

Pandora's Box, Part III: The Newly-Discovered Version

By [Michael Newberry](#)

There is a newly-discovered third version of the legend of Pandora's Box. In this version, insanity, despair, and hatred had overrun the world, and Pandora—driven by a sense of hope—opened the box by unlocking it with a key. Out from the box rose all the glories of humanity, and they spread throughout the world with undiminished splendor. Pandora discovered that the glories had never disappeared, but humankind had lost the key to identify the magnificence that lay before them.

The form of art and its function in human life are central to the debate between postmodern art and art. In the first two parts of this series I essayed 1) how postmodern art shocks your epistemological processes through its anti-art means by which *anything* is art, and 2) how it shocks your psychological processes by expressing disturbing content as the ends. Along these lines, I will go deeper in examining the theoretical basis of postmodern art. But more importantly I would like to show you that the alternative to postmodern art exists, today, in the here and now—not as some half-grasped, incomplete example of an ideal but as a fully formed and glorious realization of humanity at its most sublime.

[Stuart Mark Feldman's](#) sculpture group, *The Future in Our Hands* is the case in point. It is a brilliant achievement, not only in the sense that it is a realization of the artist's ecstatic vision, but it also holds the exalted place of being an innovative work in the history of art. ^[1]

I will discuss Feldman's work later, but first I would like to address some of Kant's concepts of the Sublime. They are important because in the history of aesthetics Kant introduced some profoundly radical concepts that have become the blueprints for postmodern art.

Kant states: "The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form."^[2]

Kant contrasts the beautiful with the sublime. He connects, quite reasonably, the beautiful with the form of an object, but oddly he attaches formlessness to the concept of sublime. As two examples, think of the *Venus de Milo* and Duchamp's *Fountain*. The *Venus de Milo* is a beautiful female form embodied in stone, which "consists in limitation" in the sense that she is a final concrete end. The *Fountain*, a urinal, on the other hand, derives its postmodern aesthetic value—not because of its value as a sculpture—but because of its "concept." Its purpose was, incidentally, to offend the sensibilities of the art-going public and artists by the act of exhibiting a toilet as art. Kant's concept of the formless nature of the sublime elevates the concept of the aesthetic work over the work itself. In other words, it is the concept that counts and *not* the artwork.

Kant's concept of the formless nature of the sublime is the ideological birthplace of the postmodern aesthetic that art, including visual art, does not need to be expressed through the means of representational painting or sculpture. In practice, this aesthetic opened up the floodgates of a nihilistic revolution in the 20th century in which postmodern artists deconstructed art and/or substituted *any* object but painting or sculpture for art, e.g., arranged rubbish, excrement, installations, etc.

An opinion voiced by many people in response to postmodern art, such as bricks scattered about on a floor, is "My eight-year-old could do this." It is easy to understand their perspective; their assumption is that a value takes effort and skill, and the higher the value the more it requires superlative skill—not something assembled at random.

This attitude echoes Aristotle's comment that "art is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning."^[3] The idea is that a sculptor sculpts and a painter paints, and they remain true to their art's forms, i.e., to the means of creation. There is no room in Aristotle's concept of art for assemblages of factory-made objects. "All art is concerned with coming into being, i.e., with contriving and considering how something may come into being and whose origin is in the making." An Aristotelian definition of someone who scattered bricks would be a *brick arranger*, not an *artist*.

A thoroughly contemporary and universal take on the nature of art comes from Rand, who connects humanity's need of art to the process of translating concepts, through painting or sculpture, into an immediate perceptual concrete. She observes: "An artist isolates the things which he regards as metaphysically essential and integrates them into a single new concrete that represents an embodied abstraction."^[4]

For example, [Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*](#) projects concepts such as fighting for one's values, overcoming barriers, life or death struggles, etc. Delacroix brought these concepts before us as a perceptually immediate concrete—the whole scene is literally before our eyes.

The point here is not about the heroic element of the piece but about the artist's process of going from concept to concrete. For the viewers of the artwork, the process works in reverse: They experience the work as a concrete, and through contemplation they glean the concepts of the work's inception. Experiencing this phenomenon is what gives humans the sense of the reality of their possibilities, of their imagination, and of the efficacy of their minds.

It is also important to note that Rand connects sculpture and painting to the senses of touch and vision, so that these forms of art are universally connected to our senses and to the transformation of concepts into concrete forms.

Both Aristotle and Rand keep aesthetics grounded in the artwork as the end form. Kant, by contrast, through his concept of the formless nature of the Sublime, divorces aesthetics from art.

As the means of an artwork deals with the form, the end deals with the "point"—the intellectual and emotional expression of the art. In Kant's view, the sublime end point "excites a feeling of an outrage on the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account."

This aesthetic theory is the foundation for all the derivative shock aesthetic theories realized in such postmodern works as: meat grinders for humans, [Hatoum's *Mouli Julienne*](#); the irrelevant defacement of the Mona Lisa image by the inclusion of a moustache, [Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*](#); canned shit, [Manzoni's *Merda d'artista*](#); empty room as art, [Creed's *The Lights Going On and Off*](#); etc.

On a basic human level there is a touch of horror in all these works. They are displays that—even looking at them unintentionally—take us to a place that is an unhealthy state of mind.

By contrast, the Dalai Lama comes from the perspective that your happiness is threatened if you embrace negative states of being. He eloquently states that “hatred, jealousy, anger, and so on are harmful. We consider them negative states of mind because they destroy our mental happiness; once you harbor feelings of hatred or ill feeling towards someone, once you yourself are filled by hatred or negative emotions, then other people appear to you as also hostile.” Though he is not making an aesthetic statement, his idea serves as an ethical stance in which happiness is a proper aim for one’s life.

The next question is: What role does human value, as a subject matter, have in aesthetics?

Kant has already shown us his negative stance in the idea of an “outrage on the imagination.” In contrast to Kant, Aristotle and Rand have benevolent views of what the end point in art should be. Rand thinks art can and should create the experience of “a moment of metaphysical joy—a moment of love for existence.” Aristotle argues that “Every art is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”

Aristotle and Rand believe that every act of human creativity has a *human* value as an end point, including art. The converse is: If an act has a negative state as end, it would be destructive or meaningless for a healthy humanity.

A point of clarification: Kant’s use of the word “sublime” is really an antonym, because by his definitions Kant means the opposite; it is the concept of “nihilism” that he defines. An unfortunate consequence of his terminology is that the contemporary art world has confused the sublime with formlessness and outrage.

So let us start afresh and move away from the malapropos use of “sublime.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines “sublime” as: 1) characterized by nobility; majestic. 2) Of high spiritual, moral, or intellectual worth. b. Not to be excelled; supreme. 3) Inspiring awe; impressive. 4) *Archaic*. Raised aloft; set high.

Here is one example of the sublime in art.

[Stuart Mark Feldman's](#) sculpture group, *The Future in Our Hands* (1992, Reservoir Park, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania) is four life-size bronze statues placed around a large outdoor fountain. There are two males and two females, life-sized, each playing with a child.

(To my knowledge, this is the first review of this sculpture group since its public unveiling, ten years ago.)

Instead of reviewing each sculpture separately, let’s first look at their common features.

Each adult is standing with one leg solidly anchored on the ground, giving us the sense that they are grounded in real life. Their other leg is relaxed and slightly extended, giving them a sense of balance and flexibility. Each adult is intently looking at their child—more: their entire body language is directed to and in support of the child. Notice how each adult has an extended free arm poised for maintaining balance. Their free arm is also extended in an expression of care.

Each child is in a moment of freedom; they are rising, reaching, or flying.

Notice that none of the children is held.

There is an intensely intimate physical connection between the adults and the children. Aside from the one child literally in flight, the other children are balancing themselves on their parents, and in beautiful exchanges of tenderness the parents are balancing the children with little more than a touch of a finger, the support of a palm, or the tip of a nose.

If we look more closely at the sculptures, we notice that each adult is a unique body type. The lithe girlish figure contrasts with the full womanly figure; the men's figures are similarly contrasted between slender and solid builds. Notice the face of the mother tossing the child: the line of her mouth and the tilt of her nose are distinct features. We have the sense that if the model walked by we would recognize her. Each figure has unique characteristics that mark them as individuals. But common among them is the elegance of the proportions of their body parts. Not a hand, head, or foot seems out of sync with the whole body. Here Feldman has stepped away from the generic prototypes of the ancient Greeks, in which, for example, youths' heads share the same proportions and same characteristics; yet he has retained the beauty of proportion that the Greeks innovated.

In each sculpture notice the flow of the surface skin and how it molds the underlying anatomy, from the hips to stomach up to the chest to around the shoulders. Look at the natural shape of the knees; we can sense how they are either locked into place or totally relaxed. This is a magnificent display of virtuosic modeling of the clay—the medium before the bronze casting—to resemble the real flesh of a living human being. It also shows the breadth of Feldman's anatomical knowledge—from the delineation of a neck muscle to the hardness of an elbow; every detail is right on the money.

It might be easy to overlook the simple naturalness of the children. But several very difficult technical things are going on here. One is that their proportions are true to little children: the largeness of their heads and the fullness of their torsos. Another aspect is the modeling of their flesh, which gives us a sense of a malleable plumpness. The third is that these toddlers are in incredibly dynamic poses, the likes of which I have never seen before. Throughout the history of art, from the Egyptians to modern times, children have been mangled, distorted, prematurely aged, made into mini-bodybuilders or billowing pillows. It is amazing to find in sculpture children that look like children—in flight no less! In this sculpture group they look so obviously right that their believability emphasizes the fact that they could only have been made by a master genius.

Stepping back, let's take in the sculptures from a distance and look at their big forms. The big form is, in contrast to details such as ears, the essential "sweep" of the whole sculpture. If you use your imagination, it is like waving a magic wand in ascending arches, in large flowing curves, or in shooting diagonal exclamation marks. Imagine that your gestured arches, curves, and diagonals magically turn into wildly arching backs, shoulders pivoting against thrust hips, and ecstatic children soaring. This is what we have in Feldman's work.

When looking at the sculpture of the lithe woman with the flying child, follow the bow-like sweep from her right shoulder through her left hip down through left leg that ends at the curve of her left big toe. Notice how the child is flying diagonally off the sweep of the mother's body, like an arrow shooting off a bow. Feldman uses this big sweep to dramatically accent the child's flight.

(Parenthetically, Rodin's greatest historical innovation was his integration of big sweeping forms of the human body—which he used to give a sense of immediacy, of living in the moment, to the expression of the figure. His figures never feel "posed," unlike the melodramatic poses you might see in silent movies. It is outside of the scope of this essay, but it could be argued that Rodin sacrificed proportions, the flesh-like texture of the modeling, and the completeness of the entire figure so that he could achieve the big sweep of immediacy and form. On the other hand, Feldman has integrated this technique without sacrificing any of these other sculptural values.)

A swirling twist of space is the big form in the sculpture of the child who is raising himself from his mother's shoulder. She is taking a step, rotating in the direction of her turned head, following the direction of her child, whose back enhances this line and whose head is turned in such a way as to continue this sweep out towards his furthest sight. The whole composition is like a waltz of balance.

Looking at the sculpture of the child balanced on his father's shoulder, we can sense a flowing "S" sweep from the father's right leg, swinging up through his torso, curving through the tilting torso of the child, ending in a burst of joyfully flung arms and legs, much like the ascent and explosion of fireworks.

Perhaps the most impressive of the four sculptures is the one in which the father has raised the delighted child on high. Notice the soaring line from the father's right shoulder through his arm up through the child's high-flung leg.

In every one of these pieces we see a historically unique sculpture because of the inventive use of the big form and because of a thoroughly modern presentation of a new humanity. *The Future in Our Hands* is a tour de force of integration; the scope of the work is startling.

The Future in Our Hands is seamlessly integrated through the theme of the joy of supporting human growth. The work encompasses minute detail, from a mother carefully balancing her child with index finger and a nudge of her nose to the monumental abstract design that sweeps a child through space. It expresses the significance of individuals grounded on this earth, and it magnifies the importance for them of supporting their benevolent stance with

care, attention, and joy. It expresses the unselfconscious exhilaration of living in the present with an eye towards the future.

The Future in Our Hands is an innovative masterpiece. It is a landmark. It is one of several contemporary masterpieces that will mark the end of the postmodern era and set an aesthetic precedent for the beginning of new era of enlightenment in the arts.

Anti-definitions such as outrage for exaltation, formlessness for means, and nihilism for sublime do not destroy the existence and nature of art or other human accomplishments. But anti-definitions do destroy humanity's ability to give real meaning to ideas, which results in the horrible spectacle of society's inability to identify and articulate human values, such as the glorious vision of a father raising his child aloft.

The key to understanding the dilemmas posed by the versions of the legend of Pandora's Box is *identification*: a thing is what it is—a toilet is a toilet, and a sculpture is an artwork. The antidote to postmodern aesthetics is clear: Representational painting and sculpture are primary and universal art forms, in which the expression of human value is sacred.

All three versions of the legend of Pandora's Box are true: the swirling demons and the diseases of insanity; the hope; and, as well, the magnificence of human creation. But it is the third version of Pandora's Box, the one in which "out from the box rose up all the glories of humanity and they spread throughout the world with undiminished splendor" is the real one. It is the version that has value for those of us wishing to achieve a flourishing existence on earth.

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Notes:

[1] [Brett Holverstott's photos of Feldman's sculpture group can be seen here.](#)

[2] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Book II, Analytic of the Sublime, esp. § 23, 26, & 28.

[3] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, 1140a10.

[4] See Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*.

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