

Deep in Our Feels

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for Timothy Curtis' exhibition "Inkblots and Feelings Charts" at Atlanta Contemporary

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Many artists throughout history have long been captivated by the human psyche, the intricate interplay of emotions and feelings, and their personal reactions to the world around them. During the transition from the 19th to 20th centuries, Edvard Munch contemplated profound love, intense anxiety, an enduring fear of abandonment, and chronic feelings of emptiness. These emotions manifested in his art through expressive paintings and prints that conveyed a constant sense of existential dread. Following World War II, the Abstract Expressionists paved a new path, diverging entirely from traditional subject matter and technique. They set out to create large-scale non-representational works, reflecting their individual psyches and responses to a post-war and forthcoming Cold War society. In the latter part of the 20th century, Tracey Emin produced a highly significant and impactful artwork marked by intense personal mental strain, "My Bed," 1998.⁷ In this piece, Emin removed the bed—in which she stayed during a drug and alcohol-fueled nervous breakdown in the wake of a breakup—from her apartment and relocated to a white cube gallery space. The work serves as poignant documentation of one of the most challenging and sensitive periods in Emin's life, a moment in which she remained confined to her bed for four days and grappled with prolonged episodes of deep-seated manic depression.

Many artworks exploring feelings and emotions over the past two centuries tend to be conceptual, deeply metaphorical, and often visually abstract. An intriguing throughline with this exploration of nuanced psyche lies in the creation of inkblot paintings and feelings charts. Inspired by the renowned Rorschach inkblot tests developed by Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach¹¹, artists employ chance and spontaneity in their approach—akin to the Abstract Expressionists—to create paintings that delve into the realms of subjectivity, perception, theories of Pareidolia and Apophenia, and the enigmatic nature of the mind. The nuances of feelings and emotions and their associated internal complexities are the crux of an ongoing series of Inkblots and Feelings Charts by artist Timothy Curtis, whose works made their museum debut in a solo exhibition at Atlanta Contemporary. Since the early 2000's, Curtis has immersed himself in the gray areas, subtleties, and challenges that define our individual emotional intelligence. Examining elements such as body language, the way we engage with one another in personal and professional encounters, and how we overtly carry our stresses, Curtis's art underscores the pervasive influence of emotions and feelings that guide us through our days and shape our interactions.

Willfully sharing feelings and emotions can often be daunting for many of us, regularly impeding our abilities to have direct conversations among friends, family members, partners, or spouses due to an internalized fear of rejection or embarrassment. This trepidation can stem from a multitude of factors, the most obvious of which are the societal stigmas around discussing one's feelings in an open and supportive atmosphere. Until very recently, discussing feelings or being emotionally open has been looked down upon and ridiculed as not having a place in the public forum outside of the arts and humanities. Our feelings are often deeply personal, belonging to individuals or members of tightly knit communities that share responses to various lived experiences. Past experiences hold a broad spectrum of rapidly changing and assorted emotions, moods, and sentiments, making it even more challenging to articulate and discuss them readily and without hesitation. Whether experiencing joy, sadness, anger, fear, love, surprise, or grief, the internal and personal associations linked to these emotions significantly influences our social interactions. We tend to keep our feelings close, and the way we interpret and respond to situations is heavily influenced by our unique perspectives, past experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual

differences. These factors vary greatly among individuals and shape our situational behaviors. It must be underscored that often cultural norms, familial upbringing, and personal sets of values continue to shape the way individuals express and perceive feelings. Different cultures have distinct and varying ways of expressing emotions, from overt to nuanced reactions, and often place varying degrees of emphasis on certain feelings or responses to lived experiences. Understanding and navigating one's own feelings, as well as recognizing and empathizing with the feelings of others, are crucial aspects of emotional intelligence and our abilities to connect with one another.

In 1982, Computer Science professor Scott E. Fahlman at Carnegie Mellon University wrote what is considered to be the first online utilization of character-based symbols in an email chain to colleagues.⁵

The note in the thread chain said:

"I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers:

:-)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use

:-("⁴

The Emoticon was born from this email chain. The term emoticon is derived from the combination of the words "Emotion and Icon"³ and has become integral to shorthand communications amongst friends and colleagues. Outside of educational and institutional contexts, communication through non-verbal symbolism has become an almost daily practice, especially with the advent of computer-assisted instant messaging and the introduction of emojis. Whether it's a smiley face at the end of a sentence to convey levity or a red face with an angry expression to emphasize frustration within the same conversation, emojis and emoticons serve as a visual narrative of our emotions when our words might fall short. As computer scientists, artists and linguists work together, this subset of image-based communication is ever growing and can be mined within the emojipedia.org website.

Taking a note from the rise of emoticons and graphic iconography, Xu Bing's seminal work *"Book from the Ground" (2003 to present)*² is a significant parallel within the motif of communicating thoughts through imagery. It stands paramount in its accessibility to a global contemporary society of readers and sets a tone for icon and pictograph communication. Regardless of cultural or linguistic backgrounds, the book's material can be interpreted and understood due to the artist's use of universal visual symbols and can be published anywhere without translation. In an effort to make the artbook as accessible as possible for as many people around the world and assist with the translation efforts, Xu Bing Studio developed a character database that aligns with the book's origination language and with the assistance of software programs Xu Bing translates various languages into his system of internationally recognizable symbols. Consequently, the symbolic language of *Book from the Ground* has undergone further rolling updates, enhancements, and added complexities.

Analogous to Xu Bing's book, which explores the balance between images, language and intercommunication, Curtis's Feelings Charts seek to illustrate and compile a library of recognizable facial expressions that are associated with feelings that we routinely internalize. Traditionally feelings charts are used as visual tools in educational settings, therapy, and counseling sessions, and are designed to help individuals identify, understand, and communicate their complex emotions while promoting emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Curtis has taken his unique style of gestural and frenetic line work to create a marvelous and lively range of facial expressions that depict basic emotions like happiness,

sadness, anger and fear, to more complex and nuanced feelings like anxiety, disgust, excitement, guilt, and calmness. As each face is accompanied by a corresponding adjective, Curtis seeks to create a dictionary of sorts for complex thoughts and internal emotional understanding. Both Curtis and Xu Bing successfully navigate storytelling through images and icons, Bing with recognizable symbols and pictographs found in public spaces, and Curtis through the more subtle nuances of body language, facial expressions and gestures.

Creating an emotionally intelligent vocabulary is no easy task, it requires a tremendous amount self-awareness – an awareness in which Curtis has worked in his own right to gain over his nearly two decades long practice building an oeuvre of Inkblots and Feelings Charts. This body of work is not simply a solo enterprise, but also a venture to help others who may struggle with their emotions and ask them to dig within themselves to recognize and articulate their own wide range of emotions.

The two parallel bodies of work intersect in both Curtis' technique and his approach to guiding the viewer's introspection. The Feelings Charts are more overt and direct in their definitions and the inkblots are more abstract and nuanced, which allows viewers to self-guide in their search for emotional definitions. His approach involves eliminating his own personal feelings and definitions from the inkblots and entrusting them to chance while relying on his gestural muscle memory. This enables him to engage in each inkblot painting freely and without reservation or a predetermined composition. The fundamentally ambiguous nature of inkblots has proven to be a stable point of departure for Curtis to capture the complexity of human emotions and perceptions while also countering the legacies of Abstract Expressionist movement. By channeling the drip technique of Jackson Pollack and the fluid pigment washes of Helen Frankenthaler or Mark Rothko, Curtis has been able to introduce an element of ambiguity that invites viewers to engage in their own subjective interpretations and preconceived underlying biases. Though the inkblot method of painting is not uncharted territory for Curtis and other artists like Andy Warhol, Rachel Rossin, or Salvador Dali, Curtis brings a distinctive and unconventional bend to his approach in crafting the traditional inkblot or Rorschach motif. While the motives of the aforementioned artists to create inkblot paintings were varying, Timothy Curtis' paintings are deeply rooted in his pushing of the boundaries of what constitutes a recognizable facial expression and what emotions are associated with those expressions.

When considering Curtis' Inkblots paintings viewers can employ the principles of Pareidolia and Apophenia. Pareidolia refers to the human inclination to assign meaningful interpretations or explanations to wholly random visual encounters, much like recognizing faces in the clouds, tree bark, rock formations or water droplets⁸. Apophenia is described as the innate human need to seek patterns, deep meanings or associations between images, data or within situations where associations typically do not exist.¹ Curtis' Inkblot paintings, for all intent and purpose—dependent on the viewer—could portray further abstracted facial features with less overt representation of emotions. By removing his own preconceived notions and definitions behind each of his Inkblot paintings, Curtis is able to provide viewers with a metaphoric mirror in which they can reflect their inner world to guide them on their own paths of finding definitions and symbolism behind work. The symmetrical and mirrored abstracts encourage viewers to consider the balance within their own emotions and contemplate how their personal experiences connect them to each artwork on an individual level. This participatory aspect elevates Curtis' Inkblot paintings beyond mere visual stimuli and turns them into dynamic and interactive maps for psychological exploration. While inkblot paintings offer a unique and intriguing approach to artistic expression, they are not without challenges for both the artists and viewers. It could be argued that the subjective nature of interpretation can lead to misrepresentations and limit the universality of artistic communication. Nevertheless, it is exactly Curtis' intent to allow for this type of questioning by onlookers, and this subjectivity is precisely

what makes inkblots a powerful and universal tool for engaging a wide range of community members and viewers.

Curtis's fusion of art, self-awareness, and behaviorism in both his Inkblot and Feelings Chart paintings exemplifies his enduring quest to unravel the complexities of emotional wellbeing. As he's continued to create these bodies of work over the last two decades, he has not only been able to build on his own self-awareness, but also continue his deeper dives into self-reflection and coping through his own life's ups and downs. From the birth of his daughter and the opening of his first international exhibition to the passing of close friends and family and everything in-between, life's experiences have paved varying paths for Curtis and have deeply informed not only his studio practice but also his emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

Curtis he has not only been able to successfully build upon a tremendous subset of works within his studio but also regularly been able to tap into and remain in touch with his own feelings and emotions. His studio practice allows him to identify the way feelings manifest outwardly in specific situations and how to deeply empathize with other people's histories and experiences. By embracing ambiguity within the Inkblots and the levity and playfulness within the Feelings Charts, Curtis magnificently creates visual experiences that transcend the canvas. He invites viewers to join him on his decade's long journey of self-study and prompts them to take their own explorations of personal narratives, internalized emotions, and our collective understanding of one another. By touring these two bodies of work together and exhibiting them in museums and galleries, visitors can encounter them in their own spaces of comfort and hopefully accept Timothy Curtis invitation and prompt to embark on a journey of self-reflection.

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