

*Author's Copy prior to revision and copy editing*

Review of K. Matthews *Revealing Art* (Routledge 2005) in *Philosophical Quarterly* 56: 224 (2006) 471-73.

*Revealing Art*. By Matthew Kieran (London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. xii + 280. Price £13.99 p/b).

Matthew Kieran addresses a number of key topics in aesthetics including the nature of originality, beauty, artistic knowledge and truth, the moral content of art, and the standards of taste. His treatment of each topic is informed by the thesis that the value of art is to be found in the insights that it provides. The structure of each chapter is to canvas a few positions (usually including one that would represent a counter position to his thesis), before presenting an interpretation of the topic (rather than an argument) that is compatible with his positive thesis regarding art's value as insight.

In the first chapter the antithesis is that the value of art is in the experiences it affords, which Kieran claims does not capture the significance of background information for the way we value art, nor the value we place upon originals over copies (although it is not made clear how art valued for its insight fares better in these respects). In chapter two, the antithesis is that beauty is the main value of art. Kieran explicitly refers to Kant's aesthetic theory but implicitly treats beauty as something pleasing to the senses. For example Kieran writes: 'Is it trite, banal, superficial or callow? If so, no matter how beautiful, then so much the worse for the work.' (p.98) The fact that Kieran thinks a work can be simultaneously beautiful and trivial, banal,

superficial or callow, tells us much concerning his concept of beauty. Kieran rejects beauty as the main value of art on the grounds that meaning matters.

The third chapter deals with epistemological questions: can art be a source of knowledge and if so in what sense can an artwork be said to be true or false? According to Kieran, once one distinguishes between the subject matter of a work and the artist's expressed attitude to the subject matter (presumably as it is evident in the work), the right question becomes does the attitude to the subject matter expressed by the artist offer us insight into an aspect of our experience? In order to address the status of the insight afforded by art in epistemological terms, Kieran broaches the indeterminacy of artistic insights, not in relation to Kantian aesthetics, but in terms of nonpropositional knowledge (p.116). He claims that we gain knowledge in the form of 'practical understanding' or a capacity to 'recognize states representative of the relevant kind of experience' through art (p.118). As an example he refers to the kind of knowledge we achieve through experiencing a colour as opposed to reading or hearing about it (p.117). However, the significance of this discussion is left disconnected from the conclusion he draws, which is that artworks convey the same understanding as reasoned principled knowledge. The only difference between the knowledge conveyed through art and other forms of knowledge in Kieran's view is that art forms are particularly suited to expressing insights into the human condition in a psychologically vivid way (p.120). This flattening out of the issues pervades the writing throughout.

When Kieran moves onto the question of whether moral concerns are relevant to art in Chapter 4, he takes the affirmative stance and focuses upon whether immoral content makes something bad art to which he eventually answers in the negative

because immoral content can still provide us with insight. Here he fails to distinguish between the particulars of the objects depicted and the artist's point in depicting them, the very distinction he discusses early in the previous chapter. For example, Kieran thinks the work of Francis Bacon is immoral but constitutes good art nonetheless. However, given that immorality involves the objectification of people or a diminishing of their humanity, the fact that Bacon's work is understood to be expressive of despair and anxiety, suggests that Bacon adopts a highly moral attitude towards his subject matter. Consequently, Bacon does not provide the example of immoral but insightful art that Kieran is after. Neither does pornography for the opposite reason. On the topic of pornography (pp.153-66) Kieran concludes that some pornography is artistic because it portrays the human subjects involved with respect as individual persons (p.160) [on what basis is it pornography one might wonder] while some – the ordinary kind of pornography [he writes] – does not (p.165). Then he equivocates: 'Pornographic works can be great art indeed. Of course, we may want to allow this to be true whilst holding that the morally problematic nature of a pornographic work may constitute an artistic defect.' (p.165).

In the final Chapter (Chapter 5) Kieran begins by setting forth the standard arguments for a standard of taste (p.221). He claims that asking why we should attend to the standards of experts (rather than settling for our untrained preferences) confuses genetic reasons with internal norms. Genetic reasons cover why we engage with art to begin with, while actually engaging in art practices is constituted by giving ourselves over to internal norms that involve enculturation to certain artistic values. The idea seems to be that either you attend to the standards of recognised experts or presumably you are not engaging in artistic practices. He uses soccer as an analogy.

Kieran points out that the internal rules of a practice (which in soccer involve competition and a high risk of injury), sometimes promote norms at odds with genetic reasons (cooperation and fitness are his examples for soccer). However, this might just indicate that the reasons he has identified as genetic for soccer need to be more general, such as, exercise of skill for its own sake. It does not show that genetic and internal norms are independent. If we do not ground the internal norms in genetic reasons, in what sense can the genetic reasons and the internal norms be said to relate to the same practice (one might resurrect Wittgenstein's 'spinning a thread' analogy, but one still requires a prior category in order to know whether something is a viable thread)? Genetic reasons for art might well legitimise asking why we should attend to the standards of experts. There might be a good argument to the contrary but Kieran does not provide it.

In relation to the test of time argument, he raises the issue regarding whether we can be confident that, given the role of context and experience in influencing the way we configure scenes and shapes, we actually perceive works in the same way that past generations perceived them (p.224). We might be looking at the same objects but not necessarily perceiving the same art works. Unfortunately Kieran does not explore the implication of this for whether we should attend to the standards of experts, when experts are identified by the concurrence of their judgments with critics of past ages.

In each chapter, Kieran moves with no clear signposting from providing a brief survey of arguments to providing his own interpretation. The conclusion to a discussion is all too often provided in the form of an equivocation. Consequently, the book cannot be used as an example to students of philosophical argument. However,

the spirited writing will serve the general reader as a springboard into the kind of issues that concern the philosopher of art.

*University of Adelaide*

JENNIFER A. MCMAHON