

Dissent of man on ape art

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Art historian Thierry Lenain tells Harriet Swain why paintings by monkeys are not art, a view which runs counter to prevailing wisdom

About 40 people are sitting in the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London looking at a slide. It shows a vibrant painting of confident curling strokes, swirls and contrasting colour, with a centre that draws in the eye.

A Belgian art historian, using the slide in a lecture, highlights a corner with a pointer stick. The audience nods appreciatively and someone asks a question about the relevance of gender. The author of this painting, incidentally, is a chimp called Jessica. The most disturbing thing about monkey painting is that it is beautiful - although it is important to explain how much help the apes receive. A human will hand the monkey its paintbrush or pencil and present it with colours. Attempts to allow the ape to select a palette result in a refusal to paint until every hue has been mixed together to a muddy grey. But the sweeping brush strokes and the love of contrasting colours are the monkey's. They produce paintings with an immediate appeal, in spite of the nagging sensation of being had. Appreciating ape art is only natural, says Thierry Lenain, who is giving the lecture. "For us it's almost impossible not to see ape paintings as art, even though we know they aren't. There is understanding the phenomenon, which is rational, and then there is the direct experience of looking at a painting and when we do that we transform it into art." He adds: "The resemblance between ape painting and human painting is so strong that we cannot help but see the apes' work as paintings by some kind of artist. For us painted shapes are always forms in themselves." But Lenain believes that, in fact, monkey paintings are not art. More importantly, they cannot tell us about the origins of art. Apes paint simply because they like disrupting a blank sheet of paper. Ape painting tells us about how apes play. It does not tell us about how humans paint.

Lenain's argument contradicts most previous work on ape painting, which sees it as a clue to how man's artistic sense began. Identifying a link between artists and monkeys goes back to the 17th century. It was a way of symbolising the artist's talent for imitation, while mocking his pretension. In the early part of this century, zoo monkeys were encouraged to paint to entertain the crowds. But in the 1950s it began to be taken seriously. At the time, there was a trend in art circles for rediscovering the supposed spontaneity of primitive man. Works by mental patients, children, the poorly educated and tribesmen were studied and exhibited. A free, abstract style called action painting or tachism became in vogue.

Monkeys became part of all this and a number of ape artists shot to stardom. First came a female chimpanzee called Alpha, whose drawings were published and analysed in a psychological journal. Next came Congo, extensively studied by the zoologist Desmond Morris. In a study carried out at London Zoo, Congo produced hundreds of paintings and drawings, displaying an intense, if brief, concentration in his work. His paintings reveal some sense of composition and balance and an acute sense of the plane on which he was working. He would fill a blank sheet but not go over its edges and was particularly interested in defining the corners. If presented with a sheet of paper containing a blank shape, he

would draw inside this shape. If the shape was off-centre, he would balance it with scribbles on the opposite side of the paper. He was very interested in fan shapes, radiating towards himself. Forty years ago, in autumn 1957, Congo's works were displayed at the ICA along with fingerpaintings by Betsy of Baltimore Zoo. The controversial show was rapidly sold out. Picasso bought a painting.

Lenain, a senior lecturer in the history and philosophy of art at the University of Brussels, came to monkey painting by accident some 30 years later. He found Desmond Morris's book, *The Biology of Art*, in a second-hand bookshop and was entranced. He bought it and soon started work on a book himself.

His approach was very different because he viewed the subject as an art historian rather than as a biologist. The drawback of this was that he did not have direct access to ape painters. The advantage was that he possessed a finely honed sense of surrealism - always useful where monkey painting is concerned. One of Lenain's most valuable pieces of research is a prime example. Finding it difficult to obtain Congo's works, since most had been snapped up by eager buyers, he was directed to a monkey-owning music hall artist in Switzerland. The artist kept several monkeys, which he had trained to perform a skating show as part of *Holiday on Ice*. Anxious to stop them becoming bored between skating sessions, he had taught them to paint and this had proved a great success. By visiting this talented band in situ, Lenain was able both to examine a number of their works and to get to know a few chimps in person.

What struck him at once was the rapport between humans and apes. Lenain noted how many characteristics they shared and how well they understood one another. But for him this only emphasised how different they were when it came to art. While they possess the physical ability to hold and coordinate a paintbrush and have the mental capacity to learn simple sign language, they have never spontaneously tried to paint without being handed the equipment. Nor do they try to imitate either life or human painting in their work. Lenain argues that this is because they have no concept of what they produce, separate from the gesture of producing it. "What they do is aesthetically relevant because apes watch what they are doing," he says. "They obviously revel in experimenting with the possibility of contrasting colours and shapes. But it is completely different from art. For us, the shapes have their own value. But for the ape they only exist as an immediate result of a gesture or action."

Lenain argues that biologists have become too obsessed by identifying similarities between humans and apes and have concentrated too much on the harmony found in ape painting. "In my view, monkey painting doesn't rest on a sense of order but on a taste for disruption," says Lenain. "Of course disruption isn't exclusive to apes. But in apes it is the only component."

He says apes show no interest in their finished work - so much so that they will sometimes tear it up, taking the disruptive impulse to its logical extent. Admittedly, temperamental human artists have been known to do this too. And even Lenain acknowledges that the line between ape and human artists can be thin.

There is some evidence of monkeys having a proto-symbolic sense. Some enjoy flicking through magazines, while others, who have seen their reflection in a mirror, appear to recognise themselves in photo albums. In one case, an ape brought up as part of a human family spotted his photograph in an album among pictures of other monkeys. He took it out and placed it in an album of family photographs. This rare example shows there is more work to be done, says Lenain. In the meantime, he has switched his attention from monkeys to modern art. He is writing a book on the contemporary French artist Eric Rondepierre, who isolates and enlarges images from cinema films and presents them as individual stills. It connects with his previous work through the process of taking something which is not designed to be art, but resembles an artwork, and bringing it into the art world. Lenain also retains his connection with monkey paintings by making them the centrepiece of his living room. He believes the apes would be unimpressed. In his view, artistic appreciation is one of the things that distinguishes man from even the most sophisticated animals. Invite a monkey to a slide show at the ICA, even of his own paintings, and he will not have a clue what it is all about.

Monkey Painting, Thierry Lenain, Reaktion Books.

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/dissent-of-man-on-ape-art/100635.article>