



## Portraits: John Berger on Artists

*John Berger, Tom Overton (Editor)*

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One of the world's most celebrated art writers, John Berger takes us through centuries of art in this distinctive history that will enlighten and inspire. In *Portraits*, Berger connects art and history in revolutionary ways, from the prehistoric paintings of the Chauvet caves to Randa Mdah's work about contemporary Palestine. In his penetrating and singular prose, Berger presents entirely new ways of thinking about art history, and artists both canonized and obscure, from Rembrandt, to Henry Moore, Jackson Pollock to Picasso. Throughout, Berger maintains the essential connection between politics, art and the wider study of culture. A beautifully illustrated walk through many centuries of visual culture from one of the contemporary world's most incisive critical voices.

## **Portraits: John Berger on Artists Details**

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# From Reader Review Portraits: John Berger on Artists for online ebook

## Kaya Tokmakç?o?lu says

Berger'ın Görme Biçimleri'nden, Bento'nun Eskiz Defteri'nden, Picasso'nun Ba?ar?s? ve Ba?ar?s?zl???ndan a?ina oldu?umuz dili yakla??k 60 y?la yay?lm?? ressam, heykelt?ra? ve performans sanatç?lar?na dair çözümlemelerinde yeniden vücut buluyor. Özellikle Feyyum portreleri, Ya?l? Pieter Brueghel, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Goya, Courbet, Léger, Giacometti'ye dair çözümlemeleri hem ca??n?n sanat?n? ve sanatç?s?n? hem de tarihsel ak?? ile birlikte toplumsal mücadeleler alan? ve kültür-sanat? birlikte kavramak için e?siz nitelikte. En dokunaklı çözümlemelerden biri, hatta belki de en içten olan? ise Juan Muñoz'a dair kaleme ald?klar?n?n Nâz?m'a bir mektup yazar? eklinde gerçekle?tiriyor olmas?. Sanatç?lar?n i?leriyle birlikte okunas?...

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## Mehmet B says

Fayum'da mezarlara konulmak için tasarlanan, gelecekte aç??a ç?kaca?? ve sergilenece?i dü?ünülmemi? portrelerin kimli?i meçhul ressamlar?ndan Kathe Kollowitz'e, Rembrandt'tan Abidin Dino'ya, 74 ressam/heykeltra?/enstalasyon sanatç?s? hakk?nda John Berger'in fark? dergiler ve kitaplar için yazd??? yaz?lar?n bir derlemesi... Sanat ele?tirmeni olarak an?lmak istemiyor John Berger, sanat üzerine bireysel dü?üncelerini bütün samimiyetliye aktar?yor. Resmin, ?iirin, foto?raf?n ve heykelin sözlerle anlat?lamayan alan?na dokunmay? ba?arabilen ender yazarlardan John Berger.

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## David Sogge says

An assembly of essays and reviews published over sixty years, this book offers both panoramic and close-up appraisals of the works of painters and a few sculptors. In nearly always lucid prose, it presents 'portraits' of more than seventy artists, most of them in the Western canon, and of at least a couple of dozen late 20th century painters I (as an unschooled onlooker, but frequent museum-goer) had never heard of. Berger discusses his subjects' methods and styles amidst reigning and emerging traditions, and often the social and political settings that shaped them and evoked their compassion or indignation. His assessments are often pungent, even withering, such as about Francis Bacon, whose art he compares to that of Walt Disney, but never merely dismissive. In a few essays Berger refers obliquely to his work as an art critic, explaining how he came to re-assess artists, or how he drew on their lives to create his fictions, such as his 1958 novel *A Painter of Our Time*. Though it lacks an index and footnotes, *Portraits* is masterfully edited and easy to consult as a reference work. As others point out, the book is sparsely, and sometimes poorly illustrated. Yet I had no difficulty whatever summoning up on the Internet full-colour pictures of almost every work of art referred to in the text.

Post-scriptum: A fine review of *Portraits*, 'The Many Faces of John Berger' by Ratik Asokan, appears in *The New Republic* published online on 29 December 2015: <https://newrepublic.com/article/12667...>

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## Cemre says

"Sanat ele?tirmeni olarak an?lmaktan oldum olas? nefret etmi?imdir" diyor John Berger Portreler'in önsözünde. Bu kitap boyunca da -bence- klasik ele?tirlere yer vermiyor zaten. "...bir sanatç?n?n gözleme bulunmas? sadece gözlerini kullanmaktan ibaret de?ildir; dürüstlü?iniün, gördü?ünü anla?land?rmak için kendi kendisiyle mücadelesinin sonucudur" diyen Berger o mücadele süreçlerine de yer veriyor kimi zaman. Pek çok ressam?, resmi, heykeli üzerine adeta öykü tad?nda yaz?larla bir nevi tan?t?yor okuyuca. Okurken sanat?n dallar? aras?nda nas?l ba?lant?lar oldu?unu, sanat?n etrafta ya?anan hadiselerden nas?l kopart?lamayaca??n? da net bir ?ekilde okumak mümkün.

Resimle aran?z nas?l bileyorum, ben bu konuda çok bilgili oldu?umu iddia edemem; ancak kitab? çok büyük bir keyifle okudu?umu, pek çok yerde durup ilgili ressam?n resimlerini inceledi?imi, pek çok yeni isimle tan??t??m? rahatl?kla söyleyebilirim. Bunlar?n haricinde bu kitapla birlikte Berger ile de tan??t?m?, biraz geç oldu; ama yine de "geç olsun, güç olmas?n" diyorlar, öyle de?il mi?

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## Kathy Cunningham says

PORTRAITS is admittedly a dense piece of writing. In over five hundred pages, art critic and storyteller John Berger takes us through thousands of years of art history, closely examining such diverse talents as ancient cave painters, classic greats, and modern masters. Berger covers the expected artists (Rembrandt, Cezanne, Monet, van Gogh, and Picasso), as well as many I had never heard of (Basquiat, Broughton, Hambling, and Noel). In all, there are 74 artists explored in this book, and Berger is intimately connected with every one of them. This isn't so much a volume of art history as it is a journey into Berger's soul as he waxes poetic about color, texture, and the many ways art communicates. As Tom Overton writes in the introduction, "this book constructs a history of art that is not about distinction, but about connection; not just between artists, but between artists and us."

I was surprised at how much of this book reads as a series of stories, stories about Berger's own life as well as the world of the artists he explores. And Berger's view of art and artists is uniquely his own. Of ancient cave paintings in Chauvet, he writes, "Deep in the cave, which meant deep in the earth, there was everything: wind, water, fire, faraway places, the dead, thunder, pain, paths, animals, light, the unborn ... they were there in the rock to be called to." Of Goya, he writes, "Goya's genius as a graphic artist was that of a commentator ... he was much more interested in events than states of mind." Of Cezanne's use of the color black, he writes, "It's a black like no other in painting." And of Pollack, he writes: "The suicide of an art is a strange idea." These are enigmatic comments that Berger explores through intense analysis, personal vignettes, and clever anecdotes. Reading this, I felt I knew Berger – and I felt I knew the artists he was revealing to us.

My only complaint is the quality of the pictures in this book. All of the paintings are reproduced in black-and-white, which I at first assumed was because the book I was reading was an Advanced Reader's Copy (ARCs are presented as "uncorrected proofs," which seldom include color illustrations). But Berger is clear in his preface that the decision to use black-and-white illustrations was intentional. As he puts it, "This is because glossy colour reproductions in the consumerist world of today tend to reduce what they show to items in a luxury brochure for millionaires. Whereas black and white reproductions are simple memoranda." The illustrations in this book are really superfluous, since they are difficult to see and do little to compliment

Berger's expert prose. It's easy enough to go online to take a closer look at the works Berger references, but I wonder why the black-and-white illustrations are included at all.

But for readers interested in art, art history, or the stories behind the creative spirit, PORTRAITS is a wonderful book. Just be aware that this is not one of those coffee table art books with gorgeous glossy color prints – it's not “a luxury brochure for millionaires.” No, it's an intellectual, very personal, and often very spiritual look at creativity and human expression. I highly recommend it.

[Please note: I was provided a copy of this book for review; the opinions expressed here are my own.]

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## **Esin says**

Portreler, John Berger'in alternatif sanat yaz?lar?n? sevenler için bulunmaz bir nimet. Kitap, kronolojik s?raya göre ma?ara resimleri ile ba?lay?p Randa Mdah'a kadar olan süreç içinden yazar?n seçti?i 74 sanat/ressam/heykeltra?a dair birkaç sayfadan olu?an yaz?lar?n?n derlemesinden olu?uyor. Bu 74 sanatç?n?n içinde bildi?im isimler d???nda bilmeli?im birçok sanatç? ile de tan??ma f?rsat? bulduk. Berger'in sade ve akademiden uzak dili, onun kitaplar?n? herkes için anla??labilir hale getiriyor. Okurken yazar?n gözlem yetene?ine tekrar tekrar hayran kald?m.

Yazar?n, bir tablo veya sanatç? üzerine hat?ralar?n?n, deneyimlerinin ve dü?lediklerinin, bilinen bilgiler ile harmanlanması? kitab?n ki?isel sanat dü?ünceleri üzerine yo?unla?an edebi bir haz kazanması?n? sa?l?yor. Kitab?n içinde, bahsedilen eserlerden baz?lar?n?n siyah beyaz resimleri bulunmakta. Berger bu seçimin kas?tl? olarak yap?ld???n?, bunun nedeninin ise piyasadaki, günümüz tüketim dünyas?na uyan renkli röprodüksiyonlar?n “paras? bol olanlar için tasarlanan kataloglar ile lüks e?ya kategorisine indirgenmesi” yani “masa kitab?” olarak nitelendirilen bir süs objesi haline getirilmesi oldu?unu, siyah beyaz bask?lar?n? ise sadece hat?rlanmak için oldu?unu dile getirmi?. Bu seçimi göz önüne al?rsak kitapta okudu?umuz ressamlar?n eserleri, internet üzerinden canl? renklerle takip edilebilir, en az?ndan ben öyle yapt?m. Renkli katalog bask?lara kar?? m?y?m? Hay?r de?ilim bence hepsi çok göz al?c? ve ilham verici. San?r?m ben bu ilham? alamay?p bunlar? “masa kitab?” haline getiren zihniyete kar??y?m. Tabii bir de fiyatlar?na.

Kitab?n içinde bir de öyle özel bir bölüm var ki, o da Juan Munoz ile ba?da?t?rd??? Naz?m Hikmet'e yazd??? o güzel mektuplar... “Manzaralar” ad?yla yay?mlanacak olan ikinci cildi heyecanla bekliyorum.

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## **Argos says**

John Berger Portreler kitab?nda resim olarak portrelerden bahsetmiyor, ço?unlu?u ressam ve daha az k?sm? heykel sanatç?s? olan 70'in üstündeki sanatç?n?n ki?ili?i, sanat? ve dü? dünyalar?yla ilgili “sanatç? portreler”ini anlat?yor. Bunu yaparken tabii ki bu sanatç?lar?n eserlerini esas al?yor, bazen sanat ele?tirisi, bazen politik ele?tiri bazen felsefi ele?tiri silahlar?n? kullan?yor.

Ola?anüstü entellektüel birikimini (bazen yerine denk gelmese de) okuyucuya payla??yor. Hemen hemen hepsi 20. yüzy?lda ya?am?? veya halen sa? olan 32 sanatç? hakk?nda hiçbir bilgim yoktu. Bu konudaki ele?tirimi a?a??da aktaraca??m. Bu arada ?spanyol heykeltra? Juan Munoz ile ilgili yakla??k on sayfan?n nerdeyse dokuzunun büyük usta Naz?m Hikmet ile ilgili bilgi ve ?iirlerle dolu olmas? ?a??rt?c? ve

sevindiriciydi.

Asl?nda be? y?ld?zl?k bir çal??ma belki ama benim elim dört y?ld?zdan fazlas?na gitmedi. Neden mi ? Yazar aç?klamas?nda kal?c? olmas?, unutulmamas?, hep hat?rlanmas? için resimleri özellikle siyah- beyaz seçti?ini belirtiyor. Bence bu fahi? bir hata olmu?, çünkü resimler bu haliyle çok yan?lt?c?, niteliklerini yitirmi?, büyüleri bozulmu? resimlikten ç?k?p birer obje haline gelmi?ler. Canl?l?k, kontrast, uyum hiç bir ?ey belli de?il. B?rak?n empresyonistleri, ba?ta Matisse, Goya, Guttuso olmak üzere tüm sanatç?lar? katletmi? bu seçimiyle John Berger.

Bir di?er ele?tirim Hieronymus Bosch gibi muhte?em bir ressam hiç yer almazken, Pieter Brugel gibi bir ba?ka muhte?em ressam da iki sat?rla geçi?tirilmi?. Vermeer, A. Warholl, S. Dali de yoklar aras?nda. Buna kar?n ço?u arkada?? olan ve internette saptayabildi?im kadar?yla hiç önemi olmayan sanatç?lar kitapta yer alm??. Bizden sadece Abidin Dino var (o da arkada?), halbuki böyle bir çal??mada Ne?e Erdok, Fikret Otyam, Nuri ?yem olmal?yd? diye dü?ünüyorum.

Kitaba ba?larsan?z normal okuma sürenizi iki ile çarp?n çünkü s?kl?kla baz? eserleri renkli görmek için internete göz atman?z ?art. Jean Francois Millet'i tan?mam da bu kitap sayesinde oldu.

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## Marie says

I began reading this book while the author was still alive, and finished it after his death. That has inescapably lent the experience a transcendent dimension, quite aside from the content of the book, which I also feel to be, in a sense, transcendent.

In 'Portraits', John Berger appears like a modern-day Vasari – an infinitely cleverer and more perceptive Vasari, not content to write the biographical synopses, the lives, of the artists, but rather tackling the life of the art, or perhaps the life of the artist through the art.

This is a five-star book; I have little doubt about that. Few art historians, or indeed any writers, write with such panache and feeling as John Berger does/did. He is/was the master not only of showing us how to see and how to feel a work of art, but also of conveying all that seeing and feeling to others.

In 'On the Art of Reading and Writing' (an essay from 1985) the Swedish writer, critic, and literary scholar Olof Lagercrantz wrote: 'Rainbows, rockets, slivers of mirror and arrows are important for a good text. I mean by that connections between different times, places, consciousnesses and aims that point backwards and forwards. As the tale moves along, its kernel must lie still while everything around it is in motion.' I don't know if John Berger was aware of or had read Olof Lagercrantz, but 'Portraits' is one long and brilliant illustration of Lagercrantz's idea.

My favourite piece may be the one on Holbein the younger, which starts off with the author in pursuit of his dead Christ and ending up in a museum where it is not to be found and instead writing about a handful of other paintings there, including a late Rothko, but with everything infused with the absent Holbein. It's as an absolute masterstroke of art-historical writing!

If I shall indulge in a (very little) criticism of a book I enjoyed thoroughly it must be to mention that the texts are arranged chronologically according to the birth date of the painters rather than chronologically according to the year of composition. This invariably creates a somewhat unsettling and disorienting experience for the reader. Berger's voice and perspective did of course change as he went through life, so this organization of the material means that one finds oneself towards the end of the book reading some texts which he apparently wrote early on in his career, texts with what seem like half-formed views compared to chapters

earlier in the book, which were composed later. I'm not sure what the solution to this would have been. After all, by arranging the texts by year of composition rather than the way they are now, the book would have lost its essential structure and in a sense it's *raison d'être*. Perhaps one option might have been for Tom Overton to not have included some of the weaker, more fragmentary pieces, in some cases featuring artists known, it seems, almost to Berger alone. The book is certainly big enough to afford some cutting. But this is small-fry as far as criticism goes.

One of the things I enjoyed most about 'Portraits' was its sparsity of illustrations. This may seem like an odd thing to say and I certainly don't in general prefer art books with few or poorly reproduced illustrations. In this case, however, reading it with the internet as a necessary on-off companion made it all the more interesting, choosing to look up some images treated, but also choosing, critically, to not look up others, but to let the text stand in for them. Or, in some cases, looking them up and being disappointed with what I found. This is one of the perils of good writing on art and music: the descriptions often intrigue and not seldom create an anticipation not realized when encountering the thing described.

A very good art writer (and seer and thinker) like Berger easily lends art, any art, a resonance, a meaning, a significance, and a beauty far more profound than anything you are able to infuse it with yourself, especially on a first viewing. It is therefore a privilege to see these works and artists through his deep-seeing, dowsing eyes and to be reminded that one of the points of art or indeed of any human creation is the chain of thoughts, feelings and reactions it can set off – the part it plays in the never-ending human conversation on all-things.

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### **Chris says**

Disclaimer: ARC read via Netgalley, courtesy of Verso. Book is being released October 27. 2015.

It was my friend who introduced me to John Berger. When I say introduce, I mean in the way every reader does; in this case, by reading *Ways of seeing* (which is a very thoughtful, read it). Since then I enjoy reading Berger. I may not always agree with him, but I always learn something new or learn to look at something, anything, a new way.

*Portraits* is a collection of Berger's writing on artists, and by extension art. It is arranged in chronological order by artist, so we start in the Stone Age with the paintings on Chauvet Cave and ending with Randa Mdah, who if you are like me and have no idea who she is, she was born in 1983. The chapter about her work is mediation, among other things, on the Israel and Palestinian conflict.

And that is what makes this book interesting as well as what makes Berger so accessible and so wonderful for a reader like me. I enjoy art, and I love going to museums, but I am not, in any way shape or form, an art historian or critic. I love the work of Parrish for his color and his illustration, Toulouse Lautrec is awesome because of his horses, the same with Stubbs but with the addition of dogs. One of my favorite paintings in the National Gallery in Washington DC is of the New Kirk in Amsterdam. I like it because the artist has a sense of humor – there is a dog taking a piss in the corner. I love Whistler, but not his mother – his etchings are where it is at. Well, those and the Peacock Room.

In short, I do not think (and most likely I am wrong) that Berger would condemn me, as some have, when I say something like my favorite painting in Montreal's art museum is "We Were the First that Ever Burst the Silent Sea" by John Macallan Swan because it is of polar bears. Because I see something new and different

every time I look at, and it brings me peace.

Berger understands that for each person art is in some ways different. This is why the essays about artists are constructed in different ways. Many times, it is about a response to that art, a personal response. Therefore, when writing about Antonello de Messina, Berger recounts a story about a guard, or when writing about Mantega, it becomes a conversation with his daughter. There is something charming about these, and despite the personal nature and structure of these chapters, there is so much packed into them.

It's also hard not to like a book where Berger can say that Michelangelo's Sibyls are really men in drag (he's right). There is a beautiful section on Monet that will make readers weep. His comments on Goya and flesh are startling, but when you think about them and study a few paintings by Goya, it's hard not to agree with Berger, whom himself finds that aspect hard to put into words.

The book is also about discovery, for he does either introduce artists that one hasn't heard of or (and) new ways of looking at things. His decision to not include color reproductions of the art seems strange at first (especially when dealing with say Matisse), but makes sense as the book goes on (especially with Matisse). Perhaps some readers will wonder what about choices, in particular those that are left out – but if this is a personal museum, it really doesn't matter. Quite frankly, I like having my horizons broadened by the inclusion of less well known artists.

In short, if you are even a little bit interested in art, read this. It is at once the view of critic/historian but written with the view of the everyday viewer. The "no nothing". Loved it.

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### **Yavuz says**

2000 yıl?k bir bienalde gezinmek gibi Portreler'i okumak. O bienalde keyifle gezinirken, insan kendisini Dante gibi hissediyor ; John Berger'in Vergiliusvari rehberli?inde.

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### **?ule TÜzÜl says**

“Cehennem içерiden geçersiz ilan edildi?inde, cehennemli?i son bulur.”

<http://www.edebiyathaber.net/john-ber...>

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### **Peter says**

Short essays contemplating artists from the Chauvet cave painters to Basquiat.

Berger is generous with unforgettable anecdotes and remarkable observations, some of which you'll take issue with, sure, but all of which show what it means to engage with art.

Here are some quotes that stuck with me--in decreasing order of bleakness (or, should you prefer, increasing

order of silliness)--half of which reference livestock directly or a product thereof:

"What I did not know when I was very young was that nothing can take the past away: the past grows gradually around one, like a placenta for dying."

"...all light is welcome that reveals the forms of one's friends."

"Everyone has their own way of speaking with cows."

"What was once pork has become a firmament!"

Suggestion: read this book over 74 sittings, one for each subject, like you were working for an artist who asked you to come back 74 times to try slightly different poses. I mean, you could do it in a day, or in ambitious chunks over several days, but there would likely be suffering.

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### **Tamara Agha-Jaffar says**

Portraits: John Berger on Artists is an exploration of centuries of art through the eyes and penetrating prose of the art critic, John Berger. Beginning with the paintings in the Chauvet Cave (c. 30,000 years BCE) through to the early 21st Century with the work of Randa Mdah, Berger situates the artist and his/her art in a historical context while simultaneously making us re-see already familiar works of art in a totally new way.

The book is poorly illustrated, its black and white photos blurred and of little help. However, most of the art referred to in the text is easily accessible on the Internet in full, blazing color.

In all, Berger discusses 74 artists and their works. Some of his essays are stronger than others, but all offer new insights. And some of these insights are breathtaking. Berger has an uncanny ability to take something initially appearing as tangential in a painting and make it his focus. He does this, for example, with the hand prints in the Chauvet Cave; the opaque window in Carvaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew*; the eyes in Diego Velazquez' *Aesop*. He draws our attention to a detail in a painting that was always there but that somehow we had overlooked.

Berger interacts with art in a deeply personal way, humanizing it for us and for himself. His chapter on Rembrandt forges an intimate connection with the artist and his work to such a degree that we begin to see the famous paintings in a new light. And this is true not just of Rembrandt but of many of the artists Berger discusses.

In his analyses of artists and their art, Berger reveals much about himself, his approach to art, and his politics. He doesn't withhold his opinions. And he doesn't hesitate to go sauntering off in an entirely new direction, describing a chance encounter with something or someone that fascinates him. For example, in the chapter on Willem Drost, Berger is captivated by the image and words of an elderly, diminutive tour guide who tosses off her expert knowledge of the paintings in a unique, almost cavalier manner. As she completes the guided tour and abruptly exits the gallery, Berger muses on the possible contents of the Marks and Spencer bag she carries.

Finally, what makes *Portraits* so impressive is Berger's penetrating prose and his ability to juxtapose seemingly disparate entities in his discussion. For example, he describes Yvonne Barlow's paintings as

having a musical sense of composition—“Chopinesque.” In a letter to Leon Kossoff, he claims an art studio is “like a stomach. A place of digestion, transformation, and excretion.” Cy Twombly is referred to as “the painterly master of verbal silence.” And Berger assures us he “listens” to the paintings of Liane Birnberg. Such juxtapositions startle. They force one to pause and re-think everything one thought one knew about art.

In the end, Berger’s *Portraits* is not simply a discussion about art. It is about the role art and the artist have played and continue to play in our lives. It is about art speaking to us on an intimate level. And by looking at art through the lens of this intense, perceptive art critic, we learn about the heart and soul of John Berger, about artists and their art, and about life.

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## Vivian says

***An artist's work constitutes his relationship with his fellow men.***

Short Review: Intellectual masturbation

Long Review:

***We live, at the moment, in a culture that is so obsessed with short-term advantages that it has already forgotten the future.***

While I understand the argument against creating another coffee table book, the lack of visual reference for works being discussed means either the reader is required to have a fairly broad knowledge of art or the formalist, mannera, and color arguments are difficult to comprehend. The anti-materialist stance that drives the essentialism of Berger’s arguments about artist intent is intentional. Based on an oeuvre of critiques through the years, some of the observations are stronger than others.

A set of philosophical arguments from existentialism to Marxism using art as a backdrop. A better title would be intersections. This is not an entry level book; it leaves out fundamental concepts necessary to understand the historical framework and how what Berger is saying is a twist rather than the traditional focus.

There are several ways to critique art. One can discuss form and color, historical relevance, audience reception, and artist intent. Berger does none of that here. This book is a series of essays discussing the present or near past in terms of art works that predate the events by centuries. He is making artists prophets.

At first, I found this intriguing. The arguments are interesting and well composed, and if Berger had made the case that the events are repeating rather than insinuating soothsaying, then I could agree. Several of these arguments as presented are anachronistic.

In the preface, Berger states that all the illustrations are in black and white to lend a critical credibility and not pander to the wealthy’s toys. I find this extremely misguided. Even if printing does not reproduce the tones correctly, color is an intrinsic component of many works of art, to ignore or belittle it is to fail to understand its importance. You wouldn’t understand the cover image’s lack of the use of gold as placing it in the terrestrial not ethereal realm. You ignore meaning. This decision is an anathema.

The introduction gives a background on Berger, presumably an unbiased view of the author for validation. It is especially focused on placing Berger as one of the people and not an elitist, if anything the vibe is hyper anti-elitist. He left the path of visual arts to pursue the written one. He's an author, thus the focus is about the words, not the art.

He's using portraits to tell stories about the time, their lives, not the pictures themselves. More a thematic overview of the artists' intents; some are brief snippets of observation, a connection seen and admired.

Leap from Early Christian, 4th century AD to 15th century, skipping Medieval art completely. The process of revelation is circle and pounce. Berger likes to divert, add the background peppered with unmade points and then unveil the connections. Very dramatic presentation.

Berger's focus and points are not always what I'd emphasize, but they are a different interpretation. Mantegna's "Bridal Room" with all of the various trees intermixed throughout the room isn't Mantegna's ignoring a hierarchy of importance that man places on the species of tree, but a nod to the Garden of Eden and all the fruit trees are fertility symbols appropriate to the location with its marital bed. The interpretation of feet and heads on the other hand, great.

The introduction was clear about Berger's Marxist leanings and the argument surrounding Bosch is an interesting intersection if thirty years out of date.

Breughel, indifference rather than realism.

Bellini, proposes the transition of Madonna and Child artworks due to man's breaking free of ignorance taking center stage during the Renaissance as discoveries are made, but Berger never states the obvious, which is the humanizing trend in art as a whole. By 1500, Martin Luther is just around the corner. Also, Berger never comments that most art done at that time was contracted. The contracts were often very detailed, even down to the quantity and quality of materials to be used.

Berger's observations of Durer were much more main stream, the Apocalyptic cults, egoism and the Protestant schism.

The penis worship in the section about Michelangelo is hysterical. The languid display of male genitalia in various works and the majesty that can spring from those loins, which gave birth to everything. Of course, not mentioning his homosexuality leaves out a significant element. Berger briefly mentioned the sibyls looking like cross dressers, but in reality it is all his women; his models were young stone masons.

Titian, Berger concludes that the maniera evident is due to confidence, not failing eye sight. Those brushstrokes, chicken or egg? His failure to mention the symbolism of dogs while arguing nudity and impotence of man, the thoughts of an old man.

*Finally, the act of painting, continually repeating like fornication, becomes a body.*

Even the proposition that all flesh is feminine even male is dilettante.

I think Occam's Razor is lacking in Berger's arguments. They are interesting, perhaps relevant tidbits, but they are not the primary focus or main theme of the paintings discussed. The book demands, due to the lack of images, a familiarity with the works discussed. Ironically elitist for a book filled with arguments against

hierarchy and privilege.

Berger's observations on Franz Hal's work as reactionary to the seventeenth century capitalism and the embrace of the bourse system in the Netherlands is compelling.

[Velazquez] treated all appearances as being equivalent of reflections in a mirror, thus his "optical verisimilitude" so early adopted. The argument of Spanish art in general as responsive to the geography of its origin is compelling.

Discussion about Degas focus on the mechanics and exertion of movement, a frozen moment where the subject's effort is highlighted is intriguing.

Paradoxical argument about Leger and socialism, freeing from capitalism yet specifying that Leger fetishized, always referred to his subjects as "objects". Then the comparison to Rousseau whom he thoroughly inviscerates,

*He made an art of visual wonder out of the visual scraps sold to and foisted upon the petty bourgeoisie.*

Yet, their shared sense of optimism of modernity rather than alienation is a fine observation.

The irony of Berger is that he makes this beautiful argument about Henry Moore and the presence of woman, the tactical quality of his work and the first sculpture he discusses is Moore's *Falling Warrior* and he fails to see the female in the form: the hips and buttocks of childbearing, falling back with no shield.

Berger's critique of Pollack and Krasner during their years together as a conversation is fascinating. Frankly, since my familiarity and knowledge is lacking in art after modernism, I found these essays to be intriguing and too brief. Undoubtedly, since I was aware of what I was missing in the earlier essays, I wonder what I am missing in these.

I don't know if it is irony or just depressing that all the postmodern artist essays revolve around dying: suicide, illness, and withering away. Even the format is shortened, almost as if obituaries themselves. I'm sure this has more to do with the original publication arena rather than the works, but it is an odd synchronicity.

Some arguments are stronger than others and those with more source material have arguments that are more aligned with the artist rather than an abstract concept. Additionally, some of the essays were published on a specific day and referencing an event, but the lack of date publishing date puts one at a disadvantage. There is an acknowledgment section that has these details, but I would have preferred the date of the original publication be present under the artist name for easier reference.

This book is filled with interesting arguments. I don't agree with all of them, but they are diverting intellectual masturbation. This is a cocktail party where the participants have a grasp of the material, and now play in the fringes. Beyond the norm and speculate. There is a beauty in the flawed and the far flung. As I stated, this is not an entry level book, but for those who are curious it is philosophically entertaining.

~Uncorrected copy provided by Netgalley~

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## **Jules says**

Reading on these artists makes for a nice learning experience about how art relates to society. There is a nice accompaniment of poetry to mediate on. It feels like a good book to explore on retreat or before a trip to the gallery.

These are 1970's essays and feel a bit of different than what we are used to reading today. It's a bit Eurocentric read. In some of the essays, be prepared for a more personal and inefficient read than you might expect . At times, this book reads like an art school student journal. His argument with a museum security guard felt a bit of dramatic and probably didn't need to entombed alongside the ancient paintings. I would recommend his other work, such as ways of seeing's work as a starting point .

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