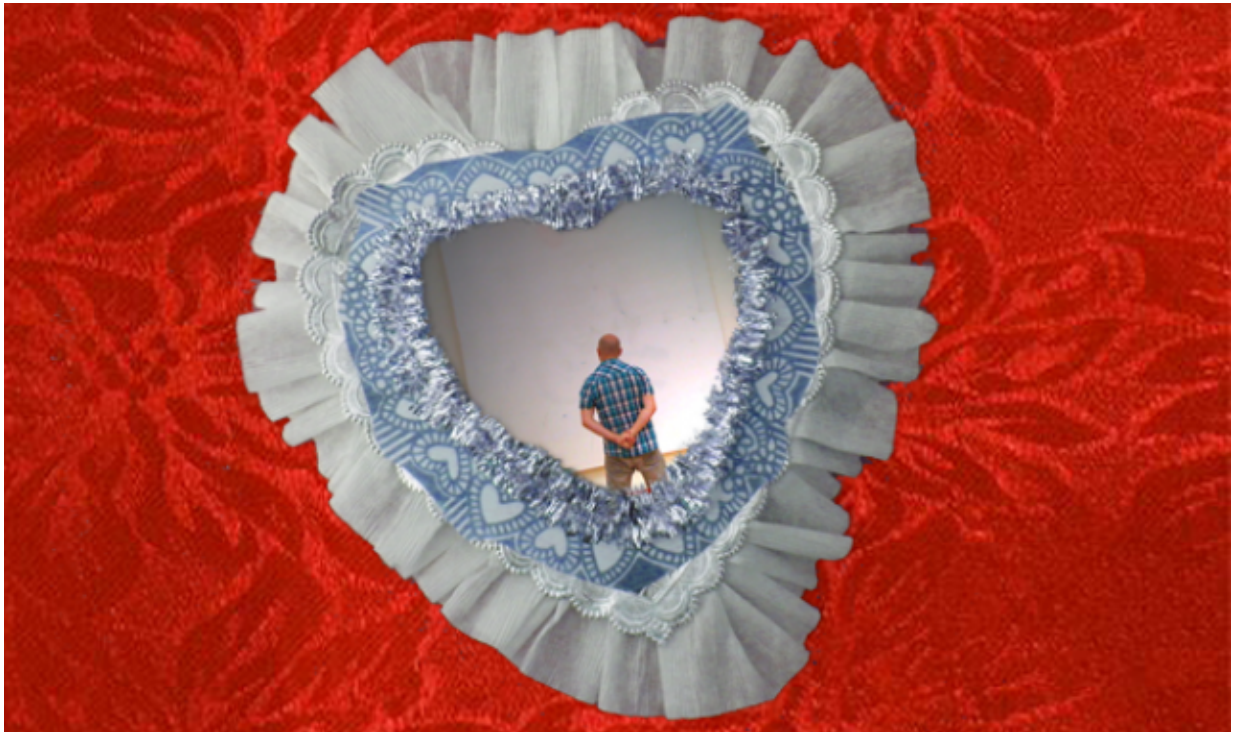


The Art Lover: Relationship Advice on Abstract Art, the Perils of Primitivism, and How to Pick a Museum to Set the Mood

by Ben Davis

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(Illustration by ARTINFO)

Dear Love Critic:

I don't get abstract art. My girlfriend says she likes it but I don't believe her. I mean, how can she really like paintings that a 5 year old could do? Should we stay together or is it just a matter of time before the distrust and lies crush us?

—Piet

Dear Piet:

If abstract art is a dealbreaker for you, then I suggest that you break that deal right now like a plate in a Julian Schnabel painting.

And yet — as Julian Schnabel demonstrated with those plate paintings — there is no reason why you can't make something out of this particular mess. Perhaps you might come to an aesthetic compromise between your lady love's fancy for abstraction and your more traditional tastes, a compromise that could look like Schnabel's "[St. Francis in Ecstasy](#)" of 1980, in which the jagged and inarticulate fragments of porcelain come together to make an image from the canon of classic art.

Speaking of ecstasy: If your lover claims she is into the wilder forms of abstraction, Piet, you can believe her. And I don't have to explain the whole history of abstraction (but *may we even speak of abstraction?* or must we speak, instead, of "abstractions"?) to tell you why.

Harold Rosenberg coined the term "existential painting," seeing [Jackson Pollock's](#) canvasses as an inchoate but articulate crying out of the vanishing creative moment through the medium of paint. If you wish to understand the beauty of such a gesture, Piet, you may think of it, in painting form, as something like the moan of a lover brought on by passion at its most bestial and exalted. Yes, perhaps, such an utterance is not lucidly crafted the same way as a college graduation speech, but to be drawn to it is to be drawn back to the ecstatic moment from which it issued.

And if you can't buy this, Piet, well, just remember, it could be worse. Your girlfriend could be into conceptualism.

Dear Ben,

I am a single female art dealer. So far the only men I can find to date are either artists (crazy), dealers (slimy), and writers (socially awkward). I never seem to meet anyone OUT of the art world who interests me, but everyone IN it scares me to death. Are there any sane men I can date, or should I just give up the ghost?

Thanks!

—Allegra LaViola

Dear Allegra:

I ignore at the outset the fact that by the terms of the question you are slimy and I am socially awkward.

Non-art-world men bore you, and art-world men are freakish divas. But the fact that you relate the question back to art tells me, despite your quest for the “sane man,” that you are still looking for someone who has that special avant-garde gleam in his eye, who can explain pictures to a dead hare, even if he doesn’t know who Joseph Beuys is.

In short, what you want is a “self-taught” or “naïve” lover.

No, not in the sense that he’s never known the touch of woman. I mean in the sense of a “self-taught artist” — all the interest of cutting-edge art, but without being stultified by the professional baggage. Do such men exist? Sure they do! They are rare pieces of work, and perhaps only a connoisseur can spot them, but they do exist, yes.

What I can tell you about your conundrum is this: A good romantic pairing is like the issue of “quality” in the theory of art. To ruthlessly simplify, you could say that a theorist like the great Arthur Danto believes that, in our age of diverse artistic choices, all judgment of quality is arbitrary — that something is “art” simply because someone says it is, and that ultimately that choice has no meaning. This promiscuous theory of aesthetics, however, is FALSE.

Our art environment is diverse — but not so diverse that any old thing can be seen to be “art” just because we say it is. There can only be consensus about whether something is particularly “artistic” if people agree that it is set off against a whole host of other things that don’t seem artistic at all, that seem banal or conventional or repetitive. This perception is subjective, but not arbitrary.

My point, Allegra, is this: Just as the postmodern chaos of our visual environment can lead us to believe that there is no foundation for art, it is all too easy to become overwhelmed by all the bad romantic options out there and believe that there is no hope, and that you might as well give up. But just as “art” is only *determined differentially* against all the stuff that falls short of that refined criteria, so your experience of something like a real, satisfying match is only determinable against the background of all those who fall short of your expectations.

So, this whole business about not meeting people you are interested in? As long as you are still meeting people, I would take that as part of *refining your judgment*. It is actually important to know what you don't like, so that you may know what you do. When you hear the voice telling you to give up the ghost, that is your inner Danto speaking. Do not listen to him.

Dear Ben:

My boyfriend likes to use the term “primitivism,” and I have a problem with that. How do I address this without being preachy?

Dear No Name:

I am assuming that you are looking for a method less preachy than telling your boyfriend that his language “illustrates, without consciously intending to, the parochial limitations of our world view and the almost autistic reflexivity of Western civilization’s modes of relating to the cultural Other.” Consequently, the conventional method of reading aloud from Thomas McEvilley’s 1984 Artforum essay on “Primitivism” — the text that launched the debate into the mainstream art world — is closed to you.

I’d also hope that it’s not *just the word* that bugs you. I mean, I hope that the issue here is not just your boyfriend saying, you know, “I’m fascinated with Primitivism, the important early-20th-century art movement whose most notable proponent was [Paul Gauguin](#).” I would hope that the problem is some kind of underlying UNEXAMINED CULTURAL INSENSITIVITY on your boyfriend’s part. And because of this, I would be more worried about not confronting it than being preachy. Be blunt. Be clear. And then, provided he takes your critique like a scholar, give him a kiss.

Dear Art Critic,

I have an upcoming date, and all we've set so far is that we're going to go to a museum. I live in New York City, and this is a little weird but... I'm wondering what current exhibit has the most aphrodisiac qualities. De Kooning is at MoMA. Cattalan is at the Guggenheim. The Met has "The Renaissance Portrait." Which one would get her in the mood the most? Or maybe you know of a smaller exhibit that would subtly set the tone for a long romantic evening? (The stuff at PS1 seems really strange right now and if that turns her on I think I'd be freaked out!)

Thanks for any help,

—Ryan A.

Dear Ryan A.:

Readers write to ask me all the time about which works of art are best to whet the erotic appetite. Let me begin my answers by laying out the strengths and weaknesses of all the shows you have put on the table.

De Kooning drips with high modern intensity. Yet the works also have a certain *vagina dentata* aesthetic that prevents me from recommending them wholeheartedly for these purposes. Also, that show is now closed.

Cattalan may make you chuckle, but will only truly delight a companion who is aroused by Hitler jokes.

"The Renaissance Portrait" will present you with the most delicate of aesthetic delights. And yet its themes of marriage, death, and fidelity may not be the best first-date material.

Better candidates? You might consider the Morgan Library's "Treasures of Islamic Manuscript Painting" with its tales of Laila and Majnun, the "Persian Romeo and Juliet," or the Brooklyn Museum's "Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties." Carsten Höller at the New Museum has an exhilarating slide, and also a literal chemical love potion to sniff, so it is perhaps the most literally aphrodisiac show out there — though perhaps this last will make your intentions too clear.

And yet, Ryan, and yet! Even from the varied reactions this list has inspired in your own mind as you have read it back, it must be clear that the answer resides much more in *how* you approach the show than in *what* you see.

Herein lies one of the greatest lessons that art theory can teach the lover. For we may like to watch, but the mind is still the most magnificent of erotic organs. Take your date not to the show where you think the art will set the mood *for you*, but where the art will allow *you* to set the mood.

Too often, we expect art to simply open itself to us and give up its secrets without work, like a TV show. And yet in fact, if we approach art as a tourist, simply looking for it to serve as the pleasant background, then is no more delightful, and arouses no more passion, than any other amusement.

The unique power of art is in its ability to yield up the deeper and more intense pleasures that come with knowledge of it. Invest in actually loving something. Take your date to see the art that you truly enjoy and know something about, then share your passion and make this art come alive with meaning, and your success is assured.

"The Art Lover" is a column by ARTINFO chief art critic [Ben Davis](#). If you have a question about love and/or art, write [bdavis\[at\]artinfo.com](mailto:bdavis[at]artinfo.com). Don't be shy.