierluissi creates a sense of movement and texture, while echoing Impressionistic style.

At first sight the backgrounds seem to just be more wild color, but upon closer inspection there is actually words woven into the brushwork. The words are seldom legible, which I thought made it less about the words themselves and more the beauty in the shape of words, creating an interesting layer to the pieces. I asked the artist about this, who said they were actually words from a favorite poem of hers about nature and the seasons, one she felt spoke to her in a way that coincided with her work.

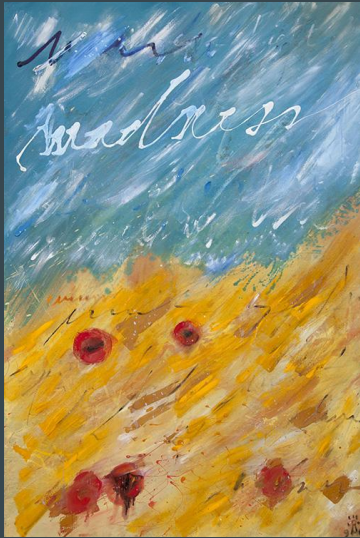


- 'Winter Fifty-Two',
Adrienne Pierluissi

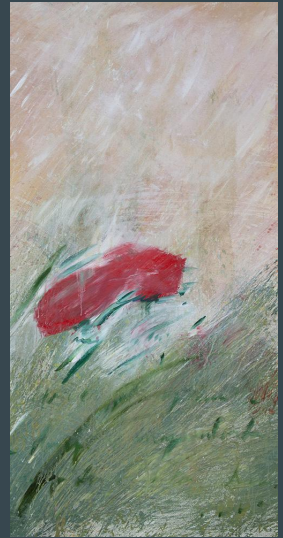
Post-Interview Response to Adrienne Pierluissi

I was also able to interview Adrienne Pierluissi about her work after exploring it on my own. She also gave me new insights into her series of poppy landscapes, as well as artistic process. Originally I'd thought of this series as an intentional body of work, but during my interview I learned that in reality these paintings were something she developed as she worked, not even realizing they were poppies until she was nearly halfway through. She originally created these for a specific walls to fill, wanting a cohesive series to give intention to the space, but over time they became much more to her as she applied more of her personal background.

Pierluissi recalls being obsessed with the idea of life and death since her early childhood, a theme she also identifies in these pieces. To her these works represent the cycle of life and death, a never-ending circle. She uses words to further that message, but also to present it to the viewer in a way that is bold and yet affects the viewer subconsciously in that it is just legible enough to be recognized as words, but requires intense concentration to be read at all. She describes it as her way of not forcing the viewer into her message but guiding them towards it a bit. As for the actual words, most are from poems or artworks that resonate with her, along with her own words reacting to the recent death of her mother. By forcing her audience to confront the words and apply their own meaning to them, Pierluissi attempts to get her audience to likewise confront her message about the natural cycle of death, as she stated in her interview, "Because honestly death is always inevitable, and does the flower know it's going to die? I don't think so but I just think that when we understand and have a bit of grasp over our own life, and death, I think we'll become more of a healthy community."



'Fall 39', Adrienne Pierluissi



'Spring 04', Adrienne Pierluissi

Contrasting Artistic Styles

Kelsey Becker

- Uses non-local color in her portraits
- Uses fine detail
- Uses smooth blending in figures
- Applies influence from Jackson Pollock
- Paints with acrylics and spray paint

Barbara Kruger

- Limited color scheme
- Use of photographic elements
- Applies influence from graphic design background
- Works in print media
- Uses found images rather than own

Adrienne Pierluissi

- Use of Impressionist style
- Total abstraction in some areas of work
- Moving, changing forms
- Simplistic style and composition
- Paints with oils
- Use of non-traditional brushes

Comparing Artistic Styles

Becker and Pierluissi

- Blends abstraction with other styles of art
- Use of spontaneous, erratic movement
- Bold, vivid color

Becker and Kruger

- Static subjects
- Realistic style

Kruger and Pierluissi

- Blend abstraction with other artistic styles
- Use of spontaneous, erratic movement

All Three

- Use of bold, vivid color, to grab viewers attention and to present their subject

Contrasting Use of Text

Kelsey Becker

- Uses words to emphasize personal meaning of the piece, viewer can understand the words but do not know full extent of the message
- Writing is separate from the rest of the piece

Barbara Kruger

- Uses words to convey a clear message, audience understands both the words and the message behind them.
- Uses typed font rather than handwritten

Adrienne Pierluissi

- Uses words as an extension of personal message and style, audience cannot fully understand words or message, rather they are forced to identify their own
- Blends writing into the movement of the painting

Comparing Use of Text

Becker and Pierluissi

- Words emphasize the cycle referenced in the message of the work

Becker and Kruger

- Clear, legible writing is meant for the audience to understand and draw conclusions from

Kruger and Pierluissi

- Keep text style/font consistent with the rest of the work

All Three

- Use text to emphasize and express a message drawn from past and current personal experiences

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