

# IMAGERY BEGINS WHERE WORDS END



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Our thoughts, when unmolded by words, can take the form of images. We may find it hard to discuss such weighty issues as "evil" or "violence" verbally, but artists can help us shed new light on these concepts and thus to better understand the world around us.

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**H**ow do we define a "representation of reality"? As a perfect copy thereof? Or as something that creates, brings about such a copy? Aristotle argued that mimetic art – art that is able to successfully imitate reality – was perfection. His teacher, Plato, had held painters and sculptors in low regard, banishing them from his imaginary ideal republic. For centuries, philosophers and art critics engaged in such debates and arguments, yet all the while painters just continued to do their thing. Epochs and styles have come and gone, but the overwhelming human urge to create never fades. What, then, is a picture, an image? A painted canvas, a panel covered with oils, or is it rather a constructed vision, a creative need, a manifestation of mankind's eternal desire to create? Or maybe images simply start where words give out, where the possibility of intellectual speculation ends?

Pictures represent human passions, beliefs, and cultural models. A picture is a text beyond words. Painted images are works of cultural alchemy, a permutation of things. Albert Camus articulated this concept in his description of van Gogh's *Sunflowers*: sunflowers themselves simply grow, exist. They become imbued with meaning by the artist through artistic creation. Sunflowers are therefore present today in their restless aspect, filled with tension and existential pain. Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* are part of our cultural

heritage, but they also reflect the tragedy that artists experience as they grapple with the world in an attempt to understand it.

Certain themes recur incessantly in art, and one of these is the issue of evil. Such great attention represents an attempt to deal with the issue of evil, with the frightening experiences that humans witnesses and undergo, yet prove unable to cope with. Pictures arise where words can explain nothing and meanings break down. Artists can accomplish more: they use different materials, which gives them freedom that neither writers nor philosophers can attain.

## Moving messages

Pieter Bruegel the Elder was a painter known for his masterful ability to depict the question of evil. He shows us a certain paradox concealed within the very perception of evil. In his *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, no horrors are immediately evident. A ploughman is working hard, his head bent low and his body taut, suggesting that he is fully focused on his task. In the background, we can see a shepherd and sheep passing without haste. All this is pictured against a backdrop of the sea and picturesque ships. A warm day, ordinary and busy. Nothing unusual happening. But those anxiously inspecting Bruegel's work will start looking for Icarus – after all, he must be here, somewhere. When artists depict Icarus, they usually showcase his ascent up into the sky. But here, Bruegel is brutal and honest: he shows Icarus drowning – we can see but one of his legs still protruding from the waves created by his fall. The very last moments in the existence of a grand dreamer. But no one even notices his descent. Bruegel thus shows us the banality



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Elżbieta Bińczak-Handerek,  
*Ptak* [Bird], oil on panel

of evil: his painting could be compared to a situation on the street when a dog gets hit by a car and no one reacts or approaches the animal. It dies, surrounded by people. The banality of evil lies precisely in the fact that we are indifferent towards the tragedy, suffering, and death of others.

The same ostensible neutrality is depicted in the painting *The Land of Cockaigne*. It shows three men lying on the ground in relaxed poses. Sated, happy, and safe, they just lie there, dozing peacefully. In this vision, man's eternal dream of finally being sated comes true. Today, such a dream has materialized out of the frenzy of consumerism and endless gluttony. But what has consumerism given us? A global climate crisis and the degradation of the world in the name of human whims. Bruegel painted this scene back in

1566, when famine and death by starvation continued to pose a threat to human life in Europe. But his painting nonetheless triggers certain disconcerting associations. The bodies of the men are not only fat – they are swollen and distended, so their resting poses actually entail stagnation. In the sixteenth century, a fat body implied prosperity and happiness, but Bruegel was not fooled. He asked one question: at what price?

The painting is intentionally unsettling. From the moment humans first came up with the idea of combining various pigments and applying them to a smooth surface, works of art have had something they want to tell us. For centuries, painters have been continually talking to us. Bruegel knew nothing about our climate crisis, as sixteenth-century Europe had other problems: plagues, wars, and famine. Through



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Elżbieta  
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*Zwierciadło* [Mirror],  
oil on panel

his images, however, he touched upon certain meanings that can speak to us today, especially when we start calculating our carbon footprint, and we realize the rate at which we are consuming natural resources. Indeed, the old Flemish master cautions us against one more thing: impertinent pride. It is no longer a cardinal sin from the religious standpoint, but an evil that modern humans are wreaking upon our own world. The Anthropocene arrived in tandem with the rise of human impertinence.

Evil is frightening, especially when it takes the form of war, the murdering of innocent people, horrible disruptions of peace and identity. Murder and rape terrify us so much we are sometimes unable to even talk about them. Excellent illustrative examples can be found in the paintings by Francisco Goya, who shows evil as a caricature of good, as an impossible and unspeakable burden that no one can shoulder. Bruegel the Elder, in turn, had the masterful ability to depict a different type of evil, one that exists in our everyday lives and does not wait for war and momentous events – as illustrated by the painting *The Magpie on the Gallows*.

In 2015, the famous British artist known as Banksy painted a mural on the wall of a house struck by bombs in the Gaza Strip. The mural features a cute

white cat with a pink bow raising a paw in a playful gesture. Banksy placed the animal's raised paw right over charred wires and rubble, a gruesome version of a skein of woolen yarn. Journalists continued to take photos of children playing near the mural long after it was painted.

## The art of expression

In the twentieth century, the meaning of images shifted. Aristotle's notion of imitation became a thing of the past, and so did Nietzsche's reflections on the Apollonian essence (ordered art) vs. the Dionysian essence (romantic art). Throughout the centuries, images had been certain reflections of the world – if not of the real world, then of an imaginary one. Artists processed meanings and sought to convey them to their viewers, or searched for something in reality that others could not see. In the twentieth century, the belief that the world could actually be understood, even to a certain extent, became exhausted, as if reality had spun out of control. Although humans had always fought wars, they began to be experienced by societies on a different scale after WWI and WWII. As the German philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote, rationalism had fallen silent, it had nothing more to say, philosophy had worn away, and the only thing left was a cry of despair. The moral shock experienced by humans confronting their own guilt was compounded by the power of the culture of consumerism and later the cultural revolution. From that point onwards, nothing could ever be the same. The turn-of-the-century avant-garde movement taught artists that rebellion was the only proper form of art, that their task was to shatter our perceptions. Images in the classical form of paintings disappeared. Events, streetscapes, gatherings, relations, and shows replaced canvases and paintings enclosed inside frames. Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović dreamed of painting a picture in the sky with airplanes leaving streaks behind. Cuban artist Ana Mendieta used her own body to blend into space. A naked human body, covered with plants and mud, and the traces it left in the ground. She used the world and her own body as creative material.

Performance, street art, graffiti, murals, and happenings have all led imagery *per se* either to disappear completely or to become conclusively altered. Banksy, when painting murals in the Gaza Strip, entered the world of brutal warfare shortly after bombings and drew attention to its everyday realities, with children playing in the rubble and people struggling to survive.

Pictures, paintings, images thus came to be transformed – from wooden panels, canvases fastened over stretcher bars, primers, and paints, to the human body and a cityscape after bombings. The language of painters faltered. Artists began to paint using their own

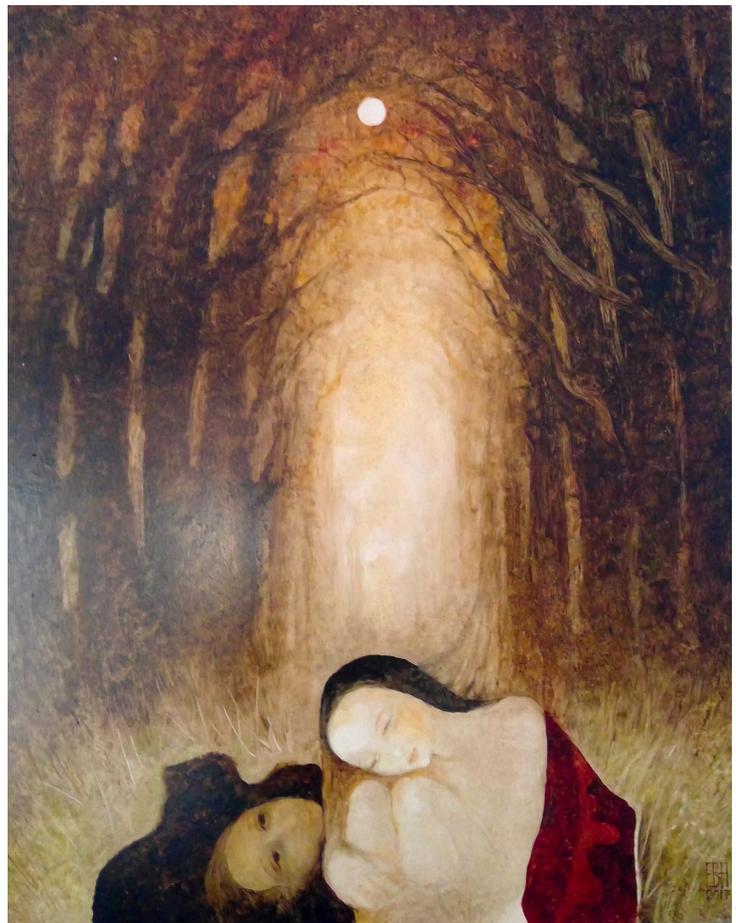
bodies and the world around them and to engage in deep interactions. For many centuries, the well-known symbols of evil had been forged in the imaginations of artists. Examples include paintings by Hieronymus Bosch, in which intricate monsters and hybrid creatures whose unreal, frightening, and repulsive appearance significantly contributed to evil being depicted as something superhuman, otherworldly. In Bosch's times, however, evil was attributed to demons, to the sin and fall of man. Now we know all too well that it is we ourselves, not demons, who are destroying this world and killing one another.

In her organic works, Ana Mendieta displayed her own body, the naked body of a woman, bleeding and bruised, reduced to waste. The tragedy of domestic violence, the nightmare of rape, silence, and social approval of the depreciation of women are the worst of all evils and have nothing metaphysical about them – it is us humans who do the worst harm to one another on a daily basis. If we escape into symbols based on visions of demons and hybrid creatures, we can no longer explain what is happening to us. Especially when evil has the face of a loved one, and is effected for no apparent reason. Especially when torture is committed by people who hurt others just because they can, who take satisfaction in dominating others, and who build their own identity upon the use of violence. That was the reason why Mendieta created a series of photographs showing a woman's face covered in blood. The literalness of this artistic message comes across as clearly as a fist-punch. In Mendieta's view, violence leaves no room for understatement or retreating into symbols. Violence is literal, and so, too, should be art. A split lip, broken bones, a black eye, and twisted arms are a reality for many women around the world. In the face of such everyday evil, we must not remain silent or retreat into imaginary worlds.

Contemporary images are diverse, and contemporary artists draw upon unlimited means of expression. What once seemed just an event, just a theatrical performance, or merely a simple gesture can now be an image, a work of art, a profoundly conveyed message.

## The power of action

Cai Guo-Qiang is a Chinese artist who uses many techniques and combines different materials. Like the works of many contemporary artists, his projects also go beyond canons, fads, and clearly defined techniques. In fact, Cai Guo-Qiang focuses on one thing: the message itself, and treats everything else as secondary to its content. He is an artist of the Earth, an environmentalist who fights for animal well-being and at the same time for our own injured conscience. Cai Guo-Qiang's artistic style is epitomized by an installation presenting a tiger whose body is pierced



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with arrows. It is dying. The artist shows us the agony of an animal murdered by a human. The tiger becomes a symbol of Mother Gaia, of mass extinction, of the climate crisis. Stories of such horrific wrongs committed by humans cannot be told in a traditional way. Being aware of this, the artist combines various techniques to produce an unusual image: a mirror of our own selfishness.

What, then, is a picture, an image? It is an artistic reaction to the world. In traditional paintings, this meant stretcher bars, a primed canvas, a palette, and paints. In the modern-day world, an image is an event. The outcry of an artist. Irrespective of its material manifestation, an image is a meaning offered to us by the artist at the very moment when words no longer have the power to exert influence or create sense. A picture starts where words fall away and rationality wears thin. An image is a response to our doubts and our everyday life. Regardless of the technique or means of expression used, it is a search for meaning, which can only be found if we have the artistic courage to go beyond expectations, off the beaten path of our thinking. An image is a challenge to humanity. Our deepest way of thinking about the world, our search for what is not obvious yet so very important. Pictures are our life. ■

Elżbieta  
Bińczak-Hańderek,  
*Gaja [Gaia]*,  
oil on panel

Further reading:

Hańderek J., *Filozofia wegariska [Vegan Philosophy]*, 2021.

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