

# THE MAGIC OF MODERN ART

HOW TO LOVE MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART

Robyn Jamison, MFA

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*The principle of true art  
is not to portray, but to evoke.*

— Jerzy Kosinski

This book's mission is simple—to offer everyone the opportunity to become as wild about Modern Art as I am. I am committed that this book provide what you need so that your visits to Modern Art exhibits become joyful, enriching experiences—experiences that you eagerly anticipate, avidly soak in and never get over. In short, I wrote this book so you can have the magic of Modern Art in your life!

I assert that the ability to appreciate art, including Modern Art, is innate to all human beings. I have discovered that unlocking this natural love of art has much more to do with clearing out what's in the way than it does with accumulating information.

When I inquire into my own love affair with Modern Art, I see clearly that when I am focused entirely on the art in front of me—setting aside judgment and cognitive thinking—that's when I find myself profoundly moved and deeply satisfied.

I have come to the conclusion that the key to unlocking the magic of Modern Art is in the ability to immerse oneself in the art and truly “experience” it. So the obvious and most vital question becomes, “How does one learn to experience Modern Art?” That, dear reader, is the work of this book.

## **How This Book Is Organized**

Part One is about opening up the possibility of falling in love with Modern Art. We will delve into the specific benefits of having a great relationship with Modern Art. This is the “why bother” conversation of the book. Once you are clear that there's an enormously rich experience awaiting you when you connect with Modern Art, I believe you will be convinced that making this connection is well worth your time and effort.

I will also make the case that everyone has a natural affinity for Modern Art. Unfortunately, many of us have become disconnected from this affinity, due to “stuff” that has gotten in the way. It could be stuff from the past like clueless art teachers, snooty museum staffers and even the seeming weirdness and inaccessibility of Modern Art itself. Part One ends with an invitation for you to make a declaration—a declaration that you’re willing to re-open yourself to all that Modern Art has to offer.

In Part Two, I will reveal and debunk the misconceptions that could be preventing you from experiencing the magnificence of Modern Art. We will tackle the various beliefs that might be keeping you and Modern Art at arm’s length. Completing this process will forever alter what’s possible for you with Modern Art.

Part Three is about seeing art through new eyes. I will discuss the notion of “context” and show you that you already have a context for Modern Art. This context has been underlying (or even sabotaging) every aspect of your relationship to Modern Art. You will invent a new context that empowers and inspires you. With this new context under your belt, you’ll be ready to explore some creative ways to approach your Modern Art viewing. I will share with you The Magic of Modern Art Tour, which I have found invaluable for introducing people to the magic of Modern Art.

I devote the last chapter in Part Three to excerpts from interviews I conducted with a variety of artists and art professionals. These Modern Art lovers will let you in on how they think and feel about Modern Art, giving you insight into ways to maximize your own precious art-viewing time. Those of them who are artists were generous enough to allow me to include examples of their extraordinary work.

Part Four is about developing your art savvy and deepening your relationship with Modern Art. I begin with a brief history of Modern Art, then delve into some invaluable art rudiments with an eye toward expanding your ability to explore Modern Art with confidence.

In Part Five, I cover the topic of curating your own art collection. For many of us, choosing, arranging, hanging and caring for our art is a mystery. This section is devoted to giving you the basic know-how to collect art that you love and display it with aplomb.

## An Important Note on the Use of the Terms “Art” and “Modern” in This Book

When I talk about art in this book, I mean the kind of art that is displayed in museums and fine galleries. Such art is sometimes referred to as “serious art,” “fine” art,” or “art with a capital A.” It’s the kind of art that has the potential to stretch you, transport you and have a profound, lasting impact on you.

In the art world, there are certain terms that are not always used the same way. Among these are “Modern,” “Contemporary,” and “Avant-garde.” In this book, I use “modern” as a catch-all term meant to include Modern Art, Contemporary Art and beyond. This is similar to its use in “The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)” and some other museums that show modern and contemporary art.

For example, MoMA’s description of its collection implies a broad use of the term, “modern.”

MoMA’s rich and varied collection offers a panoramic overview of modern and contemporary art, from the innovative European painting and sculpture of the 1880s to today’s film, design, and performance art.

As you read this book, bear in mind that “Modern” is used in a very broad way.

## A Final Thought

Whether you have a strong background in art or consider yourself a novice, there’s no question that you have a natural affinity for art. Were this not the case, art would have been a passing fancy, not the sustained abiding presence it has been throughout human history.

Loving Modern Art does not require intensive study or memorization of data or positive thinking or trying to talk yourself into anything. All it takes is your desire to have the magic of Modern Art in your life and the willingness to let this book be your guide.

Here’s to many magical hours with Modern Art!

*Art enables us to find ourselves  
and lose ourselves at the same time.*

— Thomas Merton

# Opening up the Possibility

## CHAPTER 2 YOUR NATURAL AFFINITY FOR MODERN ART – A REAWAKENING

### Appreciating Art Is in Our Nature

I firmly believe that appreciating art is in our nature—*intrinsic* to us as human beings. In fact, there are many respected and credible experts in the field who share the view that appreciating art is a universal human instinct. Some of them have even concluded that our brains are hardwired to appreciate art.

Empirical evidence in the form of art objects that have been produced by every culture and civilization abounds. Equally compelling is the fact that nearly all young children delight in colors, shapes, forms and textures.

In my case, I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, in the 1950s. In those days, art held a prominent place in public schools. I fondly remember our wonderful grade school field trips to the St. Louis Art Museum, which was (and still is) an excellent art museum.

I'll never forget what it was like to visit the art museum for the first time. I was ecstatic to discover there was a whole huge building devoted solely to art!

When I was first introduced to the world of art, I was most attracted to the art of the Renaissance period—Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Donatello. Those artists' technical command of realism and the intense feeling that their paintings, drawings and sculptures were able to convey took my breath away.

### Appreciating Modern Art Is Also in Our Nature

Since appreciating art is in our nature, doesn't it follow that the same is true for Modern Art?

Maybe your comfort zone ends at Impressionism or some other art movement or era. The same or even greater enjoyment that you currently experience with your favorite art is available with all Modern Art.

Here's how I got in touch with my affinity for Modern Art. As a child, I was exposed to reproductions of Modern Art, mostly in books. They didn't have much impact on me. I held fast to my preference for the "Old Masters."

It wasn't until I saw a major Vincent Van Gogh retrospective at the St. Louis Art Museum that all this changed. When I caught sight of the actual paintings hanging on the museum walls, I was awestruck. The colors were so vivid, the brushstrokes so bold—to me, those paintings epitomized vitality itself. I found myself completely overtaken by the sensations those paintings evoked in me. I had no awareness of anything else. It was as if I had disappeared and there was only the experience of those paintings.

That extraordinary Van Gogh exhibition was a turning point in my life. I was 12 years old. That show opened me up to all the innovative art of the late 1800s and beyond. Along with that came the realization that art doesn't have to be realistic to be moving and powerful. A whole new realm of art appreciation opened up to me.

Edgar Degas' delicate dancers, Toulouse Lautrec's gaudy performers, Gauguin's exotic Tahitian women, Pablo Picasso and George Braque's cubist explorations, Dali's dreamlike surrealism. A kaleidoscope of endless visual possibilities was now mine! I didn't know much about the theory behind all the art movements, but I was inspired by the seemingly endless expressions of creativity.

It doesn't matter whether you are, as I was at first, only comfortable with the Old Masters. I return to my original assertion: Appreciating art is in our nature, intrinsic to us as human beings. Furthermore, I assert that our affinity for art is not exclusive; it's inclusive. Appreciating Modern Art is in our nature.

## **If You Don't Experience an Affinity for Modern Art**

I was one of the lucky ones. Nothing ever came between me and my natural affinity for art. Sadly, that's not the case for everyone. For some of us, this connection seems to have disappeared altogether. Where did it go? I say it's still there, lying dormant, ready to be reawakened.

Maybe you're among those who are comfortable with the art of earlier eras but simply can't relate to Modern Art. Your lack of resonance with Modern Art could be the result of painful past experiences. Or, it could

simply be due to a lack of familiarity and exposure to it. If people around you weren't fans of Modern Art, you might have taken on their point of view. Navigating one's relationship with Modern Art can be thorny regardless of your past history with it.

With its myriad of outside-the-box expressions, Modern Art might not fit your expectations of what art is or what art is supposed to be. So it's no surprise that Modern Art can seem completely incomprehensible.

Question: What do we humans typically do when confronted with something we don't understand?

Answer: We try to figure it out.

Question: What do we do if we can't figure it out?

Answer: Avoid it. Or invalidate it. Maybe invalidate ourselves. Or possibly give up altogether.

There, in a nutshell, is how so many of us relate (or don't relate) to Modern Art. We avoid it, invalidate it and become resigned that we will never get it.

Some of us have developed sophisticated strategies to alleviate our discomfort with Modern Art. Instead of admitting (even to ourselves) that we're intimidated by it, we come up with excuses. "I'm too busy to attend that art show," or "I'm too tired." Rather than expressing our fear that we'll never get Modern Art, we feign indifference. "So what if I don't like Modern Art?" or, "Modern Art? I can take it or leave it."

There is a certain level of comfort in avoiding the issue altogether. Being comfortable is so much easier than taking risks. In opting for comfort, we don't have to confront our lack of art savvy or struggle to comprehend art that seems alien to us.

Truth be told, settling for comfort would be just fine if it weren't for the fact that we are, by nature, profoundly and inherently connected to art. Modern Art is no exception. It is natural for us to resonate with the art of our own time, the art that reflects contemporary thinking and contemporary issues. When we shun Modern Art, we cut ourselves off from a vital aspect of our culture and our nature.

## The Way Forward

Reawakening your innate appreciation for Modern Art is not as difficult as you would imagine. Even if you've spent years relying on the various avoidance strategies you have cultivated, it's still possible to cause a shift for yourself. Even if you have minimized the risks and turned away from Modern Art altogether, it's not too late!

The entry point is to become aware of the fact that you yourself have shut the door on Modern Art. This may seem counterintuitive and daunting to confront. Unsettling though this realization might seem, this is, in fact, good news. Once you realize it was you who shut the door in the first place, guess what? You also recognize that you have the power to re-open that door and reclaim your affinity for Modern Art.

Re-opening that door requires your willingness to make yourself available for all that Modern Art has to offer. Without the willingness, the door remains shut. With the willingness, you're well on your way to reawakening your natural affinity for Modern Art.

Once you're willing to open the door to Modern Art, the next step is to say so, to declare it. Making a declaration has a unique and powerful impact. When you declare something, you literally bring that thing into existence. When the umpire shouts, "You're out!"—you're out! Likewise, the very instant you declare that you are willing, you're willing.

It takes courage to re-open yourself to any aspect of your life where you've shut the door. Re-opening yourself to Modern Art is no exception. I encourage you to take the plunge. Make the declaration that you are now open to reap the benefits inherent in Modern Art!

Don't be surprised if you experience a shift in your relationship to Modern Art just by making this declaration. You may feel more relaxed and curious about it. You might find yourself ready to go see some Modern Art!

Wherever you are at this point, read on! The following chapters are devoted to freeing you from old ideas that run counter to your newly declared openness.



*Art washes away from the soul the dust  
of everyday life.*

— Pablo Picasso

# Identifying and Dispelling Counterproductive Beliefs

## CHAPTER 3 BELIEFS – WHAT HAVE THEY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Here's some good news. You don't need to amass a mountain of information to have the magic of Modern Art in your life. In fact, it's mostly a matter of unlearning—of letting go of those beliefs that might be making you feel like an outsider to Modern Art.

When we think about our beliefs (consider “beliefs” to include all those opinions and judgments we hold to be true), I suspect that most of us tend to focus only on our significant beliefs. We think about our beliefs about spirituality, religion or politics—about family, education and health care.

However, when we really look, it becomes clear that we have beliefs about almost everything, including relatively trivial stuff such as the best brand of toothpaste or the right color to paint a kitchen.

Personally, I have many beliefs about art and Modern Art:

- I believe art is one of the highest expressions of humanity;
- I believe art is a unifying force;
- I believe that being able to relate to Modern Art is an important aspect of being a well-rounded person;
- I believe valuing art and artists is essential for a civilization to thrive.

When I was younger, I assumed these beliefs were self-evident. This assumption was reinforced in art school, where I was immersed in a world filled entirely with artists and aspiring artists. We were like-minded; we shared many of the same beliefs about art. I had grown accustomed to being around people who loved Modern Art, and it seemed like an “of course” that everyone loved it as much as I did.

In the preface, I shared that I received a crash course in reality the moment I left art school and entered the workforce. In my first job as a museum guard, I was privy to the surprisingly diverse range of comments made by museum guests. Perhaps it was because I had just emerged from an environment where we all valued Modern Art so much that the disgruntled mutterings came as such a shock to me.

I was stunned the first time I heard a museum visitor exclaim, “My five-year-old could do that!” She was looking at a famous work by Joan Miro. I had just spent five years of intensive work developing my talent and skills, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that no five-year-old could produce the refinement and compositional brilliance of such a deceptively simple masterpiece.

I asked myself, “Why would anyone express disdain for such a marvelous work of art?” One thing seemed certain—alienated museum-goers could not have been seeing the art the same way I did. I wondered what prevented them from recognizing how great the art was. Then, as I listened to more and more similar comments, it became apparent that these frustrated art viewers had firmly-held beliefs about what art should be about and how it should look. There was no question that the art they were seeing failed to meet those criteria.

I loved most of the works we showed at the museum and appreciated those I didn’t love. Yet, those same exhibits were totally unappealing to so many other people. It would be easy just to say, “Oh well, each to his own.” But what about all the evidence pointing to the fact that appreciating art is intrinsic to our nature? Why would that apply only to certain art genres or periods?

Something else had to be in play for those dissatisfied museum-goers. As far as I could tell, it was those strongly-held opinions—opinions that invalidated Modern Art in their minds. What if those beliefs were at the heart of what prevented those people from appreciating Modern Art?

## **The Power of Beliefs**

To give you a sense of the incredible power that beliefs have and their ability to shape our world, I want to provide you with an example from my own life.

When, at age 18, it came time for me to choose my college major, my parents demanded that I get a degree in art education rather than a straight degree in visual art. They didn’t think I could make a living as an artist. They insisted I have something to “fall back on.” Although I outwardly resisted their point of view, their fears began working on me. Before I knew it, the belief, “Artists are doomed to either starve or sell out,” began to lodge itself in my subconscious. I acquiesced to my parents’ wishes and enrolled in the Art Education program.

Once in college, I discovered, to my dismay, that I was no longer a big fish in a little pond; I had become a little fish in a big sea. I was surrounded by hundreds of other art students, all of whom had been the “class artists” in their respective schools just as I had been in mine. I’d had no idea that art at the university level would be so competitive.

To top it all off, not only had so many of my artist and non-artist friends bought into the myth of the “starving artist,” but the world at large seemed to believe it as well. With so many people believing it, it had to be true, right? After all, “the starving artist” is a cliché known to just about everyone.

By the time I graduated from college, I didn’t even consider setting up shop to earn a living with my art. Nope. I worked at an odd assortment of jobs, only some of which were even vaguely art-related. Making art had become relegated to a hobby.

If you had asked me then, “Why aren’t you making a living with your art?” I would have recited my long litany on “how it is” for artists and that my only choices were (yes, you guessed it) to be a starving artist, sell out, or change professions. The last thing I would have considered at that point was the possibility that the belief itself was the culprit.

To my great good fortune, at age 29, I participated in an extremely impactful personal development seminar where I discovered that believing something doesn’t make it true—that, even if the majority of people believe something, it still doesn’t mean that it’s true.

Once I had this realization, it was a short leap to let go of my disempowering belief that all artists are doomed to starve, sell out or switch professions. A whole new world of possibility opened up for me as an artist.

At the time I took the seminar, I happened to be working as a writer and editor in a small freelance writing firm. When I returned to my job on the Monday following the seminar weekend, my boss informed me that he had accepted a lucrative position at a well-known advertising agency. He offered me his entire business—lock, stock and client base!

Had he made this offer a few days earlier, I would have gratefully accepted it. However, I was in a different state of mind as a result of the seminar. So, I thanked him profusely for his generous offer and graciously declined, explaining that I was going to pursue my passion—art.

I began my art career the very next day. I went on to enjoy a successful twelve-year run of creating hundreds of one-of-a-kind ceramic pieces that I sold through galleries and private commissions. Just by dispelling one significant belief, a whole new future was mine.

## **How Beliefs Work**

Before I get into the specific counterproductive beliefs that may be keeping you alienated from Modern Art, I'd like to explain how beliefs work in general. Remember, "beliefs" include all those opinions and judgments we consider to be true.

We acquire beliefs in two main ways. We inherit them and we invent them.

Our inherited beliefs are passed down to us through our parents, teachers, clergy, relatives, friends, advertising and even from society as a whole. For example, I inherited the belief that education is a major priority in life. I can't remember ever not knowing that I was destined to go to college. This is just one personal example from the mountain of beliefs we have all inherited.

When we invent beliefs, we do so both consciously and unconsciously in order to make sense of the world. As a young child, I believed that the majority of the world's population was Jewish. This makes sense if you know that I was raised in a community made up almost entirely of Jewish people. I knew about people of other religions and ethnicities, but I was surrounded by Jewish people. I never thought to ask whether we were the majority in the world and don't recall a specific moment when I created that belief. I didn't think of it as a belief, but just something I thought was true. That's how it goes with beliefs.

Whether inherited or invented, once we adopt a particular belief, it often operates in the background calling the shots. We rarely question that belief—in fact, we become attached to it. Our actions and our

speaking line up with it. We collect evidence that supports it and we ignore, fail to notice, or even refuse to consider anything that flies in the face of it.

Nonetheless, beliefs are not set in stone; they are malleable. But since many of them are in the background, we are totally unaware of them, let alone conscious of their impact. In order to gain access to our beliefs, we must bring them from the background of our consciousness to the foreground. Once we're aware of their existence, they loosen their grip. We then have the choice to let go of those beliefs that no longer serve us.

Just to be clear, there are ultimately no right or wrong beliefs. However, there are beliefs that interfere with the ability to appreciate Modern Art. From this point forward, I will refer to these as "Counterproductive Beliefs."

In the next few chapters, I'm going to expose the mischief inherent in a number of these Counterproductive Beliefs—beliefs about art, artists, the art world and even about you. I suggest you read through them and put a check mark beside any that apply to you. Every Counterproductive Belief you recognize and dispel takes you another step closer to the endgame—becoming wild about Modern Art.

A handwritten signature in pink ink, appearing to read "Zoë".

*Art evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist.*

— René Magritte

# Seeing Modern Art through New Eyes

## CHAPTER 11 THE MAGIC OF MODERN ART TOUR – HOW TO EXPERIENCE MODERN ART

The time has come for you to see Modern Art through new eyes. I have just the thing to ensure your success—The Magic of Modern Art Tour! The Magic of Modern Art Tour (originally the Robyn Jamison Art Tour) began as an experiment. I wanted to find out if the process I had invented would bring about a breakthrough for people who were not in touch with their natural affinity for Modern Art.

As I share throughout this book, I believe that the key to unlocking the magic of Modern Art is to immerse oneself in the art and truly experience it. Much to my delight, every single person who has taken my tour has confirmed that they had a breakthrough in their appreciation for Modern Art.

The Magic of Modern Art Tour is designed to guide you through a process of discovery. You can expect to make three significant discoveries when you take the tour.

The first discovery is that you have the ability to be fully present with the art. This discovery happens on the job, so to speak—it's an experiential discovery.

The second discovery is that being with the art is distinct from analyzing or judging it. Curiosity and wonder are all you need.

The third discovery is that, when you do have that experience of being with the art, all the great stuff that seasoned art lovers say happens to them, also happens to you. The closest I can come to describing this in words is a sense of awe and a welling up of joy.

### How to Take Yourself on The Magic of Modern Art Tour

To prepare, I highly recommend that you have with you the instructions for the Magic of Modern Tour. They're available in multiple locations. This chapter walks you through the long version with lots of explanations. The graphic in Appendix A is an abbreviated step-by-step instruction guide. You can also get the instruction guide via this link: [www.MagicOfModernArt.com/OnTheGo](http://www.MagicOfModernArt.com/OnTheGo) or with the QR code at the end of the Afterword.

## CHAPTER 13 INTERVIEWS WITH THE PROS – THEIR PERSPECTIVES ON MODERN ART

One of the things I enjoy most about interacting with other artists and art professionals is learning about their diverse perspectives on Modern Art. We all share a love for Modern Art, but what we love about it and how we love it vary considerably.

When I was in the planning stages of writing this book, I thought it would be extremely valuable for you to get some perspectives other than my own. I particularly wanted to dispel the myth that there is only one correct way to look at Modern Art.

With that in mind, I conducted a series of interviews with seventeen art professionals, including artists, academics, gallerists, a director of a non-profit art center and an art school director. Interviewing them was a delightful, fascinating and inspiring experience for me. To say that it was difficult to choose which of their brilliant, enlightening quotes to include in this book is an understatement.

The artists I interviewed produce unique and extraordinary works of art. Examples of their work follow the interview quotes. You can find a brief bio of each interviewee in Appendix C.

Enjoy!

### **1) What advice do you have for anyone who wants to get the most out of viewing Modern Art?**

*The responses to this question were so insightful and diverse that I couldn't resist including all of them. Hint: they are all worth reading!*

**Jonathan Tung:** Go into it with your own eyes. Don't look at it colored through somebody else's interpretation.

Look at the piece first. Read the tag last. Once you read that tag, that work is already in a box, so your viewing is going to be colored by that information. Trust your own instinct.



Robyn Jamison

*Delicate Balance*

2013

Photogravure à la poupée

8 x 10 inches

Courtesy of the Artist



Robyn Jamison

*Tricycle Sentence*

2019

Clayboard, graphite, acrylic sheet, ink

30.25 x 30.25 x 5.5 inches

Collection of Lorraine Telford



Robyn Jamison is an artist on a mission—a mission to make the magic and wonder of Modern Art accessible to everyone in the world.

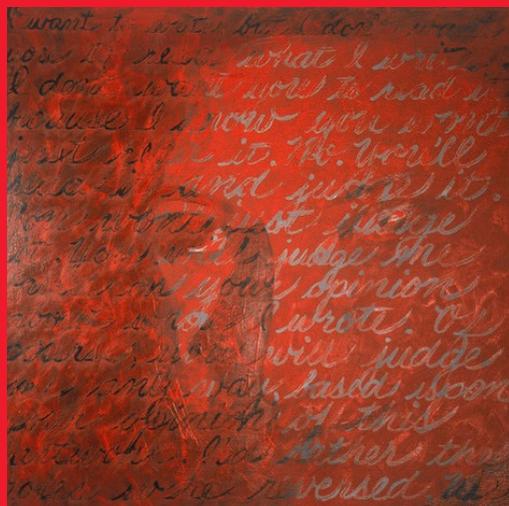
Robyn is a visual artist and published author with a Master of Fine Arts degree in Painting and Drawing. Her artwork is in collections worldwide.

This book has one purpose—to offer everyone the opportunity to become as wild about Modern and Contemporary Art as I am. I am committed that your visits to Modern and Contemporary Art exhibits become joyful, enriching experiences that you eagerly anticipate, avidly soak in and never get over.

I say that the ability to appreciate art, including every type of art, is innate to all human beings. I have discovered that unlocking this natural love of art has much more to do with clearing out what's in the way than it does with accumulating information.

When I look at my own love affair with the art of our time, I see clearly that when I am focused entirely on the art in front of me—setting aside judgment and cognitive thinking—that's when I find myself profoundly moved and deeply satisfied.

I have come to the conclusion that the key to unlocking the magic of Modern Art is in the ability to immerse oneself in the art and truly “experience” it. So, the obvious and most vital question becomes, “How does one learn to experience Modern and Contemporary Art?” That is the work of this book.



Robyn Jamison  
*Red Robyn (Self-Portrait)*  
36 x 36 inches  
Oil on Canvas

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