

Comparative Study

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Introduction

My comparative study focuses on Frank Auerbach, a contemporary artist who was a member of the famous School of London. Auerbach focused on the human form and capturing landscapes in a peculiar, unique way while utilizing large amounts of oil paints.

In contrast, I looked at Yayoi Kusama, a self described “obsessional artist” who focused on motifs and patterns in her work. Both Auerbach and Kusama grew up during World War II, and the way that the war shaped their art and lives is an interesting thread of similarity that unifies their work.

Then, at the end of my comparative study, I analyze how researching these two great artists has influenced my own work whether it be thematically or through my process.

Annotating Frank Auerbach's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1971

Bacchus and Ariadne, Frank Auerbach, 1971, Oil on Canvas, 122.3 x 153 cm, Tate National Gallery.

Auerbach's piece is modeled after Titan's piece of the same name, but in a non-objective form with joyous colors through oil on canvas.

This space of light blue paint contrasts with the rest of the image as its value is much lighter. It creates a break within the image and draws the viewer's eyes to the two red, central figures. In a sense of a landscape, this blue can represent the sky seen over an urban setting while also symbolizing the sky that Bacchus offers to Ariadne in

Titan's piece.

Auerbach's use of line in this piece is reminiscent of a landscape with scaffolding in a city like London that is constantly doing construction. However, this figure of red lines, also represents Ariadne in Titan's piece.



This section of red creates a unity between the two red figures that represent Ariadne and Bacchus. Since red is connotated with romance, the red that ties the two figures together symbolizes their love and passion for one another and contrasts with the rest of the blue, serene feeling of the image.

Auerbach's use of heavy oil paint creates a very rough texture to the surface of his paintings, which usually alludes to chaos. Again, this chaos is present as the texture contributes to the emotional intensity and chaos of the love between Ariadne and Bacchus.

Most of Auerbach's brushstrokes in this piece are stiff and geometric. He contrasts his own style by including a circle in the sky. This rounded shape creates movement in the piece, as if stars are circling above the two lovers directly below.

Also, the oval represents a crown that Bacchus throws into the sky after Ariadne dies as a way to immortalize her in the stars.

The focus of the image are the two figures meeting and falling in love in red. Auerbach emphasizes them by using dark blues and black to represent Bacchus's party. The contrast of colors make the blue fade more into the background to demonstrate the emotional intensity between Ariadne and Bacchus.

Cultural Significance of *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1971



Frank Auerbach was a member of the famous “School of London” in post WWII Britain (Getty). The School of London was a collective of artists who focused on the human figure and every day landscape through abstraction as a rejection of contemporary art. Auerbach's *Bacchus and Ariadne* embodies these values of the School of London through its depiction of an abstract landscape.

The same year that he painted *Bacchus and Ariadne*, Auerbach wrote in a letter to the Times that “Your correspondents tend to write of paintings as objects of financial value or passive beauty” In 1971, Auerbach rejected what he called “passive beauty” by creating paintings such as *Bacchus and Ariadne* to embody pure energy.

At first glance, *Bacchus and Ariadne* can be perceived as a simple, abstract landscape, but once the viewer reads the title, the many symbolic elements of the piece become significant. The title alludes to the Roman myth of two lovers as well as a painting with the same name done by Renaissance painter Titian. Auerbach has created many pieces that are “done after the masters” where he will create art that embodies the mood of the painting, but uses his abstraction of colors to create the mood (Tate). With the context of the title, viewers can then identify symbols such as the crown of stars in the sky that represent the constellation that Bacchus made for Ariadne after her death.



By creating pieces after the work of the masters from the Renaissance, Auerbach is able to connect the old world of the Renaissance with his modern world. The contrast between Auerbach's rendition of Titian's original painting is significant through its dynamic brush strokes that create dynamic energy and confusion that embody the time period in which it was painted.

Annotating Yayoi Kusama's *Pumpkin Sculpture*, 1998

Kusama's repeated use of black polkadots creates a rhythm in the pumpkin, creating its spirit and energy that is present in Japanese culture, particularly Shinto beliefs that all things had spirits. Also, the polkadot alludes to the sun, just like it does in the Japanese flag, promoting the pumpkin's energy. The black polkadots can also be seen as eyes, adding to the life of the pumpkin. Kusama sees polkadots as a way to infinity, almost like an idea of enlightenment and connection with everything around her.



The bold color choices and contrast between the black and yellow can be attributed to Kusama's pop art style as well as her love for energy, since yellow is the color of the sun and light. The contrast between the shapes due to the colors create a movement in the vision in vision of the viewers so that when they blink, they see the pattern recurring everywhere, just like Kusama did when she was mentally ill.

The unity of the colors and pattern of the pumpkin with the rest of the room makes it seem that the pumpkin is never ending, that its form is infinite, a motif often used by Kusama in her art. The way that the pumpkin can expand and fill the space make its energy extremely strong, making it so that it is as powerful as possible. This encourages the viewer to connect with the pumpkin with the way it overwhelms them, to find solace with the pumpkin, just as Kusama did in her childhood hallucinations.

The form of the pumpkin is large and takes a large presence in the small room. Its sheer size and form make it overpowering and almost omniscient, as if it will confront the viewer and that its many eyes will see all that is hidden from view. The size also makes people dwarfed in comparison, which humbles them.

The lack of emphasis on the human form with a pumpkin head may make it missed by a viewer. Kusama often made her art interactive or performed with it, physically inserting herself into the piece and forcing that connection and recognition of herself. However, in this piece, she is almost hiding. Her head is replaced with the shape of a smaller pumpkin, showing her deep connection with the pumpkin. In her childhood, she would have hallucinations often. One day, she remembers that she had a conversation with a pumpkin and used it to center herself. By making her head a pumpkin, we see that Kusama is relaxed and at ease, just completely focused on the pumpkin and distracted from her mental woes.

Pumpkin Sculpture, Yayoi Kusama, 1998, sculpture, n/a, Seoul Arts Center

Cultural Significance of *Pumpkin Sculpture*, 1998



Pumpkins and Kusama's childhood are deeply intertwined. Kusama grew up in Matsumoto, Japan during World War II. During the war, most of Japan's food supplies were disrupted due to rationing for the war effort. However, Kusama's family worked in wholesale produce sales and their warehouses were filled with pumpkins, meaning the family consumed pumpkins for a majority of the duration of the war. Also, in her childhood, Kusama often had hallucinations where she would have "conversations" with the pumpkins. These conversations would help Kusama calm down and center herself.



The use of Kusama's polka dots on the piece also may allude to Japan in the Showa era following the war. The new Japanese flag, a white flag with a red circle that represented the rising sun, may have been a source of inspiration for Kusama. Kusama has been recorded saying that she believes that "polkadots are the way to infinity" and that their shape embodied energy, like the sun of the Japanese flag.



Pumpkins have connotations of growth and fertility, which can be tied with the idea of femininity. Kusama would later explore the ideas of femininity and sexuality as she moved to create more avant garde art.

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Annotating Frank Auerbach's *The Origin of the Great Bear*, 1968 "Frank Auerbach, 'The Origin of the Great Bear' 1967–8." *Tate* Np., n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2016.

Auerbach was commissioned by David Wilkie to create a painting with a Titanesque painting without referring to a specific work of Titan.

The black shape in the corner disrupts the unity of the entire piece through its size and position which contrasts with the center of the painting which includes similar values of the shapes. This shape represents an eagle, the symbol of the god Jupiter, and represents Jupiter's intervention between ursine Callisto and her son Arcas as he omnisciently views them from above to save them from this grave mistake.

The darker values in the middle contrast with the lighter, yellow negative space of the painting. Auerbach's lines here are jumbled, but represent a chaotic situation of Arcas and ursine Callisto meeting again where Arcas attempts to kill his mother, not recognizing her in her ursine form. The texture in this painting from the many layers of oil allude to this chaos, a common motif of Auerbach's.



These seven dots contrast with Auerbach's jagged lines and their shape and positioning alludes to the constellation Ursa Major, the Great Bear, in the sky that Callisto was made into by Jupiter.

This line balances the two diagonal corners of the painting, balancing with the eagle that is Jupiter. The line, organic in form, alludes to Callisto laying in the fields. Whether it is Callisto laying down after being raped by Jupiter or when she gives birth to Arcas is unclear, but gives the impression of a cycle in Callisto's life.

Auerbach's use of the color of red contrasts with the rest of the green scenery to draw the eye to the figure. This red figure symbolizes the goddess Diana as she hunts down Callisto, one of her warrior nymphs who was raped by Jupiter. There is more red scattered throughout the image which represent Diana's hounds as they search for Castillo as the entire painting displays the myth of Castillo and how the Great Bear constellation was formed. By including Diana in such a dark, passionate color, the viewer is struck with the pain that Callisto experienced when she was banished by Diana.

Cultural Significance of *The Origin of the Great Bear*, 1967-68

Similarly to *Bacchus and Ariadne*, *The Origin of the Great Bear* was based off of the Roman myth where one of Diana's warrior nymphs, Callisto, was raped by Jupiter. However, unlike *Bacchus and Ariadne*, Auerbach was commissioned by David Wilkie to create a painting that was Titanesque. So, unlike *Bacchus and Ariadne*, *The Origin of the Great Bear* was an original composition by Auerbach that still provoked resemblance to Titian's paintings.

The themes of female sexuality and consequences in *The Origin of the Great Bear* are another way in which Auerbach is connecting the past with the radical present of 1970's Britain. During the 1970's, the sexual revolution was in full force and women were fighting for universal equality. The juxtaposition of Callisto's harsh punishments for being raped by Zeus and being exiled for the aftermath with these radical movements in the 1970's serves as a social commentary and reminder of the hypocrisy of the past.

Done in a style customary to Auerbach and the School of London, the piece is abstract enough that the viewer needs the context of the title to fully comprehend the image. Auerbach borrows from the myth to create symbols to allude to the title. For example, the black figure in the top right corner is an eagle, the symbol of the Roman god Jupiter, and represents Jupiter's influence on Callisto's story. Also, the seven dots in the opposing corner allude to the constellation Ursa Major in which Callisto was transformed into by Jupiter in the myth of its origin.

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Comparison of Kusama's *Pumpkin Sculpture* and Auerbach's *The Origin of the Great Bear*

Similarities

- These pieces have warm hues with the overbearing color being used as yellow but both have sources of contrast.
 - Kusama, her polkadots
 - Auerbach, the meeting of Callisto and Arcas
- Abstraction utilized by both artists as they explore new expressions of art and shift away from contemporary art to modern art.

Both

- Kusama and Auerbach both lived through WWII.
 - Kusama in Japan
 - Auerbach escaped from Nazi Germany
- Concepts of Womanhood examined
 - Kusama, the fertility and bulbous shape of the pumpkin can be a symbol for femininity
 - Auerbach, the myth of Callisto discusses the consequence of her rape.

Differences

- Texture
 - Kusama's smooth surfaces provoke surrealist, dream like images for the viewer
 - Auerbach's heavy use of oil paint creates a very textured, rough surface of paint that embodies the chaos that he experienced from his childhood
- Personal Connections
 - Kusama's pumpkins have deep ties to her childhood and her mental health, almost a self-portrait of her mind.
 - Auerbach's *Origin of the Great Bear* is based upon a myth and has no personal connection to him, but he is exploring the concept and modern connections for older myths and works.

Comparison of Auerbach's Bacchus and Ariadne and The Origin of the Great Bear

Similarities



Similar composition. Auerbach has a central symbol for each myth in the top left corner of both paintings.

Auerbach's heavy use of oil paint to produce a heavily textured image is prominent in both pieces.

Both pieces have aspects of high contrast.

The Origin of the Great Bear, the black eagle that represents Jupiter.

Bacchus and Ariadne, the crown of stars that represents the constellation that Ariadne becomes after her death.

Bacchus and Ariadne has the contrast between the cool tones of blue with the bright, warm red that represents their passion.

The Origin of the Great Bear contrasts the overwhelming amount of yellow with gray in the central part of the image to depict Callisto and Arcas.

Comparison of Auerbach's Bacchus and Ariadne and The Origin of the Great Bear

Differences



The focus of The Origin of the Great Bear, the gray/green that represents Callisto and Arcas meeting is muddled and has less detail than Bacchus and Ariadne.

The Origin of the Great Bear's color palette is much more somber to reflect the tragedy that has fallen upon Callisto.

Bacchus and Ariadne has more vibrant colors than The Origin of the Great Bear to depict the mood of passion and happiness from Titian's painting.

Bacchus and Ariadne is based off of Titian's painting of the same name while The Origin of the Great Bear was painted to resemble Titian's work through certain themes



Lacks a central subject. Bacchus and Ariadne serve as the subject/focus with the red paint.

The Origin of the Great Bear has significantly less negative space than Bacchus and Ariadne.

Comparison of Pumpkin and Bacchus and Ariadne

Kusama

Shape

By choosing such a large, bold shape for the focus of the piece, the pumpkin itself, the emphasis is on the organic structure of the sculpture.

Pattern

Common in Kusama's work, the pattern of polkadots trains the eye along the curving lines of the structure to emphasize the shape.

Self

Kusama inserts herself into the piece to bring a social commentary aspect into the work as the viewer works to comprehend why she is in the piece as well.

Auerbach

Non-Objective

Unlike Kusama, Auerbach's piece needs more context in order to understand the image. His non-objective representation of Titian's piece confuses the viewer.

Composition

Auerbach's piece's composition borrows from Titian's piece under the same title. Unlike Kusama, Auerbach is reworking a classic and portraying the same emotion as Titian through an abstract form to challenge society's perception of "acceptable" art.

Both

Colors

Kusama and Auerbach both chose dynamic colors in order to create a bold image for the viewer. However, Kusama's color has an emphasis on contrast while Auerbach focuses on emotions.

Motifs

Kusama utilizes a motif from her style of art: polka dots. Auerbach also utilizes a characteristic of his art: his brush strokes. Both are able to create cohesive images.



Self-Comparison: Selu and the Origin of the Great Bear

Selu, Hana Sugioka, 2016, acrylic on wood, n/a



Thematic Influence:

Presence of celestials

The dots in the upper right hand corner of Auerbach's symbolizes the constellation Ursa Major. The silver in Selu's hair represents Selu's presence in the heavens. Both women are unified with the heavens and are thus immortal after facing tragedy.

The Anguish of Lineage

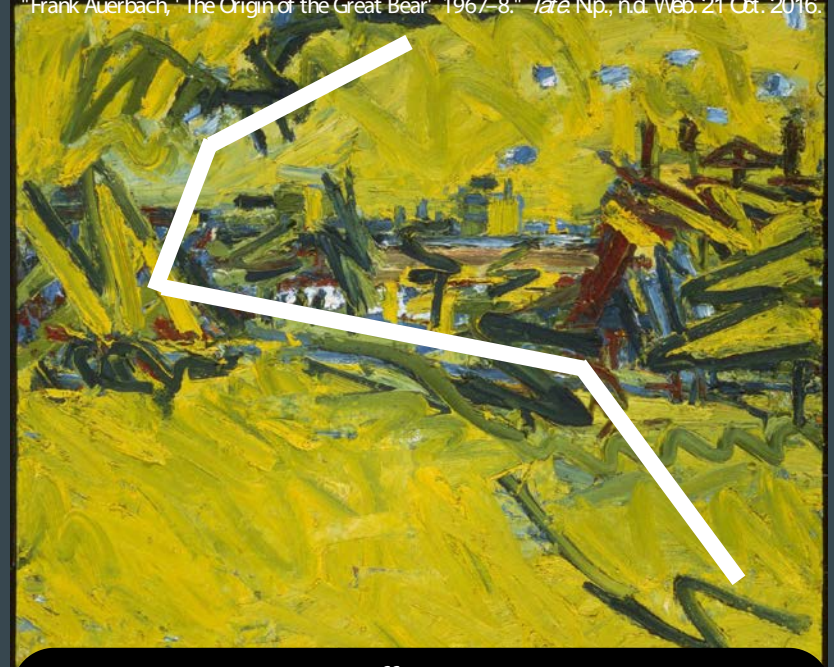
Callisto was killed by her own son to join the stars. Selu killed by her own twin sons for power. This demonstrates the unconditional nature of maternal love.

Influence on Composition

Use of Line

Auerbach's concentration of black lines centers the composition of the image. The hair of Selu in my piece acts as a line to bring the eye from the bottom to the top of the image.

"Frank Auerbach, 'The Origin of the Great Bear' 1967-8." Tate Np., n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2016.



Differences

Tone as depicted by color

Auerbach's focused on the contrast between the yellow and the gray to emphasize the tragedy in the events. Mine contrasts cool and warm colors to depict two different settings: the harvest and the heavens.

Self Comparison: Cactus and Pumpkin

Pumpkin Sculpture, Yayoi Kusama, 1998, sculpture, n/a, Seoul Arts Center.



Insertion of the artist

My piece has less of a focus on myself and more of a focus on my grandfather as I focused on working on the same materials he did in the past.

Union with the Background

Mine does not have a cohesive background to match it as I wanted it to be an artificial object in nature or a garden to have that contrast.

Sculptures

Kusama's dominates the room and attracts complete attention from the view. Is almost overwhelming. Mine is small in comparison. Focused on being endearing rather than shocking.

Representation of memories

Kusama's represents a memory she has of pumpkins from her childhood along with her mental health. Mine, because of the medium, represents my grandfather and the work he used to do with wood when I was growing up.

Union with the Background

Kusama's piece and background match with color and the motif of polka dots to truly consume the viewer in its presence.



Insertion of the artist

Kusama has herself present within the work to illustrate her union with pumpkins mentally and how it has consumed her mentally.

Self-Comparison: Sakura and Pumpkin



Artist Insertion

Kusama represents herself by physically inserting herself beside the pumpkin to represent her mental state and how it is consumed by a pumpkin. I drew myself, but more childishly in the piece to show how young I feel with everything that is daunting around me.

Mental Health

By inserting ourselves into the art, the art becomes increasingly personal. The pumpkin of Kusama represents episodes of hallucinations she used to have as a child. The skulls and flowers in mine represent two different mental states I have experienced in my life.

Cultural Significance

Kusama's pumpkin borrows from her childhood of growing up in Japan and surviving off of pumpkins from her family's business during WWII. My piece borrows from Murakami's style and contains symbols from my visits to Japan with my family. As a culture, our art is constantly evolving, so I wanted to honor that in my piece.



Differences:

Stasis

In Kusama's piece, she is consumed by the pumpkin and is depicted leaning against the piece, unmoving and stationary which symbolizes herself not moving from that mental state. I tried to depict my transition from dark life experiences to light by contrasting the flowers and the skulls.

Color

Kusama focuses on the harsh contrast between yellow and black to create a vivid, graphic image. My colors that represent the lighter side of the piece are soft and blend together while the skulls blend into darker colors to contrast with themselves but in a less harsh manner to represent the blending of these two concepts of light and dark.

Function of My Own Piece: *Sakura*

Also, personally, this piece allowed me to explore an extension of my typical style of art. I enjoy working with paper and collages as my main mediums, but this time I wasn't creating an overall image but a type of feeling and mood for the piece. I created this concept of art during a very difficult portion of my life due to family illnesses and I wanted to show how mentally I was trying to shift myself away from darker parts of my life and into a lighter, new part of my life.



This piece functioned for me both personally and culturally. When I created this piece, I wanted to pay homage to Takashi Murakami, a Japanese artist that I admired. My brother and my father had seen work created by Murakami when they were in Tokyo, and they spoke highly of Murakami's use of metallics. Also, flowers in this style, are a common motif in Murakami's art and I utilized them here as well.

While I had limited access to metallics, I wanted to recreate a similar feeling with my use of paints and paper.

Similarly to Kusama, I found the repetitive nature of cutting out the skulls and flowers very relaxing. The process itself helped distract me and keep me emotionally grounded. Recently, I've been attempting to focus on the process of creating art and not the final image, and here I felt as if I had reached the point of truly being involved in the process of my art.

Function of Kusama's Pumpkin



Self-Reflection

The function of Kusama's pumpkin sculpture is to serve a personal, healing function for herself. The pumpkin itself is a symbol of her childhood and her recognition of her own mental illness. Ultimately, the pumpkin symbolizes the consummation of her mind by these outside forces as her own mental instability has forced her focus elsewhere.

Social Commentary

Many viewers of the piece that do not have extensive knowledge of Kusama's work may view the piece itself as humorous and playful. In a way, this may be intentional on Kusama's part. Perhaps Kusama expects the viewers to approach to something that has such significance in terms of mental health. People may not at first view the subject as something that is approachable or easy to talk about, but Kusama's piece may make the conversation happen in more situations than it would have as people investigate the true meaning of her work.



Pumpkin Sculpture, Yayoi Kusama, 1998, sculpture, n/a, Seoul Arts Center.

The Viewer

Overall, the exhibit in which the pumpkin is housed overwhelming for the viewer in hopes that they will understand Kusama's own thought patterns. Also, I expect that painting each polkadot is a relaxing process for Kusama. The repetitive motion is enough to ease her mind into a rhythm as she paints so the process itself is healing for her.

Function of Auerbach's *The Origin of the Great Bear*

"Frank Auerbach, 'The Origin of the Great Bear' 1967–8." *Tate* Np., n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2016.



This painting done by Auerbach was originally a commissioned piece by David Wilkie. So, on the primitive level, this piece's function was to fulfill the commission and make his sponsor satisfied. However, this piece has function for Auerbach himself as well.

Wilkie commissioned this piece because Auerbach had been reproducing pieces by Renaissance artists such as Titian but in his own style. When Wilkie commissioned Auerbach, he requested that Auerbach create his own composition in a style that would remind the viewer of Titian's own compositions and pieces.



Ultimately, this commission allowed Auerbach to truly explore his own style and artwork without being confined to a composition that had already been created. This allowed Auerbach to truly push his boundaries as both an artist and imitator by forcing him to think as Titian did and channel the styles of Renaissance artists in order to create his own unique composition.

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