

Ask an Art Critic... For Relationship Advice: On Commitment, Shared Taste, and Hot Love With Bad Artists

by Ben Davis

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Dear Ben,

I have been in a relationship for almost two years (18 months). I value my creative independence — and I value my independence in general. Now I am wondering, is this the rest of my life? How do I know if and when I am ready to go into the long haul?

—The Rake

Dear The Rake:

Dr. Lakra is an artist who has made quite the splash lately. This Mexican-born former tattoo artist has stormed the contemporary art world with his signature aesthetic of pin-ups and wrestlers, all drawn from the pulp-tastic imagery he used to ink on the bodies of human actual beings. Lakra recently had a full-scale mid-career survey at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and a show at New York's Drawing Center.

"In one way or another, the noncivilized human, the nonrefined, the primitive, is always being repressed, in a way that's almost criminal," Lakra has said of his themes. His work braids together two subjects that are of great interest to lovers facing long-term commitment issues: sex and the rest of your life. Sex because, well, a tattoo is a bodily thing, man — and it'll be most apparent when you're naked. And the rest of your life because you are making a decision about the rest of your life, barring some very painful surgery.

My point is this, The Rake: Why not get a tattoo? If you value your independence too much to be pinned down to a tattoo then you are also not ready to spend the rest of your life with someone. All my instincts as an art critic tell me that it is a good mental test. Final word:

Escaping an ill-founded long-term relationship is more painful than living with some bad ink. Take a cue from the good doctor and look for your inspiration in tattoos.

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Dear Ben,

My lover and I share an apartment and a certain painting. When she looks at it she sees an old lady, but when I look at it I see a beautiful young woman in an elegant hat. What should we do?

—Adam K., Weehawken, N.J.

Dear Adam K.,

I am not sure this is a serious question. How do you expect me to respond to this? To say that you are dandyish horndog, and she is thinking about her own mortality? Are you aware that art criticism is a serious business, with a 150-year-plus history of heady debate about the spiritual value of art? I am not sure that you are!

I will say this though, Adam K.: Unless you live in a circus fun house, a shared love of optical illusions is not a promising foundation for any relationship, anyway. Having an M.C. Escher print on the wall is no firm basis upon which to build your love — not least because every time you think you are at the top you are actually down at the bottom.

So I say to you, aim higher. Test the limits of your taste, and lose yourself in the dreamworlds of Archimboldo, Piranesi, or the greatest of the Surrealists, René Magritte! These artists also look good in poster form, but they at least represent a higher aspiration in life than to have something to debate when you are smoking your hookah.

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Dear Ben:

I recently had a great date with a guy, who is also an artist. Afterward, I went home to look at his work online, and the news is not good. He is a bad painter of semi-ironic images of naked women and dogs. I don't know if I can go out with a guy whose work I don't respect. I had chemistry with him but not his work. What do I do?

Dear Taste-y/Testy:

Ah, now here is a problem that seems straight-forward, like "Bird in Space," but is actually knotty like... the "Book of Kells"!

Now, the obvious answer would be that it DOES NOT MATTER. Love conquers all, etc., etc. Your mutual, slobbery chemistry will overcome some little qualms about his art. Love is the most important thing!

But no, the real question here, is: *How bad* is his Martin Eder-esque ironic dog painting? How ironic? How Martin Eder-esque? (look him up)

There is an answer from within the field of technical aesthetics to this dilemma that I will now explain. In my forthcoming essay for ARTINFO, "A Four-Field Approach to the Judgment of Contemporary Art," I argue, drawing on the works of Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood, that properly aesthetic judgment is SEMI-AUTONOMOUS from several other manners of approaching an object of art. By "semi-autonomous" I mean separate but also connected.

One of these different ways of approaching an object of art is from the point of view of its personal significance to you, which includes your love for the artist him or herself — that is, one of the reasons you might like a work is that you care for the person who created it, and this question is separate but connected to the question of whether you like it aesthetically. Witness the New York Times's recent expose on the glut of child art in the United States; people love their children, so they love their children's art.

My point is this, Taste-y: Your dilemma is an early-relationship dilemma. Either the relationship ends OR your dislike of his art ends. You will learn to be able to at least SEMI-LIKE your ironic dog guy's work, because you will come to see it from the inside of his world, with his reasons and rationalizations (although your insinuation of these is not promising), or you will learn to dislike him, because these reasons and rationalizations are part of who he is.

Unless, of course, the sex is really good.

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"Ask an Art Critic... For Relationship Advice" is a column by ARTINFO deputy editor [Ben Davis](#). If you have a question about love, write bdavis@artinfo.com with the words "I Am Asking an Art Critic For Relationship Advice" in the subject line.