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The Critical I online anthology  
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The Critical I was a five-week course for the public inviting a unique exploration of the art of criticism, offering participants an opportunity to hone their critical eyes and develop their critical faculties. The aim of the course was to encourage critical thinking, introducing participants to different ways and approaches to assess the art works in front of them regardless of the contextual information available.

This online anthology is the creative outcome of The Critical I course to explore and critically respond to works in Tate's collection as well as the A Bigger Splash: Painting After Performance and Lichtenstein: A Retrospective exhibitions.

We are delighted to share this selection of written pieces with you.

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The works in this room critique the notion of clichéd gender roles as Lichtenstein concentrates on reproducing early American comic strip motifs from publications such as *All-American Men Of War* and *Girls' Romances* that promote gender stereotypes in American society during the late 50s and early 60s.

Lichtenstein argued that throughout the history of art, artists had relied upon the use of intentional clichés to create the ideal image of what it means to be male or female in the world. His work, by contrast, challenged the link between High or Classical art and these

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of our foreign policy has been unbelievably terrifying,' he also stated in the same article that he '[didn't] want to capitalise on this popular position. My work is more about our American definition of images and visual communication.' Lichtenstein's enlargement of the comic strip image in *Whaam!*

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I could probably stand out by saying I didn't like the Roy Lichtenstein Retrospective at Tate Modern, which shows Lichtenstein's lasting legacy in 125 paintings and sculptures; but I did. The retrospective is a complete survey of Lichtenstein's transformation of popular culture into fine art. It also allows the viewer to see the playful side of the artist.

Lichtenstein is a key figure in Pop Art, an art movement that

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a garbage can. But unlike Warhol, Lichtenstein was also a painter and a craftsman, while Warhol was attracted by larger themes, including death and celebrity. As a matter of fact, the 'Regarding Warhol: Sixty Artists, Fifty Years' exhibition at the Met in 2012, did not include Roy Lichtenstein.

Most well known for appropriating from comic books and other sources – he takes a small frame, isolates it and put it on large format, transforming it into fine art – Lichtenstein also achieved much more. He analysed the impact of colours on the psyche in his early paintings; played with optical effects in his seascapes and in the juxtaposition of dots in his Ben-Day paintings; explored light reflections in his mirrors; and perspective in his Chinese landscapes. The Tate Modern show is a remarkable retrospective. Lichtenstein painted in series so the exhibition has a more or less chronological hang, but it also shows his playful side, most notably in his reinterpretation of other artists' styles. His facetious side is also present in his perfect/imperfect series, which you need to see to grasp.

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This could be a speech bubble in a Roy Lichtenstein triptych. The words of a forlorn teary eyed comic-born blonde heroine searching for an Alpha male to liberate her from the tedium of her life imprisoned within the frame of a painting where she is destined to spend eternity – locked in by the whim of the author.

But who *is* the author of her destiny? Where is the REAL author of these works that surround us? Their largeness gives us a sense that we are but another insignificant transient character in this, his comic strip of life.

Lifted from established 1960s comic books of war stories and romances, standing in the 'War and Romance' Room of the Lichtenstein Retrospective we are dwarfed by the over-sized

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The 'War and Romance' room in the Roy Lichtenstein Retrospective at Tate Modern presents paintings in a playful, colourful and frivolous comic book style. All very lighthearted, one could easily think.

The men on the wall are in war style 'action', while the women on the canvases are hopelessly in love. This room is where a man is portrayed as a man – in action, brave, commanding, steering, doing – and a woman as a woman – insofar as having a man is what defines a woman.

In this display the women shown are in the midst of describing their relationship as a fairy tale, professing their love, making up excuses, waiting by the phone, providing reassurance and refusing to ask for help. In all of the scenarios depicted, the man, although absent, defines the scene.

Put all these images in a room together, like in this exhibition, and the juxtaposition of the overly brave male against the feeble female quickly introduces a different tone and perspective to Lichtenstein's work. Beyond the vibrant visuals, one discovers a sense of social commentary and critique through humorous caricature and irony.

Cartoon strips traditionally thought of as 'light' entertainment, have, in Lichtenstein's work, been used as a basis to launch serious criticism. Through his mimicking of the cartoon style he holds a mirror up to the art form in order to expose its flaws, as well as society's.

Does this style also lure the viewer into a flawed sense of understanding? The images on display depict single cartoon frames from which the viewer assumes he or she knows the full story. It is easy to make the same mistake when trying to find a meaning in Lichtenstein's work, framing it as social commentary in pursuit of social justice and equality.

Yet Lichtenstein is never forthright. He pokes fun, leads the viewer in a certain direction, but never introduces an actual proposition. In the context of the 'War and Romance' room this striking ambiguity





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An athletic young black man sits displaying his family jewels, yet far from looking coy and demure, he brazenly stares out of the canvas in a manner reminiscent of the prostitute *Olympiæ*s famously depicted by Manet in 1863.

On looking up at the canvas, the viewer cannot help but feel a little intimidated by the magnificence of this black, male model whose tantalizingly tactile, elongated, statuesque body gleams out of the canvas like a beautiful Giacometti sculpture.

His luscious limbs have been extended, and a varnish applied to the canvas to give them a gloriously healthy, mahogany-like sheen. He is surrounded by references to his north African heritage, such as the ethnic wall tiles, his discarded tunic and the small smoking pipe, and he peers down at the viewer through small academic glasses with a gloriously superior air. In fact, this young man is so magnificent that all of him cannot possibly be contained within the canvas; one arm and one foot stretch languorously out of sight.

Painted so soon after Malcolm X and Martin Luther King's famous speech of 1963, at a time when Afro-Americans were still considered to be second-class citizens, this representation by Hendricks must have provoked similar emotional responses to those of the original Manet painting.

Yet it would appear that it is very much the artist's intention to use his art as a form of social comment through the heightened contrast between the black skin and the white sofa that takes up much of the left hand side of the image. The print of the discarded tunic is also that of a white lady from the 1920s whose face can be seen looking at this contemporary black man.

This is a young man swamped by white traditional culture, yet big



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## Response to *Entablature* 1975 by Roy Lichtenstein France Leon

My knowledge of Lichtenstein has been limited to his Romance paintings; those oversized cartoon strip images of women who always seem to be crying. On viewing the retrospective at Tate Modern I come to realise the scope of his work and I now see him with renewed interest.

The exhibition takes us through from his Early Abstractions and Pop Art stage to his late Chinese Landscapes, although not necessarily in chronological order. It is evident that Lichtenstein's work rethinks in such a way that provokes the viewer into seeing things from a different perspective.

I loved discovering his brass sculptures; the extracted design of art deco handrails and architectural features. They are simply stunning. His reworking of painters such as Picasso, Matisse and Mondrian were also as intriguing as they were amusing.

Among all the works I was fascinated by one in particular; possibly one that many would walk past, despite its size. It is simple, but it draws on something that we take for granted everyday.

*Entablature* is a painting with an imposing, statuesque aura. The conflicting styles of minimalist presentation and classical architecture are brought together in this large banded frieze of cool blues, whites and silver; complete with the artist's trademark Benday dots. It is majestic, it is regal, it demands my attention and I give it willingly.

For half an hour I contemplate; some time standing close, some time standing at a distance until I find myself cross-legged on the floor writing notes. It is while I'm sat on the floor that it dawns on me. Within this work is a musicality; a beat that emits from the painting, like a metronome or perhaps a clock ticking with the passing of time. This brings to mind my experience, some years ago, of standing before Jackson Pollock's *Summertime* (1948). Although Pollock's action painting has a rhythmic freedom, such as in a piece of jazz music, my reaction to each work was notably similar; I am held by more than just the paint on the surface.

Both paintings are long horizontal canvases. Both require contemplation, and for me the experience of each is much like that of standing before an alter-piece. Two artists, polar opposites, and two paintings that are seemingly worlds apart but that share not only a musicality, but also a reference to classicism. Pollock, whether wittingly or not, achieved a painting that many have commented appears to hide a frieze of figures behind the abstract paintwork.

Arguably though, Pollock painted freely from the unconscious with his pouring and dripping techniques, while Lichtenstein's craft was

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more precise and designed. But both of these paintings would not look out of place perched upon a couple of Ionic columns.

I leave the gallery with my head held high. Not because I feel grandiose with some great revelation, but because if there is one thing that Lichtenstein's painting has left me with, it is a revived appreciation for our cities' architecture. I question how classicism has been used by and translated in our modern capitalist culture, how our institutions have used these designs to heighten their stature and importance.

In the days following I notice whilst on my way to work that where a bank once presided in a building with columns and entablature, I now see an instantly recognisable red and yellow McDonald's sign. It is almost allegorical and certainly seems to fit the themes of Lichtenstein's comment on high art versus low art. It is conflicts and contrasts such as these that make Lichtenstein's work as relevant today as it was forty years ago.

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## Response to Laocoon 1988 by Roy Lichtenstein Leo Stortiero

If anyone is still uncertain whether Pop Art can deliver strength, power and vital force beyond its study on the reproducibility of common objects as works of art, that person might well be convinced otherwise when faced with Lichtenstein's *Laocoon*

If Pop Art as an artistic movement now explained in History of Art manuals as that which aimed to use items and slogans from everyday life, and in doing so, give them artistic dignity, here with Laocoon almost the opposite happens. The classic myth and the almost liturgical shapes of the monumental sculpture are stripped from their context, deprived of their canonical legacy and, though maintaining the original dramatic strength and physical vigour, are brought into the modern era of our own.

The vivid, bright colours and the blurring lines make the faces of Laocoon and his children almost faces of pure decoration, there simply because a person is supposed to have a face, but carrying no evidences at all of their individual identities. Laocoon's struggle and vain sacrifice are those of the contemporary man, we all live a sorrowful life, where the most recognizable element is the snake biting us.

Of course, this is pure Pop Art: the deconstruction of a capital element and the birth of a new one out of its ashes, but with new informal characteristics. The intent is a desecrating one by bringing back to earth institutionalized elements or powers, destroying the amount of untouchable seriousness and self-glorification, and returning those elements to the people and to the realm of ordinary debate.

Maybe everything I brought to attention here was neither in the author's mind nor intention. If so, that would mean that Roy Lichtenstein is alive and kicking. To me, at least.

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Critics are a shifting assembly. It is a recurrent gospel that the

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an audience we become entangled in these layers – the voyeur, the participant, the critic’s critic – and each assessment then has opportunity to become more valued than the piece it assesses. As