



## OWEN THOMPSON PERFECTING IMPERFECTION

*The desire for perfection is a very powerful force from within us, but why?*

When I walk along the beach and pick up shells, I tend to reject those that are broken, worn or imperfectly formed. It seems natural that I want to find the perfect one to keep as a special prize because perfection is rare.

Rarity and value are related. The more perfect and rare something is, the more valuable.

There is an opposing philosophy which views the imperfect as superior and more valuable than the perfect because its imperfections make it unique and one-of-a-kind.

As an example, Japanese potters would throw a perfect pot on a pottery wheel, but would then deliberately dent one side of the pot to make it imperfect. Why? Because the imperfection gave the pot its uniqueness and character. Its value was related to this uniqueness and not its lack of perfection.

In European art the pursuit of perfection became all consuming. Artists largely sought out 'perfect' subjects to portray, be they landscapes, animals, plants or people.

Of particular interest to artists, particularly painters, potters and architects, is the compositional system based on the golden mean or golden ratio, which is arrived at by a very

simple geometric construct which divides any given length into a ratio of 1 unit to .618 of a unit.

A golden rectangle will have one side .618 the length of the longer side. This is close to two-thirds, but is significantly different in that it is an infinitely repeatable division or addition with the same ratio.

This unique set of proportions is used in the spatial division of paintings, pots and buildings which have a harmony of proportions running through them, thus creating, it is claimed, perfect balance and harmony.

Formulated by the Greeks, the golden ratio was applied in their classical pottery forms, the Red on Black and Black on Red period, and in their architecture - for example, the Parthenon. Modern architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier revived its use.

The ratio has been used by various famous artists since the Greeks, including for example, Leonardo Da Vinci, Vermeer, Seurat, Mondrian and Jeffrey Smart. If one looks closely at their work, the effect of applying the golden ratio begins to emerge. In common there is an air of stillness, of frozen movement, and a surreal quietude. Perfect harmony and balance.

Is this what we always want though? To be critical you could argue that sometimes the effect of this perfection is to make the works static, lifeless and lacking in emotional energy.



## *A commentary on our seemingly innate desire for perfection and the challenge for us to embrace the idea of the imperfect as ideal*

Some of these artists' works do look overly contrived and stilted. They are cool and cerebral works, not charged and exciting like Van Gogh, for comparison, who composed intuitively. Are Van Gogh's works to be considered imperfect then? If they are imperfect it certainly hasn't diminished the pleasure they give. Perhaps a work's capacity to communicate is more important to us than its 'perfection'.

There is a parallel here to people, of course. If you expect people to be perfect, including yourself, then you will likely be disappointed, but if you think of someone you know well, do you love them any less knowing their imperfections? Just like the imperfect pots, it is our variations from the ideal which individuate us, and which others find special and endearing.

I recently saw an intriguing study: the portraits of fifty people, selected for their beauty, were merged by computer morphing technology into a composite of the fifty faces - all from different countries and cultures, old and young, male and female, forming one image of the median beautiful face.

At my recent solo exhibition I included a triptych entitled simply 'Eucalyptus Leaves'. It was a close examination of collected gum leaves represented faithfully. A visitor who was a trained botanist complimented me on the strength of my observation, but was surprised, even shocked I think, that I had not sought out perfect specimens to portray. I had depicted the leaves which had spots and blotches, chewed edges and natural deformations. As far as I was concerned, I had depicted them with all their glorious imperfections. There is beauty and interest in these variations from the idealised perfect form.

The result was compelling: an androgynous, mid skin-coloured face with pleasant appearance looking a bit like everyone you have ever met rolled into one, and by the way this was made consistent with golden mean proportional ratios.

The trouble is that it represented everyone and not someone, and so we see a homogenised 'perfect' face, and not an individual - someone who is characterised by the variations and imperfections which make people special and valued as unique individuals. Ultimately the 'perfect' face was not as attractive as one might expect, because it lacked real character.

Another triptych was of collected shells, or rather parts of shells, which I titled Fragments. It was a conscious decision to feature the broken, imperfect shells I had previously discarded and to show that the beauty of their patterning and colouration was even enhanced by focusing attention on a smaller area.

Whilst it seems natural for us to seek perfection, will that really bring fulfilment ?

I am learning to embrace the imperfections in life. I love to paint imperfect things, and will endeavour to paint them - perfectly.

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