ART: TRICKERY AND THE MACABRE

Lesley Nadel

At first, we see beauty. Then something shifts. A shape emerges from the shadows, a face becomes a skull, and the image we thought we understood begins to unsettle us. In Charles Allan Gilbert's *All is Vanity* (1892), a seemingly romantic scene carries a reminder of death. The pleasure of looking gives way to a more uncomfortable recognition: life is fleeting. Yet we keep looking. Perhaps it is curiosity, perhaps fascination, or perhaps the wish to confront our fears from the safety of a painted world. When artists become tricksters, blurring the boundary between truth and illusion, they invite us beyond the surface. Beauty is no longer a refuge from mortality, decay and violence; it becomes the very thing that draws us towards them.

Follow that invitation into the past, and the darkness is already waiting. In medieval Europe, the experience of plague found expression in macabre images on the walls of chapels and halls and in the pages of illuminated manuscripts. Death was not merely an ending to be hidden away, but a presence to be contemplated. Moving into the Renaissance, we encounter the strange, troubled world of Hieronymus Bosch. In his triptych *The Temptation of St Anthony* (c.1500), ghost-like figures, demons and tortured souls crowd the scene. The eye wanders from one unsettling detail to another, caught between fascination and dread. Temptation and human vice take visible form, and looking becomes an uneasy journey through the lure of evil.

That uneasy journey continues into the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where beauty can make the disturbing even more difficult to dismiss. William-Adolphe Bouguereau's pleasing images of youthful figures and angels offer little preparation for *Dante and Virgil* (1860). Inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, the painting draws us towards the beautifully rendered bodies of its fighters, only to confront us with the brutality of their struggle. The attraction and the horror are inseparable. With Salvador Dali, the encounter becomes more nightmarish still. In *The Face of War*, a disembodied head stands against a desert backdrop, its emaciated features and attacking serpents turning the scene into a vision of anguish. There is no comforting escape into beauty here. The image leaves us facing the ugliness of conflict and humanity's relentless return to it.

For some artists, mortality was more than a subject to imagine. Theodore Gericault's fascination led him to keep dismembered body parts in his studio; in *Severed Heads*, death appears in the stark form of decaying human remains. From there, the journey leads to a different kind of horror in Andy Warhol's *Electric Chair*. Based on a press photograph of the death chamber at Sing Sing State Penitentiary in New York, the work replaces the spectacle of flesh with the haunting presence of an instrument of execution. Against the controversy surrounding the American death penalty, the chair becomes a stark metaphor for death. We have travelled from a skull concealed within a romantic scene to a place where death needs no disguise. What holds these works together is not simply their power to shock, but the difficulty of turning away. They leave us with a question that lingers after the looking is over: are we drawn to the darkness and trickery in art because it is strange, or because we recognise something of ourselves within it?

If you are interested in learning more, the Arts Society North West Norfolk are hosting a talk by Ian Keable, a member of the Magic Circle and an accredited Arts Society lecturer, entitled “The Art of Trickery”. He will share with us examples of the art of magic as depicted in art and cartoons. Sedgeford Village Hall, Monday 4th December 2027 at 2.00 pm. Ample parking. Full details www.theartssocietynwnorfolk.org.uk