

Manifestations of Cartesian Dualism in Painting Practice

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Abstract

Central to Rene Descartes philosophy is the distinction between the mind and body. Descartes Dualism deals specifically with the dual nature of man. Simply put, its argument is that man is made up of a material body and immaterial soul. When examined closely, notions of Cartesian Dualism are manifest in almost everything, including painting practice. The goal of this paper is to highlight the synergistic relationship between art and philosophy. It argues that painting practice, in process and product, can be aligned with the Cartesian dualistic system of thought which sees the mind as distinct from the body. The paper employed, as its method, a comparative analysis of the monist dualism perspective and the Cartesian split. It investigated the propagated ideas, evaluated available evidence, and established its arguments about the manifestations of Cartesian Dualism in painting practice. Findings show that works of art present to us not only the physical objects that appeals to our visual senses, but also something cognitive that is not physical.

Keywords: Cartesian Dualism, Body and Soul, Process and Product, Philosophy, Painting Practice

Introduction

Broadly construed, Dualism refers to a theory which holds the belief that reality consists of two irreducible elements or entities. In metaphysics, in general, dualism refers to the belief that reality has two kinds, namely, material, that is physical, and immaterial, that is spiritual. The two main types of Dualism are substance dualism and property dualism. Substance dualism, also known as Cartesian Dualism, is the idea of dualism as propagated by Rene Descartes. Cartesian is derived

from Rene Descartes Latinized name Cartesius. The primary submission of Cartesian dualism is the distinction between the mind and the body which are capable of independent existence. Cartesian Dualism deals specifically with the dual nature of man. Simply put, its argument is that man is made up of a material body which is physical, and immaterial soul, which is mental. Although Descartes was the first to clearly formalize the idea of mind-body duality analytically, he did not invent the position. The concept can be found in various forms in a number of earlier thinkers. The Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle were among the early exponents of mind and body dualism. Plato first formulated the theory of “Forms”. He argued that the objects and other phenomena we perceive in the real world are but mere archetype or a copy of the true reality that exists in the realm of forms (IvyPanda, 2023). He posits that the soul is non-physical and eternal, and different from the body which is physical and temporary. Plato's dualism was resurrected by the dualist thinkers in the 17th and 18th century especially by Rene Descartes who is considered the father of modern philosophy. Aristotle, Plato's student, on the other hand maintains that the soul is part of the body. Aristotle agrees that the soul and the body are two different materials but affirms that they are inseparable and need each other to survive. For him, when the body dies, the soul dies too. Aristotle's position that the human being is a unified composite substance of two substantial principle; form and matter is upheld by other philosophers like Thomas Aquinas and Benedict Spinoza. The connecting link between these two philosophical theories of the mind and body dualism is their agreement that the mind and the body are two distinct separate things. The idea of “separation” can be illustrated further using painting practice as a tool. This essay will discuss some works of art that embodies the concept of dualism either through the process of execution or through the structure and composition of the finished product.

Methodology

This essay employed a methodical structuring of artists explorations to arrive at examples of the cartesian split. Five works were discussed. The first three two works touched on artist's works created, consciously or

unconsciously, with the idea of dualism as inspiration using the monist approach as propagated by Aristotle. Secondly, the research also illustrated, using two work examples, the manifestation of the Cartesian split as propagated by Plato and sustained Rene Descartes. The discuss relied on secondary sources as well as critical analysis elicited through meditative reasoning. Secondary sources utilized for the study include exhibition catalogue essays, philosophy books, documented artists interviews and videos.

Two Notable Arguments on Dualism

In western tradition, Dualism can be traced back to the philosophers Plato (427-347 BC) and Aristotle (384 - 322BC). Plato was a philosopher in classical Greece, the founder of the academy in Athens and the first philosopher who established the dualism of body and soul in the history of Greek thought. For Plato, everything in the material world was a shadow of the forms. The body was stuck in a material world but the mind could break free and explore the ideal realm at will, just by contemplating philosophical ideas (Philosophy terms, nd). Plato believed in an immortal soul that would be released from the physical world after the body's death. In Platonism, the perfect and immaterial soul was the essence of being human, the defining attribute that unequivocally separated humankind from all other creatures (Jensen, 1998). Plato regarded all that was of the earth as temporary, worthless and a mere shadow of the ultimate reality (Rohr, 2010). Plato argues that the ultimate reality is not material but rather the essence behind the form or shape we humans give to things. Plato's ideas served as the archetype for all future implementations of dualism in the philosophy of mind.

Plato's illustrious student Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics* (350 BC) strongly rejected Plato's dualistic partition of mind and body, that the soul is independently existing entity lodged within the body during life yet capable of separate existence. Aristotles central thesis according to Gallop (1999) is that the soul of a living thing is related to its body as 'form' (*morphê*) is related to matter (*hylê*). The soul is the structure whereby bodily matter is so ordered as to form a living animal or plant. Soul and body are not two separate entities that are somehow temporarily

conjoined. Therefore, according to Aristotle, a person is a unified being of soul and body; the soul is the form of the body and to describe the form is to describe the distinct characteristics of intellect and rationality (Spenard, 2011). Aristotle maintained that a particular person's soul is no more than his nature as a human being. In other words, soul stands to the body in the same way as form stands to matter. For him, the mind and body are one thing that cannot be separated. This monist view of man as a complex but unified person reflects Aristotle's revolt against Plato's dualism (Berecz, 1976). Aristotle's position that the human being is a unified composite substance of two substantial principles when examined using painting practice can be attributed to works on ideas of dualism executed on a single unit. Figure 1, a painting titled *Duality*, by Ayoola Gbolahan exemplifies this idea.



Figure 1: Ayoola Gbolahan, *Duality*, Acrylic on Canvas, 152.5 x 152.5cm.¹

¹. Retrived December 10, 2018, from <https://www.saatchiart.com/art/Painting-Duality/79678/3686709/view>

Gbolahan believes in the spiritual facet of humanity, and sees the physical form as a mirror that the Creator has determined. His painting duality depicts two identical faces in a frontal pose rendered predominantly with earth colours. The work seems personal, deeply layered, and employs forms inspired by his African heritage. In Duality, Gbolahan, a contemporary Nigerian artist, draws our attention to man's split personality, probably using a stylized image of himself as a case study. This dichotomy of the double self and life, according to Joseph (2011), portrays Ayoola's belief in the spiritual facet of humanity and his vision of the physical form as a mirror that the creator has determined.

Conscious and Unconscious deployment of dualism in Painting Practice

Mathieson (2023) argues that when at work, the artist, much like the viewer, grapple with the dichotomy of the tangible and the intangible, the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial. Significant number of artists have explored the idea of dualism or duality in their work. Though some of these artists did not intentionally set out to explore dualism as a concept of inspiration, the structure of their work or their creative process aligns with dualist notions. In his thesis, *Dualism and the Critical Language of Portraiture*, Altintzoglou (2010) notes that artists may not necessarily be philosophically aware of the mind/body split but they do acknowledge the issue through the adoption, transformation and development of the subgenres of portraiture. It could be argued that every artist that has dealt with portraiture has dealt, to a variable extent, with the question of being and identity. As part of their methodology during the execution of portraits artists are forced to take a position and decide on whether they will acknowledge the existence of a soul or a self.

Altintzoglou adopted dualism as a means of enquiry into modes of representation in the history of western portraiture using the framework of Platonic and Cartesian dualist thinking. He notes that Dualism – or the separation of the soul and body – takes the form in portraiture of the representation of the head or the head and shoulder at the expense of the body. The implication according to him is that the modern portrait's

commonplace attention to the face rests on the dualist notion that the soul, and therefore the individuality of the subject rests on the head. He further argues that, as part of their methodology during the execution of portraits, artists are forced to take a position and decide on whether they will acknowledge the existence of a soul or a self. By implication, his argument resides on the unconscious play of dualism in the process of the artists execution. Fokt (2013) also notes that while we are accustomed to treat a given painting or a musical piece as a single thing, it is actually a compound consisting of two distinct but inseparable elements the particular object and the universal. He calls the universal aspect a recipe and the particular a realisation. He posits that;

The 'recipe' is an intersubjectively communicable abstract universal structure which provides a set of instructions of how to produce physical objects which instantiate this structure. This understanding is very intuitive and straight-forward – it is quite like the common-sense notion of a recipe in cooking. In the simplest sense, it is just a description of the thing to be realised, containing a set of directives for how to produce this realisation. The 'realisation' of a given recipe is any physical object(s) or action(s) created by the performer(s), which instantiates this recipe, is not guided by any other recipe and from which this recipe can be extracted. My understanding of it is again very similar to Ingarden's notion of the ontic foundation, which is how he called the concretisation of the foundation of existence. The ontic foundation is an object through which an artwork is communicated, the thing which is presented to the audience.

As Fokt argued, no artwork can exist just on its own without an underlying idea or process through which it is realized. The implication is that, from the development of an idea to the concretization of an art piece, the artist unconsciously engages the philosophy of dualism. Another position that is contrary to Fokt and Altintzoglou's unconscious deployment of dualism in artistic creation is a conscious premeditated approach which is evident in the artistic process of another Nigerian artist Erhabor Omokpae.

Erhabor Ogieva Emokpae was an Apostle of Dualism and one of Nigeria's foremost artists. His journey with dualism was inspired by

personal life experiences. For instance, he was the child of a Muslim mother and Atheist father. In adolescence, he was deeply troubled by paradoxes he observed in the different religions. Fundamentally a deeply searching and committed man, Erhabor Ogieva Emokpae passed through several different phases in his quest for a personal spiritual ethic, among them were Buddhism, the Chinese philosophy of Ying Yang and paganism (Highet, 1969). The background of Emokpae's upbringing made him a strong advocate of Dualism and he dwelt on themes of dualism in most of his artworks. For him, Dualism is the heterogeneous complex which encompasses diverse themes. He posited that “if the ultimate aim of the artist, is to interpret the whole, then his works will not be complete without representing the two halves that make the whole”. This idea is illustrated in his painting *Struggle Between Life and Death*, figure 2. Emokpae consciously uses the idea of dualism as a creative pathway through which his philosophies of life are expressed.



Figure, Erhabor Emokpae, *Struggle between Life and Death*, oil on canvas board, 61 x 121 cm, 1963.²

Emokpae sees Dualism as a Dialogue between the Physical and the Spiritual, or explicitly put, the dialogue between the womb and the tomb

². Retrieved August 25, 2018 from: <https://postwar.hausderkunst.de/en/artworks-artists/artworks/struggle-between-life-and-death-kampf-zwischen-leben-und-tod>

(Life and Death), the norms that form the parenthesis within which we laugh and cry, love and hate, grow and decay, a norm which permeates the entire system of creation. He argues that in the mundane realm of existence, there is always a wrong where right exists; and a reaction for every action. What was essential to Emokpae in his exploration of Dualism was the interpretation of the principle of Dualism as an all-embracing system of existence which is anchored on two elements that should be accorded equal attention in order for one to live a full and balanced life. His work *Struggle Between Life and Death*, like Gbolahan's *Duality*, also present Aristotle's monoist approach to the concept of dualism.

Figure 3. *Mind and Body*, a 3feet x 3feet painting by the artist Chike Obeagu, is another example of work inspired by the monist approach Dualism. *Mind and Body* is created on a perfect square shaped canvas with the use of predominantly red acrylic paint and drip mixture of white acrylic paint mixed with white glue. The top left of the painting was cut open and encircled with the drip mixture of acrylic and glue to create a bounded effect. The oval shape created a form of asymmetric balance in the work. The oval hollow relates the work to any background upon which it is hung thereby provoking a physical and psychological dimension to the work. The material body and the immaterial space created by the opening on the work relates the work to the mind-body narrative of the tangible and intangible and of what is present and absent. The concept of *Mind and Body* embodies the visual interplay between life and death. The minimalist use of hues of red and white are symbolic attributes of human life (blood), and true perfection (White), which can only be attained by the transition of the physical body into a higher realm of the spiritual.



Figure 3: Chike Obeagu, Mind and Body, Mixed Media, 122x122cm, 2018 (Source: The Artist)

The Cartesian Split

While the great philosophical distinction between the mind and body in western thought can be traced to early philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, it is to the seminal work of René Descartes (1596-1650), a French mathematician, philosopher, and physiologist that we owe the first systematic account of the mind/body relationship (Wozniak, 2002). Descartes thesis on Dualism supports a clear distinction between the mind and body, a hypothesis that describe the nature of human existence as containing two distinct and interacting principles, the physical and non-physical, which are capable of independence existence. Kim (1998) extends this thought by describing Cartesian dualism as consisting of two independent domains, the mental and the material, each with its own distinctive defining properties (consciousness and spatial extendedness, respectively). He maintained that there are causal interactions across the domains, but entities in each domain, being “substances”, are ontologically independent of those of the other, and it is metaphysically possible for one domain to exist all by itself in total absence of the other.

The Dualist idea of the Cartesian split can be illustrated in painting practice using the diptych structure or notions of the material and the immaterial as exemplified in figures 4 and 5. Figure 4, a two-dimensional

diptych painting titles US, is produced with the use of twines fabricated from discarded fabric off-cuts. Different lengths of fabricated twines were arranged vertically on two panels measuring 61x61cm each. The arrangement also explored the formal colours on each twine to create a rhythmic procession in harmonic sequence. The unequal lengths of twine extend beyond the base of the support, creating a jagged finish.



Figure 4: Chike Obeagu, US, Diptych, Fabricated Twine from Fabric Off-Cuts, Panel 1; 48 x 145cm, Panel 2; 48 x 138cm, 2016(Source: The Artist)

The concept of Us has diverse interpretations, and can be viewed from different analytical perspectives depending on idea the artist or viewer wants to convey. Us is perhaps the most obvious personal reference in the dualism of human nature. It can be interpreted either through the Cartesian make up of an individual possessing a mind and a body as a composite nature, or through Sigmond Freud's psychoanalytical theories on the “ego” and “id”. It represents a person's self and the other, the two different elements that make up our individual personalities.

Apart from its obvious attribute to dualism of an individual's nature, Us can also be viewed from the perspective of its social condition in relation to the collective sensibility of individuals living in unity in a

system. This perception will be devoid of ethnic, religious, tribal and racial sentiments. Us as a concept is a unifying dualism that serves as antidote to the dualism of segregation and opposition. Looking at the formal structure of the work, one will observe that, apart from its Cartesian split, and the disparity in colour arrangement, the material make-up of the painting which is the fabricated fabric twine is the same. This connotes that people should endeavor to see themselves through the lens of shared humanity rather than erect barriers and walls that segregate.



Figure 5: Chike Obeagu, Madiba's Option, Mixed Media Diptych Painting Installation, Variable Sizes, 2019(Source: The Artist)

Figure 5, Madiba's Option is another work that is used to illustrate the Cartesian split. The work is a mixed media painting installation composed of two fabric wrapped table chairs, a fabric wrapped table, and a detached background with newspaper off-cuts and inscriptions. The

work embodies dualism in many aspects. The use of fabric and paper to create each part of the installation, points up dualism in the artists use of materials. The two fabric wrapped chairs situated opposite each other also connotes two individuals, opposing views, conflicting ideas, disparate actions, and many more. The alternate background with newspaper cut-outs and inscriptions serves as the “mind” of the work which explains the intention of the “body” of arranged chairs and table. Apart from the symbolic link of the discarded newspaper materials used to connote dualism of life and death, text was explored as an embodiment of meaning which also has the propensity to suffice as an embodiment of the soul of a work in line with Mind and Body dualism.

The work is also fashioned in a way that invites public participation in the sense that two people can actually take advantage of the functionality of the chairs and table, sit down, and have a meaningful dialogue in respect to the idea projected by the work. In reading the intentionality of the artist, Madiba's Option was inspired by Nelson Mandela, an icon of reconciliation and forgiveness who was not enthralled by the lust for power and the charms of vain-glorious pursuit like many world leaders. Notwithstanding his incarceration for 27 years, when he emerged as the president of South Africa, he magnanimously set up the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) which played a key restorative role in the advent of democracy in South Africa. Mandela's approach is a blueprint that can provide lessons for other countries and world leaders. There is urgent need for genuine reconciliation, forgiveness, inclusivity, restitution and reparation in most nations of the world. Madiba's Option is a curative approach to the concept of We versus Them mentality. It calls for a handshake across all religious, tribal, political, racial, and ethnic lines, and it is one sure way that we can get it right if devotedly applied to the bedeviled human condition.

Conclusion

This paper set out to expose aspects of the philosophy of dualism in painting practice. Emphasis was placed on manifestations of Cartesian Dualism, which the French philosopher Rene Descartes propagated. The main argument of Cartesian Dualism is that the Soul and the Body can

live separately independent of each other. The paper engaged in a sequential analysis of works that illustrate the monist dualistic view of Aristotle, which proposed a unity of form and matter, before arriving at the Cartesian split. From the works presented and analysed, it is established that painting practice can be used to expound our understanding of complex philosophical ideas. The paper posits that every painting has a body and a soul. The tangible materials like the canvas, the stretchers, colours, or any physical object that can be manipulated to create a painting composition represents the body and the causal extension of the artist's mind. On the other hand, the intangible aspects of a painting like the verbal and textual interpretations, symbolism, metaphors, artists intention, and his imaginative process, embodies the soul of a painting, something that is not physical and we cannot see, without which the body is incomplete. Also, the paper established that, a deliberate studio experimentation by the artist can yield a systematic structuring of work in a way that can help his audience understand more the workings of the theory and practice of Dualism through the physical outcome of his studio engagements.

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