

The Art of Michael Bell: Aesthetics, Education and Activism

by Claudia Moscovici, Jan. 4, 2011

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Michael Bell • "Love and Pain" • 36" X 48" diptych • oil/paper • 2003
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It's only since the nineteenth century that art became its own autonomous domain, separated from education and politics. Before that, the art world was shaped by the tastes of rich patrons, the Church, the Salons, and the art Academies. In the early nineteenth century, the French writer, Théophile Gautier, coined the term "l'art pour l'art", or art for art's sake. Although this concept doesn't describe all art during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it had an enormous impact upon the attitudes of modern artists, critics and viewers. And yet, there were significant exceptions. Even the most modern of the moderns, **Pablo Picasso**, made a spectacular political statement in his painting *Guernica*. This painting represented a *cri du coeur* against the bombing of Guernica by German and Italian forces at the behest of the Spanish Nationalists in 1937. Picasso's *Guernica* brought the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War to the public's attention and stood as an anti-war symbol for years to come.

Today I'd like to introduce a contemporary American artist, **Michael Bell**, who perpetuates the long-lost tradition of seeing art as a means of educating the public and of changing society for the better. Michael Bell's paintings seamlessly combine aesthetic talent, educational value and political activism. Michael is best known for painting some of the most famous—and infamous—celebrities of

our time, such as John Gotti and other actors from popular gangster movies like “The Sopranos,” “Goodfellas” and “A Bronx Tale.” The artist has also won numerous awards in the field of art education as one of the pioneers of the **Visual Journaling** movement. He gives free workshops that educate the general public about art and art history.

Michael also participates in charity benefits. He raises thousands of dollars for worthwhile social causes from his painting sales. As an art critic who also writes about domestic abuse, what caught my attention most was his contribution to raising public awareness about domestic violence. On October 1, 2005, Michael Bell received the **Good Shepherd Community Service Award** at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles for his activism in raising domestic violence awareness.

Michael Bell’s series of paintings, **Voices of Violence**, expose the vicious cycle of love filled with pain, abuse and reconciliation, which many victims go through. These paintings follow the gaze of the model, ex-mafia wife and Hollywood stunt actress Georgia Durante, as she attempts to cope with years of abuse and free herself from the painful cycle of love filled with violence, which isn’t really love after all, but an expression of dominance and possession. Michael’s painting **Love and Pain** (see above) executed, appropriately enough, on two separate, fractured canvases, reveals the ambivalence that victims of domestic violence experience, as they remain hopelessly attached to the very person that causes them most pain.

It’s relatively rare for an artist in our times to use his talent for the social good. Even though, truth be told, art is not just for art’s sake. Art is a human creation by talented human beings for the benefit of other human beings. For as long as we continue to view art as completely detached from our nature, our struggles, our mistakes and our goals, we’ll alienate viewers, as they’ll become detached from the world of art as well. An artist through and through—as well as an educator and a humanitarian—Michael Bell eloquently states: “All I am is what I create. It’s my blessing to share with the world.”

by **Claudia Moscovici**, postromanticism.com

Claudia Moscovici is an art critic and author of *Velvet Totalitarianism*, a novel about a Romanian family's survival in an oppressive communist regime due to the strength of their love. She also published several scholarly books on political philosophy and the Romantic movement. Her publications include *Romanticism and Postromanticism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), *Gender and Citizenship* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) and *Double Dialectics* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002). She taught philosophy, literature and arts and ideas at Boston University and at the University of Michigan. Born in Bucharest, Romania, she writes from her experience of life in a totalitarian regime, which marked her deeply. She immigrated to the United States where she has gone on to obtain a B.A. from Princeton University and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Brown University.

View more of Claudia’s Art Blog at:

<http://finearteblogs.wordpress.com>

Claudia is also co-founder of **postromanticism**, an international art movement which you can view online at: <http://postromanticism.com>