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THE ART LOVER: On the Romantic Heft of 3-D Art, Jealousy, and Erotic Still Lives

Language
English



by Ben Davis

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THE ART LOVER is an infrequent column of love advice from an art critic's perspective, written by executive editor Ben Davis. If you have a question about art and love that you would like answered, write [bdavis\[at\]artinfo.com](mailto:bdavis[at]artinfo.com) with "The Art Lover" in the subject line.

Dear The Art Lover:

I'm an art critic and writer, and I've been dating someone who is also a writer and critic at a different art publication for a few months now. It's going great, and we have compatible — though, thankfully, not always identical — opinions of most exhibitions we see. The only problem is that I'm a sucker for painting and sculpture, and she is prejudiced against the latter medium. She says she's rarely impressed by three-dimensional work. Should I try to change her mind about sculpture — I'm hoping [the excellent Huma Bhabha show](#) at MoMA PS1 will help chip away at her staunch anti-sculpture stance — or could it be that I'm just insecure about my own unshakable attachment to objects and process-driven works in our conceptualism-favoring field? Should I give up sculpture in the name of love?

—The Sculpture Lover

Dear The Sculpture Lover:

You are an “art critic and writer,” so I believe that in your ink-stained heart you already know the answer to this query. Critical honesty is all you have. Sacrifice your pleasure in 3-D art for love, and you will be reduced to just a lumbering critical automaton, personality blasted away. (Incidentally, this sounds a bit like a Huma Bhabha sculpture.)

I am glad to hear that you are thankful that your tastes differ some. Yet when you say, “The only problem is that I'm a sucker for painting and sculpture, and she is prejudiced against the latter medium,” I reply: A couple of art lovers need no more agree on the art they love than they must wear matching berets. As adorable as that might be.

In fact, *the very insinuation* in your letter that aesthetic disagreement poses an intractable romantic dilemma suggests the perilous reification of critical opinion into pseudo-philosophical dogma that has beset the field of art criticism since the 1970s. Liking one kind of art or another *is not a philosophical position*. We should be unsparing in our critique of such false fixities.

Who indeed, The Sculpture Lover, is to say that fiercesome critical disagreement is not a better basis for an enduring affair than boring old critical consensus? What can generate more fireworks than a sizzling hot intellectual debate? One of the services art offers us in our lives is that it provides something to argue about endlessly, with bottomless passion, yet with no real right answer. This is part of why its pleasures are so boundless.

So, I say: Take your concept-art-loving lover to MoMA PS1! Go argue about Huma Bhabha. Perhaps she will prefer [the neighboring Metahaven show](#). Then go back home and make some fiery art critic love — a practice at once object-based, and reliant upon the power of the mind!

Dear Art Lover:

My girlfriend has the statue of [Michelangelo's] “David” as her cell phone wallpaper. Should I be jealous?

—(Anti)Renaissance Man

Dear (Anti)Renaissance Man:

I strain my imagination to envision the case in which the answer to this question might be “yes.” I would be more worried if your girlfriend had a picture of a shirtless Channing Tatum on her phone. Heck, I would be more worried if she had a picture of a clothed Glenn Lowry.

The 500-year-old humanist pinup known as the “David” has become the eternal symbol of man made perfect (despite [his ginormous paws](#)). But it was also Michelangelo’s symbol for little, republican Florence standing up to Goliath: the nefarious Popes who ruled in his day.

So no, the “David” need pose no threat to you, unless you happen to be a Papal absolutist.

Why do Old Master still-life paintings of food turn me on?

—Ripe Imagination, Brooklyn, NY

For the same reason that perky stalks of asparagus, swollen cantalopes, and glistening oysters turn people on in real life?

Still-life painting, seemingly the most banally factual of genres, has a venerable association with the erotic: Freed from the cumbersome narratives of history painting, the product of a secularizing (though still feverishly repressed) society, and dwelling on over-lit, pulchritudinous treats for the senses... The line between food painting and food porn has always been hazy.

Yet the association is definitely not just the product of an overheated imagination. The specific tradition of *erotic* still life began in Raphael’s circle (Vasari [notes](#) with bemusement the presence of testicular eggplants and engorged purple figs in the work of one of the master’s disciples). But leave it to the inveterate rogue Caravaggio to create the painting that gets credit as the first goads-out “erotic still life,” his “[Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge](#)” of 1601-1605, a wild sexual free-for-all of coyly interlaced peaches, pomegranates, pumpkins, and squash.

In this masterpiece of botanical erotica, the Baroque genius gave “vent to the ambivalence of his own sexual preferences,” [according to one account](#). “Just as the phallic stems and gourds seem somewhat aimlessly pointed, the cleft peaches that surmount the basket are every bit as enticing as the vulvar figs, melons, and pomegranates strewn beneath them.”

In a way, it would be an unhealthy sign if you DID NOT see any sexy associations in a work like this, RI. (And if you are really into this sort of thing, might I suggest that you check out Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens’s “[eco-sexual](#)” [art movement](#).)

My boyfriend would rather paint in his studio than come home... Is he actually painting or is he cheating?

— BenAndJerryz<3

The fact that you have to ask tells me that yes, likely, he is cheating.

What do I do if I suspect I'm one of [the missed connections](#) in ARTINFO's missed connections feature?!?!

For god sakes, write the person! And then write Ben Sutton at bsutton[at]artinfo.com to tell him your triumphant and unlikely tale of art bringing you together.

[Columnist](#), [The Art Lover](#), [Ben Davis](#)

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