

LIMINAL CONTACT
Or: Why the 'Death of Painting' is Cognitively Absurd
Bruce Rimell

1. Introduction

What is Art? It has generally been accepted for perhaps the past fifty years, in artistic and critical circles at any rate, that this question is by now virtually impossible to answer in any meaningful sense. However, outside these cultural and critical purviews, in scientific fields of evolutionary, anthropological and cognitive enquiry, some interesting inroads are being made which allow us, if not to give a definitive answer, then to at least delineate some of Art's fundamental attributes.

One of these attributes is that Art in general and painting in particular rest upon innate cognitions and behaviours which are present in some form within the human being from birth, and which are founded upon our species' evolutionary prehistory. This goes against pretty much everything that art criticism and the humanities have been proposing for the past century: implicit within Modernism, for example, is an image of the mind as a blank slate, shaped only by ontology and experience, while Postmodernism models the mind as infinitely interpretive, shaped only by subjective impression.

By contrast, the message of the past thirty years from evolutionary and cognitive perspectives has been to propose that the human mind is deeply nuanced and content-rich at birth, and that such innate content forms the basis of myriad human behaviours including Art, Religion, Culture and Language. Evidence for this proposal has been greatly forthcoming and as such is now widely accepted in one form or another across the sciences in what has been termed the 'cognitive revolution'. This perspective challenges virtually all contemporary critical positions on Art, not least the famous so-called 'death' of painting, which 21st century scientifically-founded understandings of the artist's mind renders as untenable as a theory or methodology.

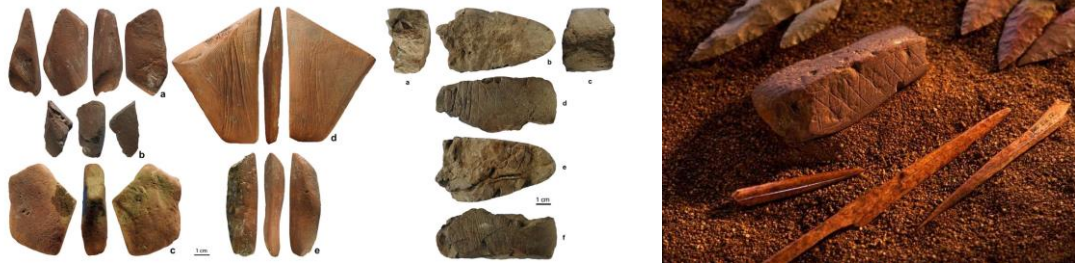
To understand why this much-touted ideology might be cognitively and anthropologically absurd, and why painting might indeed be considered as perhaps one of the most innate of human artistic behaviours, we need to undertake a very particular artistic journey through our species evolutionary prehistory, and simultaneously come to understand ourselves as humans in a completely new, twenty-first century manner.

2. Red Ochre

Humans have been painting for almost as long as we have been humans, and the first canvas was not rock walls but the human body. Good evidence for this assertion has been emerging from Southern Africa since the mid-1990s, and it takes the form of red ochre fragments associated with early human habitation sites. Wherever we go, we seem to carry red ochre with us and archaeologists have come to the conclusion that there is no known functional purpose for this substance, such as weapons hafting or animal skin curing, which can explain this apparently all-too-human obsession.

The emergence of our species *Homo sapiens sapiens* in Southern and Eastern Africa around 200,000 years ago corresponds with evidence of a fragmentary ochre usage, with the earliest evidence at Pinnacle Point in the Western Cape of South Africa. By 130,000 years ago however, archaeological evidence documents an explosion in red ochre usage at sites such as Klasies River, Florisbad and Border Cave in South Africa. Some of the red ochre pieces have been tapered into 'pencils' while others show clear evidence of having been scraped to liberate an ochre powder.

The consensus is now that these ochre pieces were used as body paint, and the consistent appearance of ochre at early human sites along with flint tools and bone fragments suggests that the making of paint for dance displays was as much an essential part of early human behaviour as was the preparation of weapons for hunting, or the making of clothes. It strongly suggests the emergence of a uniquely modern human mind beginning to engage with symbolic constructs and ritual behaviours.



Perhaps the most striking evidence for body painting, however, comes from the site of Blombos Cave, near Stillbay in the Western Cape of South Africa. Here in this cave barely sixty metres from the sea was found a multitude of red ochre pieces dating from 100,000 to 70,000 years ago. Many showed evidence of scraping, but a handful exhibited something even more striking: abstract engravings.

In the most famous ochre piece from Blombos, the narrow edge had been smoothed before the engraving was made: the engraved pattern itself was a complex criss-cross/lozenge design which suggests very clear intentionality on the part of its maker. Archaeologist Ian Watts remarked that *"...it is almost inconceivable that the occupants of Blombos were engraving such designs onto piece of ochre while not doing similar things with ground ochre on their bodies."*

The location on the engraving on the narrow edge of the ochre, on the other hand, led cognitive archaeologist David Lewis-Williams to suggest that the pattern referred to a certain 'something' – an incipient spiritual force or supernatural power – perceived to be inside the ochre, and applied to the body in an emotionally-charged ritual of paint-making.

Such speculations are partly supported by the uncovering a few years later of ochre-stained seashells at Blombos, along with stone-scrapers and ochre-stained bone tools. Christopher Henshilwood, the lead archaeologist at Blombos, has made a sustained case for these being related to such paint-making rituals, with the seashells acting as palettes, the bone tools as mixers and the stones being used to scrape the ochre into the palette before water is added.

Here, then, we have some remarkable evidence for an extremely early date for the practise of painting, as well as an association of paint with ritual behaviours, proto-spiritual perceptions and emotionally-charged events such as painted dance displays begins to demonstrate the non-functional symbolic and supernatural approaches to life that characterise our species. These dates are also early enough for us to consider painting is some senses as an evolved behaviour, not merely a cultural practice but something deep enough in the timeline of the human lineage as to be termed innate.

Painting is thus coterminous with our species and deeply embedded within our mental and perceptual landscape. Would we even begin to consider so absurd a suggestion as the death of dance, of language or of music?

3. The Emergence of Two-Dimensional Representation

If we have an early date for body painting, the question must be asked: why do we not see art on cave walls until much later? It seems as if one thing here did not necessarily lead to the other. David Lewis-Williams uses this insight to argue that the mental architecture needed to create body painting – primarily a social interaction – is not sufficient to automatically liberate two-dimensional representation such as images on cave walls.

He argues that more subtle cognitive abilities were needed for two-dimensional representation, and that furthermore, such representation was not ‘invented’ by a given group of people at a given time, but rather that the notion of abstract images seen in the earliest periods of Palaeolithic cave art were already present in human experience long before they were painted.

His argument is complex, but his neuropsychological view holds that visionary experiences, and particularly ‘entoptic’ or geometric patterns reported as being seen in visions the world over, are naturally emergent features of the neurological structure of the human brain. One of the significant features of visions is that the imagery is often ‘projected’ onto external features of the world: images which are most likely to be brain-internal are nonetheless experienced as moving or dancing across walls, floors and other surfaces.

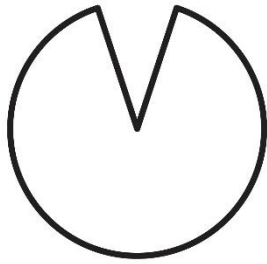
Energy-intensive dance displays and rituals in cave dwellings were likely the first methods by which visionary experiences were elicited, while later artificial means such as the ingestion of psychoactive plants may have been used, and visions were perceived to be important because they appeared to reveal a ‘hidden world’ which the cognitively-modern human mind endowed with symbolic thought is primed to expect, regardless of whether such hidden realities are objectively real or not. Fictional constructs such as abstract ideas, deities, shared social values and ritual kinships are essential for human society to function, and visionary experience has often been understood as opening these reified ‘collective unrealities’ into direct experience.

At a certain time in our prehistory, then, Lewis-Williams proposes that the mere experience of these projected visionary images was not sufficient and there came a social need to reach out and ‘touch’ these experiences. In this way, the first abstract two-dimensional images were born, and there is evidence from Palaeolithic cave art that this ‘touching’ was an important part of ritual behaviours and art-making in the otherworldly cave environment.

4. Boyer’s Circle

On the other hand, when we pursue deeper and more specific insights from cognitive psychology, we find that there may be, after all, a direct link between body painting and two-dimensional representation. Pascal Boyer argues that two-dimensional images require considerable mental complexity: to make sense of a map, for example, our minds must block certain inferences – *“the path through the forest is one inch wide on the drawing but it is not that narrow in actual fact”* – but allow others – *“the path in the [drawing] that turns left means that the actual path turns left too.”*

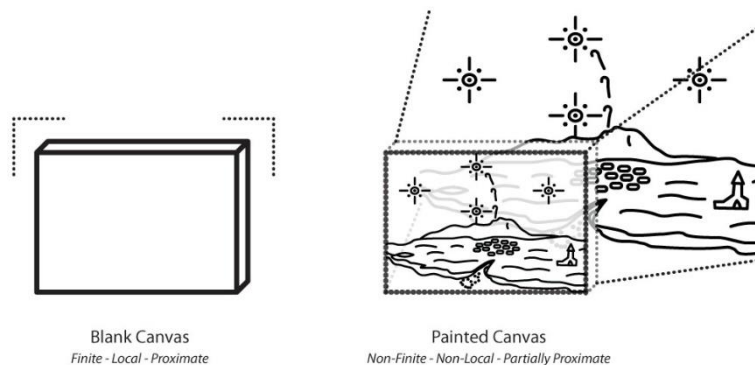
This simultaneous blocking-and-allowing of certain insights leads to a subtle cognitive habit of humans which is near-ubiquitous and which is often implicated in the creation of novel constructs and new behaviours: humans are often attracted to ontological violations, a common type of simultaneous blocking and allowing which liberates a wide range of symbolic constructs and cultural forms.



Consider the diagram at left. Boyer argues that most people have no problem calling this a circle with a dent, or a circle with a slice missing, but in reality a circle is ontologically defined by its continuity. That continuity is here violated, yet the human mind persists in seeing both the completed circle (inference allowed) as well as the 'slice missing' (inference blocked). Given that a 'slice missing' is something of an abstract non-entity, we also have here a kind of pseudo-magical construct.

Such allowing-and-blocking, and ontologically violative perception is one way we can understand the fundamentals of painting. A human body which is painted is no longer fully a human body, since the patterns and images painted upon it stand for social, spiritual or other ritual and abstract constructs which mean that to a certain extent, the body is released from its materiality into the 'hidden world' that the human mind is primed to expect of reality, based upon the centrality of symbolic thought to its function. The painted body no longer represents the abstract construct, supernatural actor or ritual force but becomes it and embodies it in every culturally meaningful way.

A painted canvas exhibits precisely the same features, releasing the surface upon which it is painted from its materiality into the imagined world of depiction, of colour or of form which form the image. The basic properties that we intuitively understand of any object – that it is finite and local – become partially blocked since the painted image now contains representations of objects which cannot ordinarily fit into the confined space of the canvas or surface, and the presence, say, of a landscape in the painted image means that at some level the surface is no longer local, no longer merely here, but also elsewhere.



The surface is here, but not only here. The surface is finite but it contains something larger than itself and hence it is non-finite. In this cognitive ontological violation, it is as if the canvas or painted surface becomes a window into a 'hidden world' – again we arrive at a familiar mental event – and we shall shortly see evidence that this theoretical idea actually has resonance in real human experience.

A key point here that we see reflected in the upcoming case studies is that it is the application of paint which triggers these innate cognitions and sensations, and this is no more prominently seen than in Palaeolithic cave art.

5. A World Beyond The Wall

Palaeolithic cave art is justly famous for its naturalistic depictions of animals and great technical skill exhibited at an apparently early date for human artistic expression. Less famous are the handprints and abstract designs which also adorn many of the cave walls and which, for our exploration of painting, are in some ways more important.

It was long thought that the negative and positive handprints post-dated the paintings of the animals and that Palaeolithic people were trying to touch or otherwise make contact with the animals in some way, either expressing ownership or communion or something similar. Recent dating discoveries, however, have shown that the handprints and abstract images pre-date the animal friezes by up to 15,000 years, and some are as old as 40,000 years. Thus the handprints are images in their own right.

David Lewis-Williams & Jean Clottes have argued that it is not the handprint image itself that was important, but that the ritual act of making the print should be the main focus of understanding. A hand was placed against the wall, and then paint was blown onto and around it, such that the hand appeared to 'enter' the wall, the paint dissolving the boundary between its presence in this world and a purported supernatural realm which existed behind the rock wall.

Curiously, although negative handprints are much more difficult to make than positive prints, it is the former that we find most commonly in cave art: here the hand becomes invisibly sealed behind the wall, and intimate contact appears to be made with whatever is held to exist behind the wall.



Handprints are not merely confined to Palaeolithic cave art, but are found all over the world in all periods of human cave art expression. Finger flutings are also commonly seen – this is where the fingers are run through soft calcite and clay on cave walls leaving traces and patterns which have sometimes been preserved for thousands of years, and sometimes these flutings appear to have been precursors for more fully-expressed painted animal images. David Lewis-Williams' insight that people need to touch their visions and make them real seems to have powerful resonance here.

Offerings of flints, animal bones and sculpted artefacts were also made in Palaeolithic caves, often pressed into gaps or cracks in the walls and then sealed with red ochre. This is particularly present at places like Lascaux, Enlène and Les Trois-Frères. Meanwhile at Altamira, so-called 'animal masks' were made by picking out face-like features in the rocks with charcoal or manganese dioxide, to give the impression that bison-like anthropomorphs were emerging from the walls.

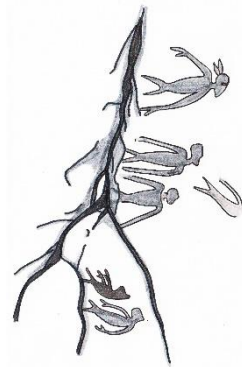
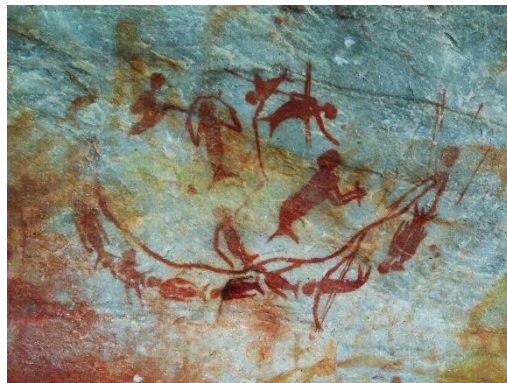
All of this evidence, which is most commonly mediated through the application of paint, has led to a majority view among archaeologists that the cave walls themselves were considered important, not merely as a passive surface upon which imagery was created, but as an active and animated boundary between this world and a supernatural world beyond the wall.

These ideas survive today in many religious contexts: among the Yokut people of California, offerings of tobacco are still left in cracks beneath rock art paintings, while at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, believers squeeze prayers written on pieces of paper between the cracks as a way of communicating with the deity.

6. The Swift People

In February and March 2016, I was lucky enough to visit South Africa to paint murals in a township in the Western Cape. In the mountains close by can be seen Bushman rock art, and in the Western Cape region, a unique figure, depicting half-human, half-swift people, can be seen. These images are found nowhere else in the world.

Recently a multi-disciplinary approach has led to the interpretation that these figures represent Bushman shamans in trance, experiencing the hallucination of 'soul-flight' which is a ubiquitous sensation in shamanic cultures across the world. What is remarkable however is the way these swift-people are depicted as flying out from another world in a manner very similar to what we might expect from Palaeolithic cave art.



The classic image of swift-people can be seen at Ezeljagdspoor, in which figures can be seen arranged dancing in a circular formation in a manner very similar to contemporary Bushman peoples in the Kalahari of Botswana and the Northern Cape. However, other images are painted interacting with cracks and other features on the walls, with their long swift-tails touching or truncated by the cracks as if flying out from a perceived world behind the wall into the world of the everyday.

Many of these rock art sites are associated with swift nesting places, as well as with water, and it is when these images are connected with swift behaviours that the 'otherworldly' attributes really begin to become apparent. Most notably, observing swifts as they fly into their nests leaves a striking impression: the bird arrives at the nest at high-speed, makes a sharp, fast turn at the mouth of the nest and then vanishes. It is as if the swift has flown directly into the rock face!

To a mind already attuned to the possibility that a supernatural world might exist behind the rock surface, this is a powerful image indeed.

7. The Experiences of Contemporary Painters

It is all very well dwelling upon prehistorical and historical archaeological cultures to explore evidence for the kinds of innate cognitions underlying painting that we are discussing, but the hypothesis would be greatly strengthened if it could be demonstrated that contemporary painters experienced similar 'otherworldly' sensations as purported for Palaeolithic cave artists or Bushmen of the Western Cape.

I had already seen from the accounts of painters like Ernst Fuchs and Robert Venosa reporting trance-like experiences and an opening out into another world, and so to this end I conducted a small-scale survey with painters working in various genres – mainly visionary, expressionist and abstract – asking fairly neutral questions about their experiences of painting. In particular I wanted to know what they felt and experienced when standing before their canvas and applying paint to it.

Just over half of the respondents came back with significant responses relevant to the theme. Some of the most interesting related directly to an 'opening up' or direct experience of precisely the kind of perceived 'hidden world' or 'otherworld' that we have been discussing...

On 'opening up or loss of body boundaries:

"[I am] not totally in control, but a conduit for life to move through..."

"I have on occasion felt like... I just show up, something else uses my body..."

"[It] feels more like the art is coming through me... a lot of the time I feel like the conduit rather than the source..."

"I'm not here – I'm somewhere else but not here... I'm more spectator than creator..."

A voice from the back of the head:

"I occasionally receive instructions or suggestions from a voice that originates in the back of my skull... The instructions can also be visual: colors [sic] to use, or what line or pattern to execute. The voice is never hostile, only revelatory."

Seeing beyond the self:

"It happens that I see myself in front of me, on the canvas, and it always blows my mind. I see myself, my consciousness. Not my body. I see stuff emanating from myself..."

Canvas as portal:

"[I experience the canvas as] a portal or state of transition between how I see the world and how everyone else sees it"

"One of the most interesting things occurs near the completion of a piece, when it feels like I am looking at something real, and that each brushstroke is an enhancement to that reality..."

"[It feels] like a karst window, looking into another reality."

"The moment of painting is a moment of becoming part of a parallel world..."

"I enter the invisible world and bring it into view..."

Paint as animate:

"I'm sure that I do not choose the colours and objects – the colours and objects choose me!"

"Silky smooth oils could be my blood itself... pumped out of my heart, flowing from my shoulder thru [sic] my fingers into the brush..."

"Paint's first impulse is to resist you..."

Energy experienced from the canvas:

"I could actually feel.... The subtle yet palpable vibration emanating from the canvas. I stepped to the side then back in front of it several times to confirm the effect, particularly around my heart, a visceral sensation that... penetrated to my shoulder blades and spine."

"Certain works of art seem to have what I can only describe as 'energy fields'... Nobody taught me to do it [the placing of hands near the canvas]... it's something I've started doing after feeling the energy coming off a canvas while painting..."

8. Summary

In all the foregoing, from the beginnings of our species up to the present day, we appear again and again to arrive at the same kinds of behaviours, the same repeating reflections of deeply-hidden cognitions:

- an expectation of an 'otherworld' behind the canvas or rock wall,
- bodies being freed from their materiality to slip into a loss of self or as some kind of proto-mythical actor,
- paint as more than mere material but as an animate agent which opens up access to that 'hidden world',
- intimate and liminal contact with a surface to attain sensations of supernatural potency,
- the act of painting as a kind of liminal magic

...and it appears the activating factor for all of these cognitions in ritual and creative contexts is the application of paint, to the body or to a surface which then becomes, as it were, a magical portal into a hidden world.

In light of all this evidence, this constant repeating ubiquity, we may ask, quite forcefully, upon what factual basis shall the 'death' of painting be founded? Is there any cognitive or anthropological depth to this supposed 'death' or is it merely a thin ideological veneer which pits critical theory against a profound, innate, scientifically-evidenced human nature?

If we compare the time-depth of 150 years of Modernist ideology with the 130,000 years of red ochre usage, we can see that painting both reflects and responds to a whole range of cognitions and behaviours, only a few of which have been narrated here. We might look at Modernism's attempt to uncover the 'essence' of painting before killing it as absurd, since 'essence-based' approaches to a human phenomenon known to be delocalised across much of the human mind and human culture are untenable in the twenty-first century. We may as well search for the essence of language, or the unitary truth of art.

Being a serious artist means working with and discovering Who We Are as humans, and exploring possibilities of who we could be. This is a very different quest to the one seen in major galleries of the Western world, where patently false, iconoclastic and deeply counterintuitive approaches to being human are dogmatically presented as the Only Way To Do Art, an ideological veneer overlain upon a deep ocean of innate and evolved experience, the ice of which is everywhere cracking whilst being pronounced as secure.

There never was a 'death' of painting in any meaningful sense. Much of the criticism levelled at painting – its apparent lack of function, zombie formalism, crass commercialism – has now rather ironically come to pass for the art movements and critical schools which eschewed and rejected painting as finished. After 150 years of its predicted death, it still continues with ever-greater vitality, and that is because it is as innate as language, as human as music. Painting is a profound humanising method of engaging with 'other', a perennial drive within human beings, to extend beyond the self. Painting in this sense cannot die, while we humans continue. It lives. It truly lives.