

The Value Industry

Reflections on Art, Money and Celebrity

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extract from **Chapter 7: Anything and Nothing At All**

Girl Power and Prozac

Stella Vine's paintings unravel the myths of contemporary celebrity, gender stereotypes and identity. But they also offer an intimate, revealing view of herself, mastering the artistic technique of looking inwards while looking outwards. It is as if every picture is a self-portrait, even though the face is of someone else, and therein lies the unsettling power of her art. In Vine's work, the visual style is everything. Here we have an example of cultural value grounded in aesthetics, where the contribution to culture is an outsider's riff on the age-old art of portraiture. Vine takes the portrait to and beyond its logical limit with an aesthetic that transcends everything we think we know about painting.

Vine did not go to art school. She was a waitress, a cleaner, an actress, a single mum and a stripper, as the press never tires of reminding us. She took a few classes at Hampstead School of Art, but it never came to much; perhaps the institution of the art school, even a small, community one, did not suit her. In hindsight, it hardly seems to matter, since Vine's gifts cannot be taught and should not be ruined by education. In 2003, she decided to become her own gallerist, to learn the hard way, as she has said, 'to be Jay Jopling', so she opened a gallery, Rosy Wilde, in East London and later relocated it to an upstairs room on Soho's Wardour Street¹. A gargantuan task for anyone, not least a Northumberland girl who paints with the abandon of a child and the penetrating insight of a psychoanalyst.

Her big break came in 2004 when she sold some works to Saatchi, whom she says she met for two or four minutes (depending upon which account you read), as if she was bound by solemn covenant to perpetuate the myth of Saatchi. One of the works bought by Saatchi was

¹ See Lynne Barber, 'Vine Times', *The Observer*, 7 July 2007.

the now iconic painting, *Hi Paul, can you come over I'm really frightened* (2003), which is one of those in an artist's body of work which comes, retroactively, to be career-defining. This picture is symptomatic of her style, with its superficially naïve forms and jarring pallet depicting Princess Diana in mid-hysteria, blood dripping from her mouth, her cheeks rosy but her hair strangely grey and sporting a crown. The furtive, impasto brush strokes, the wavy lines that are vaguely reminiscent of van Gogh and the juxtaposition of colour give it an air of carelessness, but one which is on the wrong side of grotesque. It looks like a work of outsider art, and that, although Vine would surely disagree, is what it is – Vine stands outside of the artworld but within the tradition of portraiture, which is the crux of the charm.

There is something grotesque about the picture: the urgency of the painter's hand and the wilful disregard for the rules of painting convey depth of subject-matter. But without all the affectations of form, perspective, colour and light the painterly illusion of pure, unmediated aesthetic fall away, and we are left with raw human emotion, an instant of human drama which, as we know, can only end in inconsolable tragedy. Vine deconstructs portraiture to its barest elements – a subject, a gaze, an idea, a feeling – so that it feels a bit inside out, as if those internal mechanisms of a portrait are the first things to catch the eye, while everything to do with fine art and portraiture falls by the wayside.

There followed a series of lucrative solo shows, most notably an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford in 2007 which included nearly every painting she had ever made. Vine had scandalised the artworld with paintings that revel in their surface naivety; paintings, no less, of A-List and Z-List celebrities, instantly recognisable and yet curiously alienated from the tough exterior of fame, perennially vulnerable, damaged and human. In this conflation of the celebrity hierarchy itself, there is something deeply revealing, both about the fairy-tale of celebrity and about Vine herself.

Nobody could escape her brush: she painted Amy Winehouse, Courtney Love, Kate Moss, Elizabeth Taylor, Chantelle Houghton, Pussy Riot, Sienna Miller and Amy Childs. All women who are equal measure heroic and tragic in their own ways, and yet in Vine's hands the playing field is levelled so that all these women wear their fame as a curse and their unbridled humanity as a virtue with no distinction between their roots or destinies. Vine challenges the constructed stereotype of the female damaged by brutal masculinity. Her women are, like herself, in the grip of an outmoded womanhood, with all its tenderness and

terror in a merger of Elizabeth Wurtzel with the Spice Girls. It is Girl Power and Prozac in an effort to reclaim the woman in art not as object or muse but as subject and master.

In the midst of these starlets in the dizzying cosmos of modern celebrity, the figure of Sylvia Plath looms large as the archetypal tragic heroine who was ruined by a man. The Plath myth is as powerful as it is well-rehearsed: the femme fatale who came to England on a Fulbright Scholarship, married a thrusting young poet, wrote reams of poems about her dead father and wound up her days in an oven in Primrose Hill. But Vine does not paint Plath because she relates to the myth, but rather because she is interested in the way that women are always prefigured by their myths rather than their art. For Vine, painting such women is an attempt to burrow beneath the myths and to see beyond their professional output to uncover the struggling, cowering, terrified human being underneath the carefully constructed surfaces. It is in this sense that one can see Vine's paintings of other people as constant, unflinching iterations of a self-portrait. She does not necessarily identify with her subjects as women or mothers or celebrities, but rather as individuals who have had their identities co-opted and battered by the world around them. This, she thinks, is a reflection of herself – Vine's own journey to fame and fortune was one in which she felt exploited as a woman, as an artist with remarkable outsider style and as a novice playing the, largely male, game of the artworld. In Vine's world, we all give so much of ourselves to others just to get by that our Selves – deep inside, behind the constant façade of the face – get lost in the seas of our public personas. And here is the great aesthetic trick of Vine's paintings: the visual style – childish, naive, folkish – enables her to get to the core of a person's being because it is pure feeling, liberated from the trappings of figuration.

This purity of expression enables her to interrogate and display the subject's soul, and every time it happens to contain granules of her own soul intermingled with that of a celebrity with whom she feels an affinity. These paintings, which initially you would be forgiven for discounting after a single glance, derive their value from the way they look in the purest sense, since it is the visual style that expresses the true meaning of the pictures.

Vine's celebrity portraits express a deep concern with the fragility of humanity, particularly as she sees it abused and perverted by celebrity, in which the artist exorcises herself through the images of the famous, who are, after all, the common property of us all. The Princess Diana paintings, for example, seem to be about an essentially good woman in turmoil,

buckling under the pressure of the media spotlight, but really they are a metaphor for Vine's grief over the death of her mother. One woman's tragedy, it seems, is another's, too. In Vine's world, celebrity is just a mechanism which enables society to pretend that some people are better or worse off than ourselves; but Vine feels herself to be in possession of the truth – that fame is a meaningless fiction because underneath we're all the same damaged, vulnerable human beings. The fact that Vine paints celebrities rather than mere civilians adds one final delicious conceit: celebrities are different from the rest of us because they have to toil their demise in public, adding one more hurt to the trials of being human.

The value industry, represented, as ever, by Saatchi, was seduced by Vine's deconstruction of portraiture, by the simplicity of the aesthetic in counterpoint to the complexity of the subject. The naïve folk-art appearance is exactly the right vehicle for an investigation of the relationships between genders, between celebrities and their admirers, between the portrait and its subject. No other aesthetic programme could have captured this timely and urgent project, and nobody other than the great Stella Vine could have pulled it off single-handed with such style, while also making a bit of money from it.

But the great paradox of it all is this: Vine's visual style is so unique and such an acquired taste that the value industry could not have seen its way to impute to it any cultural value at all if it were not for the standing possibly of economic value being generated. Vine paints in a way that does not look attractive or immediately seductive, nor does it initially appear to possess depth and substance, but the thing that drew the attention of the value industry – of Saatchi – is celebrity. These curious portraits of famous people, including the most famous of them all, Princess Diana, found their own market, not in virtue of their aesthetic programme, but because the subject-matter is in and of itself marketable.

Here is a grim illustration of how the value industry operates: the seasoned art viewer can see that Vine's paintings have cultural value in and of themselves, for all the aesthetic and thematic reasons outlined above, but if any of that – especially the surface aesthetic – is challenging, which in Vine's case it is, then the value industry must build cultural value up from a basic premise of economic value. In Vine's case, not astonishingly different from Warhol's, that basic premise is celebrity: the paintings are treated, not as works of art in and of themselves, but as celebrity portraits, as if they are hewn from the pages of glossy magazines which merely document the trials and tribulations of modern celebrity, just as

Warhol manufactured images of the starlets of his day, reflecting the sticky fluidity of celebrity. Vine, a painter of idiosyncratic style, is the paintbrush paparazzi – the 21st Century antagonist who, more vociferous than Warhol and less glamorous than Richard Philips, documents celebrity as if photography does not exist; who paints the cultural figureheads of the day as if it is still the times of court painters and cavaliers, imbuing the familiar faces of the day with a tragedy and vulnerability that the camera could only conceal. And yet, in spite of such high-minded analysis, Vine is grounded in the sensibilities and intuitions of casual observers – art lovers with nothing at stake but our taste – who can see through the shimmer of celebrity and the substance beyond the style to discern that the primary, if not the sole, point of Vine’s work is aesthetic. The value industry could not concede such a contention in Vine’s case because it takes too great an intellectual effort to untangle that aesthetic from the marketable and lucrative surface attributes of her celebrity subjects and folkish style.

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