

Response 2

Feldman's Art Criticism Assignment/Response

"Can't Help Myself" by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu



Description: Can't Help Myself is a modern art piece of a black robotic "arm" that sweeps up a dark red hydraulic fluid in a white room with glass walls. The medium of this piece is stainless steel, rubber, and cellulose ether in the colored water. Can't Help Myself was created in 2016 and commissioned for the Guggenheim Museum in Spain. The industrial machinery is programmed to contain this viscous liquid in the predetermined area. The machine has sensors that detect when the fluid has strayed too far the arm will sway with frantic specific movement in an attempt to bring the fluid back to the designed area. The two artists and engineers programmed thirty-two movements for the machine to perform. But the liquid inevitably strays outside of the bounds. The machine had come to a halt, was unplugged, and "died" in 2019 and the piece was renamed, "Couldn't Help Myself."

Analysis: This seems to be in the genre of architectural or robotic art. The artists intentionally used a robotic arm but programmed it with relatable and sporadic movements. The machinery also makes sounds that can almost resemble a distressed sound or scream. The focus of this piece is this dark red fluid that highly resembles blood, it leaves streaking and splattering that also has the same viscosity that we recognize in our minds as blood. The room is a stark white that can be seen as isolating and lonely, it also creates a bold contrast between the pool of the blood-like liquid. The walls are made of glass and the spectators looking in can have their meaning and commentary. The artist intends to have a direct, shocking, and ominous tone. The emotional response is a sad and hopeless feeling, as human beings,

we are programmed to be concerned and alarmed at seeing that much “blood” and have the feeling of urgency.

Interpretation: I feel that there are endless interpretations and meanings of this work. I believe the artists made this piece with the meaning of the sorrow of when immigrants are rejected and sent back to their origin country by the authoritative government enforcing borders. But there are also many ways to see what this piece could mean and I also believe that much of the meaning is depending on what we are all going through. This could be seen as a commentary on humanity destroying our environment and could be seen as symbolic of the oil spills. We then try to repair the destruction we have caused but it is beyond our containment at this point. I personally saw it in a personal take on depression or grief, that we try to survive and contain the blood but it feels all in vain and an insessant battle.

Judgment: I’ve always really loved this piece, the artists have created a piece that seems relatively simple but so thought-provoking and emotional. They humanized cold machinery to the point where many viewing the piece feel empathetic and touched by the robot. They somehow made a robotic arm with erratic dance-like movements feel relatable and showcased the fragility of our humanity. It’s amazing that we are able to humanize something that we are aware is not a sentient being. This piece always captivates me and keeps me thinking of what it could mean. I also thought the title of this piece adds to it so much, “Can’t help myself” further humanizes the piece and allows us to understand that this is a commentary on the human experience.