

Brain finds pleasure in processing abstract art

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The Irish Times:

A new discipline called neuroaesthetics was founded about 10 years ago by Semir Zeki of University College London. It aims to discover the neurological basis for the success of artistic techniques. Most people find the blurred imagery of Impressionist paintings appealing and the new studies show that these images stimulate the amygdala, the area in the brain geared to detect threats in our peripheral vision. The amygdala plays a big role in our emotions, which may explain why we find Impressionist paintings so moving.

The images in abstract paintings do not directly picture anything in the real physical world. The question therefore naturally arises as to whether we would find random lines, shapes and colours daubed on canvas by animals or small children equally as pleasing to the eye as the work of professional artists.

Angelina Hawley-Dolan of Boston College, Massachusetts, did an experiment to answer this question (Psychological Science, volume 22, page 435). Volunteers viewed pairs of paintings, one painting of each pair being the work of a famous artist and the other the doodle of an amateur, infant, chimp or elephant. One-third of the paintings were unlabelled and two-thirds were labelled – however sometimes the labels were mixed up. The volunteers generally preferred the work of professional artists even when the label said it was the work of a chimp or an elephant. Apparently we can sense the artist's vision even when we cannot explain why.

Read the whole story: [*The Irish Times*](#)