



# Exploring Aesthetics: Beauty without Utility in Harvey's Fine Art Photography

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## Abstract

The paper delves into aesthetic beauty in photographs of Cig Harvey (b. 1973, England). Using Immanuel Kant's theory of "Aesthetics", this paper will explore how beauty without utility is expressed through order, harmony, and balance in Harvey's photographs. For Kant, order, harmony, and balance are the keys to the beautiful and what he called the "sublime." And what Kant's theory "disinterested pleasure" reveals is that there is nothing utilitarian about beauty – no useful purpose to the piece we are enjoying other than its beauty. The piece of art should be judged apart from any practical function, which echoes the principle "art for art sake". This paper focuses on three pieces of Harvey's photographs *Frozen Apples*, Rockport, Maine, 2018 (see Figure 1), *Exit, Self-portrait*, San Francisco, California, 2005 (see Figure 2) and *Scout & the Jacks*, 2016 (see Figure 3). Through these three photographs this paper discusses how Harvey works as a fine art photographer to pursue true beauty, leaving the viewers with a feeling for the sublime.

## Keywords

Cig Harvey, true beauty, Immanuel Kant, "disinterested pleasure", photography

## 1. Introduction

When you admire a beautiful statue, why do you feel that way? What do you really admire? Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a German philosopher from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has a theory called "disinterested pleasure". According to Kant's theory of "Aesthetics", "disinterested pleasure" means that true beauty is completely detached from any utility. That means it seeks nothing from the art object, it has no agenda, and it makes no demands. It must be free. Echoing Kant's ideas is Cig Harvey (b. 1973), a British photographer who lives in Maine and whose work is in pursuit of true beauty. Rooted in "implied narrative, saturated color, and nature", her works of art are focused on inner feelings. She has published five collections of photographs: *Blue Violet* (2021), *Reveal* (2020), *You an Orchestra You a Bomb* (2017), *Gardening at Night* (2015) and *You Look at Me Like an Emergency* (2012) to date and works as a fine art photographer to seek "disinterested pleasure".

## 2. Biography of Cig Harvey

Harvey has been interested in photography for most of her life. Notably, her website states that she was born in England and "[s]he first became interested in photography because of the photo portfolios that *The Independent* published. At age thirteen, Harvey began working in a darkroom, which furthered her interest in photography" (Robert Klein Gallery). She now lives in Rockport, Maine and is world famous for her surreal photos of nature and family and her photographs "feature vibrant colors, dramatic natural lightning and motifs including family, memory, nature, and everyday life" (Cig Harvey, 2021). Her earliest work presented stylized self-portraits, enhanced with

visual metaphors and elaborate costuming. Later, Harvey has shifted her focus to more spontaneous shots of her life in Maine, which often feature her husband and daughter. Harvey becomes a better storyteller through her clever use of light, framing and saturation. Her works are widely known and are included in numerous museum collections.

### 3. An overview of Cig Harvey's photography

The three photographs examined here come from Harvey's different collections at different stages in her life. The first one, *Frozen Apples* (see Figure 1), is from her book *Blue Violet*, which shows "a celebration of the natural world and sensory abundance" (Cig Harvey, 2021). The second one, *Exit* (see Figure 2), is a self-portrait of Harvey herself included in the book *You Look at Me Like an Emergency*, which takes us into her rich emotional world. The third photo *Scout & the Jacks* (see Figure 3) is in the book *You an Orchestra You a Bomb*, which focuses on the fragile moment and Harvey's "relationship with life itself" (Cig Harvey, 2017). All three photos show Harvey's persistent pursuit of true beauty without utility.

#### 3.1 True beauty and Kant's aesthetic theory reflected in *Frozen Apples*

True beauty has no material use. Harvey is motivated by art and art alone (Risch, Conor, 2016). The first photo bellow is called *Frozen Apples, Rockport, Maine, 2018* (see Figure 1) and demonstrates Harvey's art motivation to pursue natural beauty rather than to create art with any kind of material function. Light shines on the dancing snowflakes. The apples are frozen and some of them have brown spots due to severe cold. The colors of the whole photo are harmonious: brown branches, white snow and orange red apples. In the distance, viewers can vaguely see some trees standing in the snow. The connotation behind this image is about the resilient life. Even if the apple tree is in the harsh environment, it can still stay vibrant.



Figure 1. *Frozen Apples, Rockport, Maine, 2018* from *Blue Violet*.

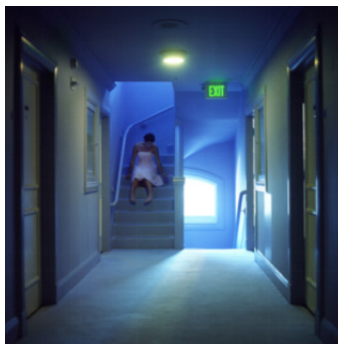
*Frozen Apples* presents viewers with simple beauty, in a way that only Harvey can do. The photograph seems to show not only the physical beauty of interlaced branches and the balance of colors, but also the spiritual beauty of tenacious life in nature. As In her book *Blue Violet* Harvey exclaims: "it's about living!" Then she says, "I think of [*Blue Violet*] as the personal response to grief but also this collective response to grief" (Madeleine Morlet, 2022). That's true in this photo *Frozen Apples*: all creatures might feel agony and grief because of severe cold in winter, yet the frozen apple tree shows the resolute and positive attitude in adversity. It is the pursuit of physical and spiritual beauty in nature that encourages Harvey to create this masterpiece because, for her, artistic pursuit is the only justification for photography.

This photo can be thought of as an example of true beauty, according to Kant, because it is artwork itself that does nothing but shows beauty. It does not ask us, the viewers, to do anything for it. This photo brings us "disinterested pleasure," because the enjoyment is being extracted from the tranquil and snowy scenery, the resilient apple tree, the perfect color composition and the hopeful mood, instead of the purpose behind this photo. It seems that when we look at this photograph, we don't care about function. We forget about this idea. Rather, we contemplate how beautiful it is and that we are inspired by the tenacity of life reflected in it.

#### 3.2 True beauty and Kant's aesthetic theory reflected in *Exit*

Kant said that "art for art's sake" was about the value of art for itself without an utilitarian function. The second photo bellow, *Exit* (see Figure 2), shows that whether one photo reveals a story or expresses an emotion, the reason why we think it is beautiful has nothing to do with needs or purposes behind it. The photo *Exit* is one of Harvey's

self-portraits. In this image she sits on the stairs of an apartment indoors and wears a pink strapless cocktail dress. This photo was made in San Francisco, California, in 2005. It is almost in blue tone, yet “the hallway light and exit sign glow different shades of green” (Cig Harvey, 2012). The bright light comes through the window and catches viewers’ attention. When viewers see this photo, they begin to question the story behind it. Why is Harvey looking down to her cocktail dress? Is she going to a dance party? If so, why is she just sitting on the stairs? Is she waiting for someone else? Harvey might be a little sad in this photo. The gesture of bowing her head shows her hesitation. When viewers feel curious about stories behind this photo and forget about function or monetary value, they will understand that art speaks for itself.



**Figure 2. Exit, Self-portrait, San Francisco, California, 2005 from You Look at Me Like an Emergency.**

According to Kant, art is just for art. True beauty has zero utility value and it’s about “disinterested pleasure”. Following this, viewers can also find “disinterested pleasure” when appreciating this second photo. This photo is beautiful because viewers can see how the light and shadow make a contrast in it. And the sad mood is skillfully expressed through the blue tone of the whole photograph. Harvey uses color to attract people, but she says, “for me it’s not just about color, it’s also the light that I’m shooting in and what that does to color, so I think the light really defines the language that I want the photograph to talk in” (Risch, Conor, 2016). Form, order and harmony are in this photo, which is a reminder of Kant’s “aesthetics”. The colors of this photo are rich but they are in balance: pink, blue, green and white. Furthermore, viewers don’t immediately consider the market value of this photo when appreciating it. They never think that this photo is beautiful only because it can be sold for a large sum of money and the money can be used for utilitarian purposes. Rather they think only about beauty.

### 3.3 True beauty and Kant’s aesthetic theory reflected in Scout& the Jacks

Harvey embraces the “uselessness” of her work in the modern world, and prefers to pursue true beauty. She thinks that if she introduces the utilitarian function of the image, there’s “a cheapening of beauty” and something will be lost (Madeleine Morlet, 2022). This is evident in the third photo of Harvey’s young daughter, Scout. This photo *Scout & the Jacks* (see Figure 3) was taken in 2016 and Scout is under the surface of the ocean. A beam of light is right above her as it shines on the algae around her and she is wearing a slip dress with dark brown and red patterns. Five fishes are swimming in the ocean above her. Scout raises her head slightly and closes her eyes. She faces the light in the water without obvious expressions. The light forms shadows on her neck. The whole photo is almost in dark blue.



**Figure 3. Scout& the Jacks, 2016 from You an Orchestra You a Bomb.**

Here Harvey wants to “capture a dying breath” in this moment (Cig Harvey, 2017). Yet, the photo is beautiful not because it has any practical use, but because it shows viewers the unity of both beauty and terror in death. Echoing Kant, viewers understand that the two aspects seem contradictory, but they are reflected in one photo at the same time. As Harvey says when relating this photo to her experiences of becoming a mother, “The world became instantly more beautiful, and instantly more terrifying. It became more beautiful, but with an element of danger. What I’m seeking is something that makes me gasp” (Walsh, Brienne, 2018). This photo is pure beauty and following in Kant’s ideas; viewers can’t see any moral, political or utilitarian function in it. It seems that Harvey took this photo of her daughter just as “art for art’s sake,” and nothing more.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Harvey works as a fine art photographer to pursue true beauty. She says, when taking photos, “I would brainstorm different metaphors and symbols. What’s the right light to tell the story? What’s the right color? And so they were quite heavily planned” (Risch, Conor, 2016). She spares no effort to live up to the principle, “art for art sake”. According to Kant, true beauty has “disinterested pleasure”. That means it doesn’t have any practical use. True beauty has its own value and should be judged apart from any political, religious, historical function. All three photos of Harvey mentioned above show true beauty seeks no utilitarian function, and that it is conveyed through order, harmony, and balance in photography.

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