

# MANY SHADES OF HAPPINESS HOW ART GIVES US A GLIMPSE OF A BETTER WORLD

WORDS BY  
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Art is the promise of happiness,” wrote 20th Century philosopher and cultural theorist Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*. This seemingly simple, pithy adage is anything but, however: the ‘art’ Adorno referred to included only 19th and early 20th century music and fiction, by ‘promise’ he meant an unfulfilled one, and his definition of happiness had nothing to do with cheer, physical pleasure or excitement. Adorno may have been a towering intellect, but clarity was never his strong point.

But for many artists and art lovers, the less complicated (if ultimately incorrect) interpretation of Adorno’s words still hold true. Art can induce positive feelings – whether in making it or looking at it on a gallery wall. Research correlates viewing art with increased levels of dopamine and activity in the brain’s frontal cortex – much the same physiological changes connected with being in the throes of romantic love. And regardless of the cliché of the tortured artist, it’s been demonstrated that the physical process of creating art stimulates the brain’s system for connecting movement, emotion and thinking, which is believed

to lessen anxiety and depression in much the same way as meditation and yoga. While there are clearly limits to what science can tell us about art, the work of London-based painter Shaun McDowell would make a textbook case for these laboratory findings. McDowell has far more physical interaction with his work than most painters, foregoing the brush and using bare digits and palms to manipulate thick swabs of paint, leaving thumbprints amidst the explosions of vivid colour and layered impasto in works

like those from his *Love Pictures* series of 2008. His raw physical involvement in that particular series was inspired by those dopamine-dizzied throes of love. “One night ended up with me and my then-girlfriend in my studio,” he tells. “One thing led to another and we got creative.”

The work in one sense evokes the abstract expressionists, akin to Pollock in its trapped energies, de Kooning in its daubed frenzies of colour. Even those images that are figurative – the *Love Pictures*, for example – suggest only the most flurried, fanciful yet visceral outline

of their model. “It does seem free, in an expressive sense, that I’m not limited by the depth of skin or fixity of form, no matter how beautiful that form may be,” he explains. “The beauty I experience is energetic, expressed sensually. My work realizes that we are not so separate.” McDowell’s philosophy of painting seems almost Eastern in its rejection of ego, which he’s described as a stumbling block to free creative expression. “Egoic thoughts seek to form an ideal,” he offers. “Such an ideal may conflict with the expression of body and movement of energy, thus limiting freedom.” It may sound a bit Zen-master, but the proof is in the painting – the works radiate a positivity and power that more self-conscious, overly intellectualized efforts can’t approach.

Washington D.C. based artist Erick Jackson makes paintings at the other end of the spectrum from McDowell – almost literally. Sombre-hued and dreamlike, the images have a vintage, 1970s quality in their surreal exploration of domestic interiors and suburban neighbourhoods. Faceless, shadowy forms and the occasional mystical glyph or object would give a Jungian analyst a field day, but one suspects

Shaun McDowell  
*Between the Wind and the Wood*, 2012  
Oil on board



Shaun McDowell  
*Untitled* (from the *Love Picture* series), 2008  
Oil stick on board



the symbolism is private to the artist. “My work is simply the combination of dreams, ideas, fantasy and feelings to form scenes and stills for a film yet to be made,” says Jackson. “I’m interested in the initial explosion where outsider worlds and realities are created out of the necessity to escape.”

While it might not be a painting you’d want to hang in your child’s bedroom, Jackson’s ‘Indian Summer’ is a strong example of this amalgam of influences. Its inspirations were the 1970s architecture of the neighbourhood the artist grew up in, fused with elements of the 1966 animated feature *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, which made a great impression on Jackson as a young boy. “Parents were never seen, the kids seemed like cruel, grumpy old people, pet dogs pretended to be WW1 flying aces,” he recalls. “The combination of the moody flute soundtrack with the simplified backgrounds created that ‘creepy sweet’ feeling.”

People often connect memories of childhood and youth with happiness, but Jackson rejects such a simplistic equation. “The big difference between now and then is that feelings were more heightened when I was young,” he explains. “There was some basic happiness, but the feelings of fear, excitement, anxiety, isolation and ennui were much more extreme. Everything was a new experience, and having a lack of access to what I desired and a lack of control over my life left me filled with nervous energy. So I’d say the good and bad are romanticized and morphed into many shades of happiness. Yin and Yang, but heavy on the Yang.”

Jackson reconciles these conflicting elements by creating those outsider worlds and realities through his art. “It’s both a happy and

the problem that lets you discover who you are.”

This palliative and positive influence of creative work was recognized long before contemporary artists, modern science or Eastern insight made their claims, however. The 19th century French writer Stendhal wrote that, “the man of genius is he and he alone who finds such joy in his art that he will work at it come hell or high water.” Matisse concurred, advising, “derive happiness in oneself from a good day’s work, from illuminating the fog that surrounds us.” Presumably, he was referring to making art rather than working as a lighthouse keeper.

Sculptor Alex Chinneck, also based in London, puts it more literally. “I’m addicted to progress and as a sculptor I measure it physically,” he says. “Progress quiets my anxieties and that is when I’m happiest.” His work is more considered than effusive, clever but marked by a sense of humour.

His playfully titled ‘Fighting Fire With Ice Cream’ is a plank of OSB – thousands of large flakes of wood pressed into particle board – with each flake hand-coloured by crayon. It’s a building material usually hidden behind the walls of houses or under floorboards or carpet, and to see it metamorphosed into this sweet conflagration of vivid hues is a bit of an inside joke for those who do a little DIY,

as well as a testament to the power of art to give a spectacular life to ordinary everyday objects. It’s a child’s view of the domestic, where spaces between furniture become canyons, or duvets become teepees.

Equally witty is *Self-employed*, which is chimney as Ouroboros, the serpent eating its own tail or, here, recycling its own smoke. Constructed from masonry bricks, the artwork weighs over a tonne. Nearly as heavy, yet also lifting the viewer’s mood is ‘Concrete Cross-dresser’, a simulacrum of an oriental rug made from grey council pavement slabs, each carved into delicate arabesques. Like *Fighting Fire With Ice Cream*, these take the often oppressively dull, unadorned materials of the built environment and transform them into wondrous, wryly funny something-elses – quasi-architectural transvestites, perhaps.

“I use humour because I think intellect can too often take itself too seriously,” says Chinneck. “I feel a responsibility to produce uplifting work and have no interest in re-

Alex Chinneck  
*Self Employed*, 2011  
Reclaimed brick, mortar, steel, smoke  
200 x 200 x 75 cm



Henri Matisse  
*The Joy of Life*, 1905–1906  
Oil on canvas



difficult process,” he says. “The artist has questions, makes a plan to tackle the question, implements the plan and sees what happens. If there’s progress or not in answering the question, then there are a few hours of either happiness or stress... But it’s the momentary triumph over

minding people of their problems." No mere escapism, his engagement with the stuff of the everyday and cunning use of metaphor prompt viewers to see reality through a different lens. "I create illusions because I think there's something optimistic about challenging the boundaries of possibility."

Breaking boundaries has been fundamental to art since its origins. Many groundbreaking works owe their entry in the canon of iconoclasm not only to formal innovation but to their vital, positive energy – an almost living force we might connect with happiness. With *The Joy of Life* Matisse upended the history of Western art by rejecting painterly traditions of stylistic unity and harmony of form, introducing vibrant, clashing colours and figures of mismatched size and uncertain delineation. To drive his point home he incorporated references to Western art ranging from nods to the cave paintings at Lascaux to allusions to Titian, Cranach, Poussin and the Impressionists. It's delirious and celebratory and a delicious pie in the face of the classical tradition.

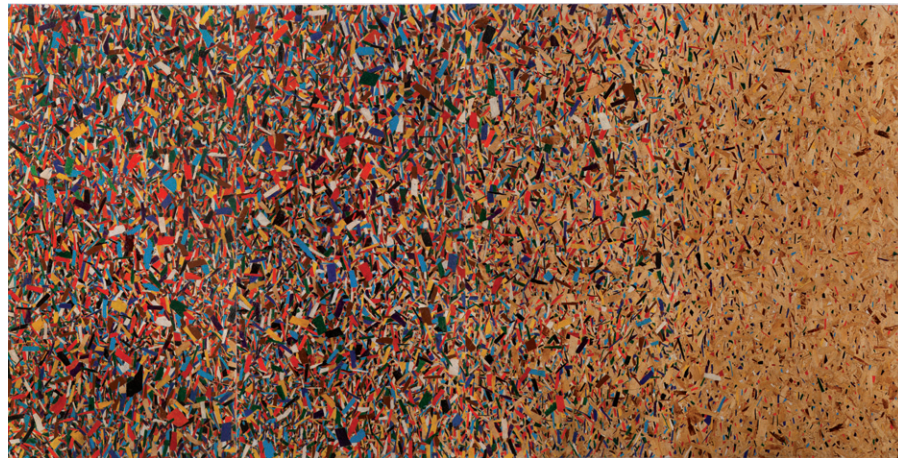
The Bauhaus were also aesthetic pioneers with joie de vivre. Owing a debt to the Arts &

and all their atrocities that Adorno penned his "Art is the promise of happiness" line. His view was that after such a monumental disaster for Western civilization, art could no longer uphold the naïve principles of the classical tradition. Art must shed the aesthetic ideals of harmony and utopianism, which were drawn from cultural conceptions that, in his view, indirectly culminated in the atrocities of the 1930s and '40s.

Art should resist such naïve idealism, be tense and conflicted, even self-destruct. It should offer a critique of authority, be a foil against the marketplace and somehow hint at the possibility of a better social order. But it should be dissonant, disorderly, flawed, with an uneasy mismatch between content and form. If he'd extended his critique to visual art, one might imagine the contorted figures of Francis Bacon or the emaciated ones of Giacometti fulfilling Adorno's criteria. Not exactly happy art, but then again Adorno's notion of happiness was concerned more with awareness and understanding, with the individual as part of society rather than as a consumer of experiences. Ignorance may be bliss, but in Adorno's conception it wouldn't be happiness.

There's a Marxist subtext to much of Adorno's thinking, that late capitalism has commodified art – or at

Alex Chinneck  
Fighting fire with ice cream, 2011  
Hand coloured OSB, wax crayon, polish  
488 x 244 x 5 cm



Crafts movement, which held that art has a social duty to contribute to the happiness of human beings, the Bauhaus married beauty in form with functional simplicity, offering a progressive, perhaps happier face to mass production. But it was the dance performances and mad parties they threw that set them apart in the annals of art. Elaborate themed parties like their *Metal Party* of 1929 – in which students dressed in costumes made of foil and wire arrived via a long metal chute – showcased their creativity in the guise of a good knees-up. Equally innovative was Bauhaus luminary Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, a fantastically costumed dance performance in three colour-coded parts: yellow/happy, pink/festive and black/mystical.

But the party would end for the Bauhaus, and for the optimism of modern art, with the rise of the Nazi party and the outbreak of World War II. It was just after the war, the Holocaust

least, in one view, bad art – neutralizing any real potential for social criticism, and presumably making many artists turn coats in the struggle for a better society. One is reminded of Walt Disney's slightly ominous quip: "We create happiness." In the 1940s, the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein had great admiration for Walt Disney's animations, yet saw them ultimately as a tool for distracting the proletariat from their oppression – entertainment as opiate.

Does this cartoon reality continue in modern art? What would Adorno think of Jeff Koons's astronomically-priced gigantic, polished metal balloon dogs, made-to-order for the super-rich in his 16k square foot studio in



Erick Jackson  
Indian Summer, 2010  
Gouache and wet pigment on canvas

the heart of Chelsea? King of kitsch and former commodities broker, Koons deals in happiness as pastiche, overblown emblems that for all their size are void of emotion. Having said that, as objects they do have a physical presence, a wow-factor that's undeniable. And as part of the *Celebration* series, the dogs were conceived as a sort of semaphore, a means of signaling his love to his estranged son after Koons divorced from his wife, porn-star and Italian parliamentarian Cicciolina. Perhaps it's too easy to hold up Koons as the cut-out villain of art-as-commerce. Maybe it's not as cut and dry as Adorno might have it.

If you're of a more Marxist persuasion it might be equally tempting to take aim at Takashi Murakami, who's studio is the international corporation Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., named after his anime-inspired branded characters (one naughty, one nice). Murakami makes not just painting and sculpture through this studio-cum-factory, but also t-shirts, videos, plush toys, plastic figurines, mouse pads and key chains. He also designed a limited-edition Louis Vuitton handbag. And admits to having done market research for the characters he features in his art. It's not surprising he's turned to Bill Gates for management philosophy and holds Steve Jobs as one of his heroes (as well as Jeff Koons).

Of course, measuring Murakami's artistic integrity by Marxist standards seems a bit unfair, not to mention outdated. Besides, he grew up in poverty, his wealth is self-made, and he reputedly sleeps on a pile of sleeping bags. Yet the biggest rebuttal to such criticisms would be his art and his remarks on the creative process. His oeuvre is a wildly original synthesis of manga and anime influences, articulating an imaginative vision of contemporary Japanese and global culture that hovers between irony and celebration. ("My happy face flower paintings are clusters of satire," he admitted in an interview with Damien Hirst.) The sheer scale of some of Murakami's work is awe-inspiring, such as the 100-metre wide painting 'Arhat' at his massive *Murakami-Ego* exhibition in Doha, which also featured a giant inflatable self-portrait as a seated Buddha. Doha was indeed one big exercise in ego, but not in the usual sense. Murakami has said he sees himself as a conduit for artistic expression, believes the focus is not himself but the art, and the origin of this vast exhibition gives this some credit. The impetus behind it was the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and the resulting meltdowns at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. *Ego-Murakami* was a huge retrospective, but also a hallucinatory visual exploration of suffering and release through the Buddhist tradition, and an articulation of his nation's journey through that tragedy. As well as focusing his creative efforts on the issue, Murakami raised a substantial amount of relief funds through a charity auction at Christie's. So the success

of *Ego-Murakami* was partly down to the artist's management of those egoic thoughts that his fellow artist Shaun McDowell decries. Or maybe it's just down to good marketing. Most likely people just like the art, though.

An artist whose uber-capitalist working methods would be anathema to Adorno, none-



Erick Jackson  
Paradise Garage, 2010  
Gouache and wet pigment on canvas

theless seems to tick some of the boxes for that philosopher's conception of modern art. The work is certainly dissonant in places, is often ironic and tries to articulate a great tragedy without pretending it can in any way make it right. Murakami's art isn't always 'happy' stuff at face value – but it may 'promise' a sort of happiness by resisting the wrongs of this society while giving us a glimpse of a better one. "I will always work for the sake of beauty," Murakami has said. "It's because beauty gives reality to the fantasy that when [people] stand before it, everyone is an equal, if only for a moment. It is the culmination of people's desire to understand one another. That is what I work for." ■■■■



Erick Jackson  
Paradise Garage, 2010  
Gouache and wet pigment on canvas