Two good documentaries about art

I'VE HEARD A lot of talk about "goodness, truth, and beauty" in the context of the arts; Christians, especially, love to bring up this trio of concepts when discussing paintings or stories. What is the relationship between these three concepts and that of "value"? It seems sometimes that the rest of the world has decided to consider art primarily in reference to cultural or economic value rather than aesthetic value. But how does "value" get imputed to a work of art? Is value in "the eye of the beholder," as they say about beauty? Recently I watched two documentaries which bring a tricky set of nuances to questions of artistic, economic, aesthetic, and cultural value in the context of contemporary art.

BANKSY'S 2011 FILM *Exit through the Gift Shop* is the story of Thierry Guetta, who is either a genius or a madman or a charlatan as devious as the Duke and Dauphin from *Huckleberry Finn*. The story starts out with him filming various personalities in the global street art scene; he accompanies prominent graffiti artists such as Space Invader, Monsieur André, and Shepard Fairey, filming them as they make their art. Eventually he meets Banksy. Although Guetta claims he is creating a documentary about street art, it turns out that his videographing is just the result of some sort of obsessive tic; the hours of footage he has accumulated are in a state of absolute disorder. Banksy takes over the project, intending to salvage what can be used of Guetta's tapes and finish the documentary. He sends Guetta back home to Los Angeles to "go make some art" . . . which he does, with a vengeance.

Guetta transforms himself into "Mister Brainwash" and creates piles and piles of artworks that merely look like derivative copies of the Andy Warhol and Banksy stuff we've all seen before. He hustles up all sorts of publicity for his big opening show, and the buzz takes off. People believe his own self-hype and he takes the Los Angeles art scene by storm; he becomes the next big thing, and sells his canvases for $30,000 and up.

This rather annoys Banksy, who is not at all certain that the art of "Mister Brainwash" was ready for public exposure. "He hasn't matured yet," Banksy says. But it's too late to stop the juggernaut that is Mister Brainwash. At one point, the film shows us a line of people waiting outside to get into Mister Brainwash's packed gallery show and get a chance at winning one of the door prizes. When interviewed, these

people sound like they are genuinely excited for this hot new artist to burst onto the scene in their city . . . but what are they excited about? Are they interested in new art, or are they just riding the hype wave? "I was there at Mister Brainwash's first show" . . . like an art-world version of James Murphy talking about how hip he is on "Losing My Edge"?

Is it a good thing for people to crank out art like this? Banksy isn't so sure. In the last line of the film (and in my mind one of the greatest dry-humor lines in all of cinema history) he says, "I used to tell everyone I met that they should make art. Now I don't tell them that anymore." Is *everyone* worth celebrating?

But what's the problem with people enjoying the hottest new things, even if maybe they are only liking that stuff because of its market cachet? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but so is taste and value—value, indeed, is an even more slippery quality to pin down than the notoriously difficult-to-define "beauty."

IN *MY KID Could Paint That* (Amir Bar-Lev, 2007), we are introduced to Marla Olmstead, a little four-year-old girl who likes to play with fingerpaint. Her father, an amateur painter himself, encourages her talent, and some of her paintings catch the eye of a friend who owns a coffee shop; Marla's paintings get put up on the wall . . . and they sell. Things really start to pick up when a local gallery owner arranges a show of Marla's paintings; the show sells out, the New York Times runs a story about Marla, and next thing you know, she's commanding prices of up to $20,000 for her canvases. Marla herself is oblivious to all this, of course; she's only four years old—it's hilarious to watch her answer art-world questions like "do you want to talk about what your paintings mean?" with short four-year-old dialogue like "No." Marla is just a regular kid who likes to paint.

Or is she? A child development expert, asked to look at Marla's paintings, says she thinks Marla is "a child prodigy" . . . then she watches some candid-camera footage of Marla actually painting, and changes her mind. It seems that when Marla is painting in front of a camera her pictures tend to look rather different from the ones that were sold at the gallery; the paintings she makes "on her own" seem less "polished" than the other ones. Some people actually begin to accuse Marla's dad of "guiding" Marla and even touching up the paintings after she's done.

The question of "who painted Marla's pictures" is left spectacularly out in the open; Amir Bar-Lev's film doesn't come down with certainty on either side of the issue—but by asking the question at all, the film invites doubt regarding the pictures' provenance, a doubt that cannot easily be brushed away.

TAKEN TOGETHER, THESE two films pose some serious questions about how value is imputed to art—especially, these days, when the more abstract kinds of art are in the cultural ascendancy. Back when all the paintings were representational, it was easy to

say whether a particular piece of art was good or bad: did it look like its subject, or did it not? Now, though, there is no set criterion for judging whether an abstract painting is "good" or "bad." There is no canon of abstract aesthetics, no agreed-upon standard of taste and quality; if you like something, that's good enough. All of us who have spent time looking at contemporary art have our personal likes and dislikes, our favorites and our pet peeves. Personally, I'm not fond of Pollock or Rothko or Kandinsky, but I like Bacon, Mondrian, Diebenkorn, and Warhol. But I can't really justify any of these likes or dislikes—and I'm certainly not about to say that, for instance, Rothko is "not good." That kind of value judgment is simply too hard to make these days.

But if it isn't possible to decide on a canon of good and bad contemporary art, does that mean that value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder? Are Mister Brainwash's tired and derivative paintings actually worth something, as it seems they are to the people who are buying them? Why would a painting by Marla Olmstead be worth twenty thousand dollars, but much less if it were painted by her father? In these instances, what are buyers actually paying for? Is it really true that if enough people get on the hype train and decide that a particular painting or artist is worth something, then that artist does indeed have value in an objective sense? Do their works have cultural value in and of themselves, or is their value only contingent on the immediate market climate which elevated their work to such heights of status?

These are complicated, thorny, sticky questions, but the situation has implications for the current AI-art debates as well. If Marla Olmstead's paintings lose value because they aren't entirely authentic . . . what ought to be said about the efforts of those poor computers who are just trying to make art like the big people? Is AI art worth celebrating and studying? If it is true that Marla's father coached and coerced her into making her paintings, then he seems analogous to a prompt artist working with an AI image generator. I've said before that the AI image generators are "drawing" in the same way a child does, by drawing on the repertoire of symbols and presenting a finished work for our approval. But if Marla were to do the same thing—if she produced her paintings with her father's approval in mind, or to get recognition from the media and the art world—something of her "innocence" would be lost, and her paintings would become, somehow, less interesting.

And aren't the paintings of "Mister Brainwash" simply the results of his spitting out recombinations of the data from his "training set," i.e. all the paintings by Banksy, Space Invader, Andy Warhol, and all the rest of the pop art / street art scene of which his pictures are such obvious pastiches? His paintings, and the outputs of AI art engines, should have equivalent value, since they share the same kind of provenance and relationship to the images that make up the rest of the world's visual culture.

But there's another way of looking at all this: people are willing to pay for their view of what art is and what it should be. At the start of this essay I said that Mister Brainwash might just be a clever charlatan—but it isn't really fair to call him that, because he was giving people exactly what they wanted: new art. The people lining up in front of his show and paying top prices for his art were people who wanted some piece of a hip new edgy art phenomenon—and that's what Mister Brainwash gave them. Similarly, the people paying for Marla Olmstead's paintings were investing in their idea of what art could be—in the world they wanted, a little four-year-old girl could create artworks which rivaled in quality the pieces on display at the contemporary wing of the museum. But at least one person seems to have become involved in Marla's story out of a desire to prove to the world that contemporary art was all a big scam—that "my kid could do that": this appears to be part of the motivation of Anthony Brunelli, the photorealist painter and gallery owner who organizes Marla's first solo show and gets her pictures noticed by the broader art community. He is given the last interview of the film, and he seems quite resentful of the status and prestige given to the artworks of people such as Rothko, Pollock, and the other abstract expressionists. Could Marla's rise to fame be a lesson in envy and bitterness? We'll never know.

And neither will we ever know if *Exit Through the Gift Shop* is a document of real events—or a complete hoax. Since the film's release there have been persistent rumors that the entire thing is an elaborate practical joke, one of the stunts for which Banksy is widely known—and the rumors continue despite Banksy himself, and many members of his circle, declaring emphatically that the film is the unalloyed truth. Why, then, the rumors? Could it be that people don't want to believe in a world in which Thierry Guetta could transform himself into Mister Brainwash, make a bunch of junky art, and convince people that it is worth thousands of dollars, despite all the evidence that it actually has no value at all?

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