

Perfect Deceit

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Course: English 101

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What is abstract art, and why is it important? That is the question that I was challenged with as I visited the exhibit, “Mapping the Terrain: New Directions in Abstract Painting,” hosted by the Southeastern Louisiana University Center for Contemporary Art. Abstract art draws its substance from the artist’s experiences, thoughts, and reactions. It is rather difficult to penetrate the meaning of a piece of abstract art, especially if the piece does not reflect any form of conventional reality. When I look at such art, I cannot help but wonder why the artist would spend time creating something that does not even make sense at first sight, but then I pause from my wondering and I realize that there must be more to that painting than what meets the eye. I must be able to go beyond what I see and find out what I might feel. According to the artist Harley Hann, “With the coming of abstraction, artists had a powerful tool that would allow them to bypass literal perception and reach into this otherwise impenetrable world of unconscious emotion” (“Understanding Abstract Art”). One such piece of art that uses shapes and colors to capture a world of unconscious emotion is Paul Loughney’s *Highway to Hell*. The painting draws the viewer to a world that expresses deceit and degradation. Paul Loughney’s *Highway to Hell* was painted in 2007, and the piece is an acrylic on canvas that measures 24 by 36 inches. The artist created his work during a very turbulent period for the United States of America, when there were negative forces working against this nation. The significant art elements that are present in this artwork, lines, shapes, space, and colors come together to make up the image.

Colors can create the illusion of depth, and they can react to other colors to express different qualities of light. Also, they can have symbolic connotations and can promote emotional feelings. In *Highway to Hell*, colors are important, for example white, Taupe gray, nuances of brown, blue and green. Even though these colors would not seem to match, they blend together to create a pleasant view on this canvas. The contrast of colors in the painting is visible from the first glance. The viewer's eye is drawn to the middle of the piece where the prolonged white follows its route from the bottom right corner to the top left corner of the canvas. The sapphire color is in contrast with the white, and they are superposed in the center of the painting. At the same time the sapphire color perfectly surrounds a brown color, creating an image of captivity. The Taupe gray is present in different shapes and appears in contrast with the white. There are diverse nuances of brown on the background, connecting all the elements together. The viewer is absorbed by the same sapphire color in the top right corner, and the black color seems to be important for the painting.

Numerous connotations that the colors might have are important for the painting's meaning. The white represents purity, perfectness, and something untouched by the evil that surrounds it. The iridescent dark blue is the color of the deep midnight sky, when everything is enigmatic. Along with the same idea, black would represent death and evilness, and even if the color is not found on a large area of the canvas, it is present. The gray color inspires a detached and isolated feeling. However, placed next to the white color, it has a stabilizing effect, making the white stand out.

Highway to Hell seems to have three distinct overlapping levels, which create an illusion of depth and breadth. The viewer's eye is drawn slowly on the surface of the artwork, traveling

diagonally from the bottom right corner to the top left corner. Along the way there are levels of suspended shapes that are encountered on each side of the diagonal.

The shapes and lines create a structure that can symbolize meaning in a work. In addition, lines create rhythmic patterns and suggest movement, as well as define edges. In the center of Loughney's painting, there is a white silhouette that comes from an unknown source and ends on a diagonal route close to the top left corner of the painting. This white road has the shape of a creature with horns. Crossing through the silhouette, the viewer finds a highway moving in the same direction. The color of the highway is dark brown with flecks of light brown. In the right side of this white shape, there is a big, oval, gray rock, very well contoured, which has a cut towards the bottom of it in the shape of a mouth.

Towards the right side of the canvas, there is another gray element with a shape of a long round finger. In the top part of the painting, there are several small oval shapes that seem to be spades from playing cards. In the top right corner of the painting, there is a two-dimensional dark blue trapezoid surrounded by two concentric circles whose colors are light brown and light green. On the left side of the highway, the viewer is brought to two important elements. One of them is an iridescent, dark blue, quartz crystal, very well polished. In the interior of this quartz crystal, there is a pentagon colored with different nuances of brown, which is also crossed by a thick dark brown line. Beneath the quartz crystal, there is a map drawn on a two dimensional axis. On top of the map, there is a distorted five-sided star with a black pentagon in the center of it. This second pentagon is the perfect copy of the one above it, but in miniature. On the top left corner of the artwork, a collection of thin brown lines grows closer and closer towards the center of the painting. The painting seems to be separated into two different worlds; one is closer to the viewer, and the other one is at the point where the road ends. The worlds are separated in the

upper side of Loughney's piece of art by a thick, brown, wavy line. The dark and light brown are combined on the background to present to the viewer an image of earth and stability.

The illusion of space used by the artist draws the viewer into a world of three-dimensional space stretching beyond the framework of the painting. The white silhouette comes from an undefined place in the bottom right corner and decreases in width as it approaches the top part of the canvas. On the top left corner, the parallel lines increase in length as they approach the center of the painting. The aerial image of the map is dominated by the star above it, which spreads its five sides along the contour line of the map. The dark blue crystal quartz seems to be out of place; however, it is connected to the map.

Energy is the life force that makes the painting speak to the viewer and makes the artist's work original and identifiable as his work. *Highway to Hell* is a mixture of calm, soothing atmosphere, given by the white bright silhouette and the light brown color of the earth. There is also a feeling of malefic energy and degradation given by the dark blue crystal quartz, the black pentagon, and the big gray oval rock.

Paul Loughney created this piece of art with social and political intentions. *Highway to Hell* makes reference to a topographic map and shapes that are reminiscent of the Pentagon floating over an aerial photo, and this image creates a digital landscape. There are symbols in the painting that represent certain things, and all of them have common denominators: death, deceit, and wickedness. The white silhouette seems to be a beast with horns and hooves in the shape of an angel of light. The gray oval rock looks like a face that laughs in a mocking way and lifts a finger in a sense of revenge. The iridescent dark blue crystal that surrounds the pentagon makes me think of Superman and kryptonite, which was a deadly substance for his body. However, even if being an element of malefic energy, the outside crystal has been polished to make its

facets perfectly shaped and attractive. One piece belonging to the same crystal is placed in the top right corner of the painting, in a bigger size, and it seems to come to life there in that area of light brown color, like in a desert. The inverted five-sided star placed above the map in the aerial image is a symbol of Satanism, also supported by the black color of the pentagon shape inside of it. The spades drawn above the gray rock symbolize death and war. The Pentagon is a city within itself; it is the symbol of defense and military power. *Highway to Hell* tries to represent the political and social degradation of the Pentagon, due to horrifying global events that certainly affect the world, but mostly the United States. While studying and analyzing Paul Loughney's artwork, I find myself admiring the remarkable complexity of the entire painting; however, I am also worried because of the unavoidable reality that this piece of abstract art represents.

Good artwork should grow on the viewer; it should become more interesting and more enjoyable to look at as he or she looks for the art's meaning. I think that *Highway to Hell* is a good and important piece of art because of its quality and message. As Morgan Thrift says, "There are some things too strong for words. And some who shout all the louder with a brush rather than a pen" ("Understanding Abstract Art"). Paul Loughney's *Highway to Hell* expresses the effect of malefic forces acting against the military power of American society, and also the seducing mask that the evil force wears in order to deceive and destroy.

Works Cited

Hann, Harley. "Understanding Abstract Art." 2007. 25 September 2007

<<http://www.harley.com/art/abstract-art/index.html>>.

Thrift, Morgan. "Understanding Abstract Art." 2007. 28 October 2007

<<http://www.helium.com/tm/178148/understanding-abstract-abstract-pursuit>>.

Ms. Acosta's Comments: *Estera's clever insights and ability to attach meaning to ambiguity make sense of a high abstract piece of art. Her clear and careful prose brings to the reader both the immediate experience of the art and the rumination of its effect.*