

Interpretation and Judgment: Controversial Art

ALL THE RESPONSES TO the work of René Magritte cited in chapter one were favorable. Those quoted respondents implied that they valued Magritte's work. They admired it, although they were never quoted saying so directly; their judgments were implicit and positive. In the case of paintings by Édouard Manet, however, viewers and commentators made judgments that were explicit and sometimes very negative. Some Parisians who first saw Manet's paintings stated that they were ineptly painted, vulgar, and even immoral. Indeed, the jurors of the Paris Salons, the official arbiters of artistic taste at the time, refused to hang them. Some of Manet's contemporaries, and most later historians, implicitly praised the work by devoting much thought and writing to it and then by including Manet's paintings in the canon of art history. Commentators and historians also made explicit positive judgments of Manet's work when they praised it for its contributions to stylistic changes and attitudes in art, most noticeably in its depiction of daily subject matter and the ordinary in life and in its push toward abstraction.

As mentioned previously, the activities of *describing*, *interpreting*, and *judging* are interdependent. These activities are intermingled and form a circle of meaning. How and what we describe is highly influenced by how we interpret and judge it. For example, I could say that the culture in which I live informs me that Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is important (judgment), and when I look at it I see a woman and a bar in front of a mirror (description), but the woman's reflection in the mirror does not make optical sense (interpretation), and therefore I think that Manet's is not a very good painting because it does not accurately portray what I know to be real and, at the minimum, paintings ought to be optically true (judgment). Or I could say, for

example, that I see colors on a surface (description) that delight me (judgment) and I wonder how this array of colors and splotches that form a place and people and things might inform me about what I am attracted to (an impulse to interpret). Or, as the jurors of the Salons may have thought, this painting is inaccurately (description) and ineptly (judgment) painted and does not deserve to be hung in the Salon or to be interpreted at all. This chapter examines further the interdependence of interpretation and judgment by looking at works of art that are controversial in the present day.

RELIGIOUSLY CONTROVERSIAL ART: *THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY* BY CHRIS OFILI

On Saturday, October 2, 1999, at the opening of an art exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York, protestors outside the Museum handed out "vomit bags" embossed with the sword and shield of the Catholic League, suggesting to visitors that the exhibition they were lined up to see was sickening. The afternoon before, supporters of the Museum and the exhibition staged a rally featuring celebrities and politicians who passionately defended the exhibition. The brouhaha quickly spread nationally and internationally through TV news and the press. The exhibition was called "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection." It included the work of forty artists with around ninety paintings, sculptures, and installations, many of them large, displayed in two grand galleries in the Museum. These were recent works by avant-garde British artists, the best-known of whom was Damien Hirst. The works were selected from the personal collection of Charles Saatchi, an advertising executive in England and collector of contemporary art. The controversy centered on one picture in the exhibition, a painting made by Chris Ofili, called *The Holy Virgin Mary* (Color Plate 6). Central to the controversy was how the painting was interpreted.

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- *Interpretation is central to controversy.*

The picture and the artist achieved instant notoriety when the mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, condemned it, calling it "sick stuff." The Museum is partially funded by city tax dollars, and the mayor demanded that the Museum remove the painting from the exhibition. If the Museum did not take the painting down, or move the whole exhibition to a private exhibition space, he threatened to withhold the city's annual contribution to the Museum of \$7.2 million (about a third of the Museum's operating budget), withhold a promised \$20 million for building improvements, dismiss the Museum's board of directors, and reclaim the city-owned building.

When the Museum refused to capitulate to the mayor's demands, the city withheld the half-million-dollar October payment and sued to evict the Museum from its city-owned site. The Museum filed a lawsuit of its own, claiming its First Amendment rights had been violated by the freeze on its subsidy from the city. Eventually, a federal judge restored city funding to the Museum, ruling that Mayor Giuliani had vio-

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lated the First Amendment. She wrote, "There is no federal constitutional issue more grave than the effort by government officials to censor works of expression and to threaten the vitality of a major cultural institution. . . ." The mayor reacted by saying the "judge is totally out of control"¹ and vowed to counter her decision with new legal moves, but both sides dropped their respective lawsuits in March. The show ran for three months, closing in January 2000 after more than 180,000 visitors had seen the exhibition.²

Although the mayor had not seen the painting, he said it represented "Catholic bashing" and "hate speech." What was so offensive to the mayor was that the painting included elephant dung, and he apparently believed, based on whatever he had been told, that people were "throwing elephant dung at a picture of the Virgin Mary." Cardinal John O'Connor, then head of the archdiocese of New York, joined the fray and in his weekly sermon from St. Patrick's Cathedral, asked Catholics to condemn the painting, saying, "I'm saddened by what appears to be an attack not only on our Blessed Mother . . . but on religion itself."³

The wall text accompanying the painting at the Museum listed the media of the painting as "paper collage, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, elephant dung on linen." The collage elements in the painting include magazine pictures of women's bare buttocks, cut in shapes reminiscent of butterflies. They are small and float about the Virgin. The painting does not hang on the wall but leans against it. Two clumps of elephant dung beneath the painting on the floor function like two pedestals for the painting. One has the word *Virgin* and the other *Mary* spelled out with map pins that look like African beadwork. The painting is large, eight feet high by six feet wide. The overall surface of the painting is bright and glittery. (Because of the painting's shiny surface, it is difficult to obtain a good photographic reproduction of it.)

The artist's use of elephant dung was the element that the media latched onto in its reporting about the painting. The painting was referred to as "splattered with dung" (*Wall Street Journal*), "dung smeared" (*New York Post*), "dung encrusted" (*Associated Press*), "elephant-dung-ornamented" (*New York Times*) and was said to have used "a mixture of paint and elephant dung" (*Business Week*), "elephant doo-doo" (*Sarasota Herald*), and "imported pachyderm parcels" (*People*). The controversy gave rise to puns such as the front-page headline of "No Dung Deal" in the *New York Post*, September 29, 1999.

The artist was interviewed in England by a newspaper reporter and observed, "I think there's some bigger agenda here." Ofili seems astute in his observation, made from across the ocean, about politics in New York. Elizabeth Kolbert of the *New Yorker* referred to the mayor's outrage as "a piece of political theatre."⁴ Cathleen McGuigan of *Newsweek* magazine identified some of the agenda at work: "The Mayor was looking to appeal to upstate voters in his New York Senate race, the Museum needed a hit show to put itself on the map and the city's other cultural institutions were looking for a way to show solidarity without giving Giuliani an excuse to cut off their city subsidies. And of course, there was Charles Saatchi . . . the Mayor's office charged that he

only stood to gain from the scandal, which will inevitably increase the value of his collection."⁵

Ofili also quickly and importantly noted that "the people who are attacking this painting are attacking their own interpretation, not mine." The artist did not provide an interpretation of the work, but he distanced himself from those who thought the work obscene and hateful toward religion. He revealed that he has a Roman Catholic upbringing and that he is a church-going Catholic. He is British-born with African ancestry. Both his parents were born in Lagos, Nigeria, and their first language is Yoruba. Ofili says he was very moved by the beauty of the African land when he studied and painted for eight weeks in Zimbabwe when he was twenty-four. Most of his works are vibrantly colored, employing multiple layers of dots, inspired by images in ancient caves in Zimbabwe. He rests his paintings on clumps of dung, saying, "It's a way of raising the paintings from the ground and giving them a feeling that they've come from the earth rather than simply being hung on a wall." About his use of dung as an element of his artistic media, he says, "There's something incredibly simple but incredibly basic about it. It attracts multiple meanings and interpretations."⁶

New York City's best-known black newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, offered a counter-interpretation to the mayor's: "Ofili portrays Mary as a rather exciting Black with impressive eyes, a hint of breast upon which a piece of dung has been placed, signifying nourishment, the color of darkness, a broad nose and a sensuousness not generally assumed when one sees the Eurocentric version of Mother Mary. . . . We believe that his [Giuliani's] sensibilities were shocked by the belief that Mother Mary happened to be some color other than the color that he has accepted for everything that is good and pure and right and white."⁷

Although most commentators attended to the elephant dung, some also addressed the artist's use of magazine cutouts of female buttocks and genitalia. His oil paintings often include pictures cut from magazines as well as comic-book-like characters. Michael Kimmelman, art critic for the *New York Times*, sees the cutouts in *The Holy Virgin Mary* as allusions to naked putti—winged, chubby, cute, naked, angelic children with round bottoms and rosy faces—in Old Master paintings. Kimmelman reports Ofili recounting that, in his own childhood, he was struck by all the paintings of the Virgin Mary with an exposed breast that were sexually charged. Kimmelman finds this observation by Ofili to be "perfectly fair," and recalls paintings of religious themes that have offended throughout history. Michelangelo offended the church with his *Last Judgment*. Paolo Veronese's *The Last Supper* includes black pages, turbaned Muslims, a dwarf, and two soldiers in German dress, all of whom offended church powers at the time. Veronese was called before the Inquisition in 1573 and subsequently changed the name of the painting to *Feast in the House of Levi*.⁸

Lynn MacRitchie, a London-based art critic writing for an American art journal, thinks Ofili consciously brings Christian iconography into proximity with contemporary profanity in everyday culture. MacRitchie wrote, "As a painter and as a Roman Catholic, Ofili has long been familiar with the image of the Virgin as both an artistic

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and a religious icon. As a young black male steeped in contemporary culture, he found it perfectly sensible to rework Mary as a black woman and to place her in juxtaposition with the contemporary discourse of pornography. In doing so, the artist chose to make explicit the sexual undertones which cannot be separated from any image of a beautiful young woman suckling her child.⁹

Based on the controversy over *The Holy Virgin Mary*, Stephen Dubin, an art historian, wrote an account of the events and took occasion to generalize about cases of artistic censorship, inventing a character he calls *Homo censorious* to stand in for all humans who would censor what other human beings might otherwise see. A basic assumption, according to Dubin, is that "*Homo censorious* insists on a single interpretation of a work of art." To provide an example, Dubin quotes a letter writer to the *New York Daily News* about *The Holy Virgin Mary*: "I know what the Virgin Mary looks like, and that is nowhere near a resemblance." Dubin explains that such people are certain that they know what some works of art mean and refuse to consider any alternative interpretations of them. They fail to recognize the principle that "the most compelling art typically generates multiple interpretations."

Dubin asserts that "*Homo censorious* takes a few elements out of context—specific words, titles, part of a design—and treats them as if they embody the entire work of art." He argues that "condemning works of art on the basis of isolated components is misleading and unfair. Art cannot be judged by focusing only on a fragment: the full meaning of a disputed piece can only be gleaned by considering the work in its entirety, relating it to the rest of the artist's output and considering the context provided by the work of his or her contemporaries." The dung in Ofili's work is only a part of the painting, and those who fault the painting for its use of dung only see one interpretation for the dung, that is, that the artist is committing the sin of sacrilege. Ofili, however, uses elephant dung in many of his paintings, including paintings he makes about secular culture. He is not singling out religious subjects with the medium. One of Ofili's other paintings in the "Sensation" show, for example, is *Afrodizzia*, a work that pays tribute to Cassius Clay, Miles Davis, Diana Ross, and other black icons, and it too utilizes elephant dung in a manner very similar to its use in *The Holy Virgin Mary*.¹⁰

Dubin offers another characteristic: "*Homo censorious* assumes a paternalistic attitude toward the public," and explains that *Homo censorious* "is both self-righteous and adamant about what he believes, and assumes that others are incapable of deciding for themselves what is good and bad, right and wrong." The paternalistic attitude is based on beliefs that there is a natural as well as cultural hierarchy among living things and that the male of the human species is on top and ought to exert control, because he knows best what is good for the rest. Sometimes *Homo censorious* claims to be trying to protect children, but he usually extends his surveillance to adults.

A final characteristic of Dubin's *Homo censorious* is that he or she "overestimates the power of exposure to different forms of cultural expression and assumes the effects to be immediate and irreversible." *Homo censorious* fears that many aspects of contemporary culture can only contaminate minds and believes that if you "eliminate

what you perceive to be pernicious, you've performed a momentous deed."¹¹ In other words, censors have rescuer mentalities, believing they need to jump in and save people from what will harm them if they see it. Neither the mayor nor the cardinal who would have had Ofili's painting removed from the exhibition gave extended reasons for their decisions, only revealing that they thought the work to be sacrilegious, anti-religious, or offensive. The cardinal and the mayor did not explain what dire things they thought would happen to people who looked at the painting. Apparently they assumed, as Dubin says, that something pernicious, immediate, and irreversible would occur to anyone who saw *The Holy Virgin Mary*. The mayor and the cardinal failed to explain, however, what those horrible consequences would be, and they did not provide any empirical evidence or rational arguments to support that what they feared would actually come about.

• *How one judges a work will likely affect how one describes it.*

Verbal descriptions figure very prominently in the critical discourse surrounding *The Holy Virgin Mary*. Those who are opposed to the work do not describe it, but typify it with derogatory terms. For example, Roger Kimball, art critic for the *Wall Street Journal* and managing editor of the *New Criterion*, a scholarly journal of art criticism, refers to the painting as "splattered with elephant dung."¹² For a professional art critic to refer to Ofili's use of dung in *The Holy Virgin Mary* as "splattered" is either an irresponsible lack of research—that is, he did not observe the painting he described—or an act of intentionally cynical and misinformative writing to inflame his readers, most of whom will never see the actual painting nor even a good reproduction of it. The *Wall Street Journal* published no reproduction to accompany Kimball's article.

Michael Kimmelman, the art critic for the *New York Times*, was ambivalent about the painting and the controversy, pointing out both positive and negative effects, and offered this introductory description of Ofili's works for his readers: "He has several large pictures in the show, all of them incorporating elephant dung, one way or another. They're basically abstract, brightly colored, meticulously made works of swirling shapes and beautifully stippled surfaces, throwbacks to the 60's psychedelic art, with occasional bits of text woven into them, conveying a lightness of spirit."¹³ MacRitchie, a critic who is positive about the artist's work, wrote this introductory description: "Chris Ofili's paintings are joyous things to behold. Dotted with bright pastel colors, layered with shiny varnish, sprinkled with glitter, their surfaces seem to dance and dazzle and shimmer and shine. Some even glow in the dark. Complex, decorative and mostly figurative, they are populated with an ever-increasing cast of characters, both real and imaginary. And, oh yes, they are often presented leaning against rather than hanging on a wall, supported on balls of varnished elephant dung, the way that overstuffed armchairs used to rest on carved wood spheres."¹⁴

Thus, Kimball, Kimmelman, and MacRitchie have different judgments of the painting, and their descriptions of it are influenced by their judgments. They also use lan-

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guage persuasively to sway their readers' judgments of the painting. Readers can check the accuracy of critical descriptions by comparing critics' words to artists' pictures.

- *Descriptions are accurate or inaccurate: readers can check the accuracy of critical descriptions by comparing critics' words to artists' works.*

A letter writer to *Newsweek* underscores the importance of seeing works that are the objects of judgments when she thanked the magazine for printing a reproduction of the painting, saying, "It's too easy to condemn something that you've never seen. I was prepared to be offended and outraged after hearing about his dung-decorated rendering of Mary. To my surprise, I think it's a terrific work." Seeing a reproduction of the work allowed her to form her own interpretation of it: "Yes, it's different. But this very contemporary rendering tells me that if Mary were a young woman today, she would be bombarded and surrounded by sexual images at every turn: television programs and commercials, movies, pop-music lyrics and magazine ads, to name a few. The title of the work, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, says it all, that a contemporary Mary would reject the barrage of temptations, remain a virgin and do God's will."¹⁵

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- *Politics affect interpretations.*

The mayor's position on the painting and on the Museum's exhibition of it had severe economic, as well as political, sanctions attached to it, and other museum directors were likely cautious in their defense of freedom of expression and exhibition, so as not to incur sanctions from the mayor on their own institutions. It is likely that politics affected both interpretations and judgments of *The Holy Virgin Mary* and the right of a public museum to display it.

Philippe de Montebello, director of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* that praised Giuliani for his "astute critical acumen" and his "aesthetic sensibilities," while expressing regret for the mayor's effort at censorship. De Montebello's criticism of Ofili's and the other artists' work in the exhibition was harsh: "artists who deserve to remain obscure or be forgotten."¹⁶ Lee Rosenbaum, a critic writing for *Art in America*, noted de Montebello's judgment while pointing out that the director's own museum had just purchased for its permanent collection a set of Ofili etchings.¹⁷

More than a week after the worst of the storm had passed, the director of the Museum of Modern Art came to the defense of the Brooklyn Museum with a short and mild op-ed piece in the *New York Times*. He argued that "to work with contemporary art is to understand that new ideas require a great deal of patience and openness. Art is a language, a means of communicating deeply held ideas and beliefs, and to dismiss that which we do not like because we do not understand it makes no more sense than ignoring German or Chinese literature because we cannot read German or Chinese."¹⁸

What is particularly notable about this case of Ofili's painting in the "Sensation" exhibition is how many commented on the painting, very passionately, without having seen it, including the mayor. People, for the most part, were commenting on the verbal observations of reporters and commentators and others who also had not seen the painting. People were either accepting the descriptions and interpretations of others or forming their own based on others' words, and then, in turn, they were making very forceful judgments about the painting. Had the contributors to the furor over the painting first gone to see the painting in the Museum, there may have been no furor at all. No one who saw the painting in person could accurately or honestly state that it was smeared, splattered, or splashed with dung. The dung that the artist used was dried, heavily shellacked, and, in a small clump, attached to the painting and, in two larger clumps with beadwork, used as short pedestals. Seeing the actual painting without being told what the material was, one would have been hard pressed to figure out that the material was dung.

Once one knew the material to be dung, one's interpretation of its meaning became paramount. Many of those who heard "dung" took immediate offense, forming an interpretation that imputed to the artist sacrilegious disrespect of the Virgin Mary. The wall text, however, prominently displayed right next to the painting, gave a reasonable account of the painting and a different interpretation of its use of dung as a respectful symbol of nourishment in an African context:

From a distance, this painting looks as glittering and stylized as a traditional religious icon. But up close, we see some unexpected attributes. The Virgin is not surrounded by putti or angels, but by photos of buttocks, oddly cut out so as to resemble angel wings. This Virgin is black, not white, with African, not European, features. And her exposed breast, traditional symbol of divine generosity, is made of the manure that nourishes African soil.

Most of the commentators in the media did not read this text or chose to ignore it in their reporting on the painting and the events surrounding it. Dung that was falsely said to be "splattered" was more newsworthy than "manure that nourishes."

The Brooklyn Museum of Art unwittingly set up its audience with misinterpretive expectations by its own marketing of the exhibition, with a tongue-in-cheek "health warning" that was meant to be playful advertising:

HEALTH WARNING

The contents of this exhibition may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety. If you suffer from high blood pressure, a nervous disorder, or palpitations, you should consult your doctor before viewing the exhibition.

This attention-getting publicity device of the Museum's, however, provided a general interpretive mindset for all the works in the exhibition, including Ofili's. In effect, the Museum prompted visitors before they even entered the exhibition to interpret *The*

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Holy Virgin Mary as sensational, shocking, and sickening. When visitors stood next to Ofili's painting of the Virgin, however, the Museum, with its wall signage, was sending the opposite message, telling the visitors to calm down, that the painting merely had "some unexpected attributes."

- *All works of art are candidates for controversy.*

Works of art, in themselves, are not controversial. Works of art might be difficult, challenging, or unconventional, or possess unexpected attributes, but people make them controversial. To make an artwork controversial, someone interprets the work to mean a certain thing, then asserts that the artwork will be harmful to those who see it, and gets public support for their position. Without public support and publicity, there may be disagreement, but there is no public controversy. When talking and writing about the artwork, those who believe the work to be harmful use language to alarm others. For example, they seem to be describing the work, but they are actually choosing words that encourage outrage against the artwork and anger toward the artist who made it and toward those who would show it. Any work of art can be made controversial. There are works of art in "Sensation" and in New York City that might be even better candidates for controversy than Chris Ofili's painting, but Mayor Giuliani chose *The Holy Virgin Mary*.

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SEXUALLY CONTROVERSIAL ART: PAINTINGS BY ERIC FISCHL

In 1997, Robert Hughes, the art critic for *Time* magazine, made a television series on American art called "American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America, 1997," which was shown by the British Broadcasting Corporation in Great Britain and by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the United States. Eric Fischl is one of the contemporary American painters whom Hughes features in the series. When PBS broadcast the series, however, they removed two of Fischl's paintings from it. The producer of the American version of the series explained that he omitted the two paintings "in light of American taste and notions of decency."¹⁹ The two paintings are *Sleep Walker*, 1979, and *Birthday Boy*, 1983 (Color Plate 7). *Sleepwalker* features an adolescent boy masturbating in a wading pool, and *Birthday Boy* shows an open-crotch woman with a young boy on a bed.

Jack Flam provides an overview of Fischl's work that he wrote for readers of the *Wall Street Journal*, an audience who might be interested in art but that is for the most part not professionally engaged in the art world. Flam writes, "Mr. Fischl remains a very controversial painter. Critical opinions about his work run from enthusiastic praise to outright disdain. To some, he is a ruthlessly honest realist; to others, he is a cheap sensationalist." Flam goes on to explain that "the controversy centers almost exclusively on the content of Mr. Fischl's work rather than its form. Much of his straightforwardly realistic, sometimes flat-footed imagery is overtly sexual. And it is