

Symbols and Devices



What might archeologists think in years to come, if written records vanished and they were to describe today's culture from its artworks. Much of our knowledge of past cultures is derived from artifacts, which are the product of human workmanship, and most historical art pieces were functional as well as decorative. Artists were valued members of their societies and produced beautiful furniture, implements, sculpture and paintings, as well as decorating objects and walls of buildings. Today's artists have a harder job convincing the community that art still defines society, so it is important that they can articulate the basic ideas behind their creations.

To look at the language of art and the way artists of all media use it in a poetic and lyrical way is an enjoyable experience. However a whole culture has been built around a type of art language some refer to as art speak. While it sits above the heads of the average person, it arose partly out of a need for explanation by both the artist and the critic. Art speak is a useful tool for those who want to keep art aloof, but an artist can articulate their concepts without alienating the listener. An adequate vocabulary to explain an art work remains important for curators, artists and their audience, but it needs to communicate understanding rather than distancing the audience.

Translating artworks into personal language allows greater understanding of both the process and the meaning, and it was a great learning experience to critique the artworks of some of my favoured artists. By using a good reference book as an aid to explain processes, I was able to write in my own words, the methods and devices the artist had used to execute the work to give it meaning. I began to expand my art vocabulary so I could explain my own work in an interesting, acceptable but understandable way. While some say art should speak for itself, I believe the viewer wants and needs the artist's explanation, even if only as a starting point. Perhaps some of the world's greatest masterpieces are over defined, but it is possible to describe anything in terms of technique, meaning and emotion generated.