

Art? Or The Artist?

By Jason Obermeyer

It seems many artists live double lives. One as their public, artistic persona. Whether it be a painter, actor, singer, performer, or any type of entertainer. The other is their private life. Sometimes they're very similar, other times different. And in several instances, completely two-face.

Separating the art from the artist is a difficult road to navigate.

How can you separate the two when they're both tied to that person? Could you own a painting done by Hitler? How would you feel every time you saw it? Or what would you think of that person who owns and displays it?

I believe it depends on a few things; the crime the artist committed, either illegally, immorally or unethically; how severe it was; how different their art ? whatever type ? is from them as a person; their overall type of art/entertainment; and how close they are or visibly related to their work.

Depending on the incident definitely changes or impacts your views. Someone famous and charismatic like Will Smith. After the slapping incident at the Academy Awards, does it overshadow everything he did up to that point? Including the movie that won him Best Actor shortly after? And do we disregard every new work he'll do going forward?

I believe that's something easier to move on and separate. What he did isn't at all related to his acting career, though still wrong.

Or J.K. Rowling, and her views on transgender people and trans rights. The author of the Harry Potter franchise, one of the most successful, acclaimed, and popular novels/movies of this century. Do we burn every copy of those books? Destroy every DVD? Tear down the park attractions? This falls more under immoral than illegal, so maybe for some it's easier to look at Harry Potter and not see Rowling.

A big circumstance is whether or not the art played a major role in the actions of the artist. If Hitler's views influenced him to paint gas chambers, ghettos, and destroyed cities, that would be impossible to separate because of what the painting is and represents.

A serious one is Kanye West. More recently, saying he likes Nazis, praising Hitler, and various forms of Holocaust denial and antisemitic views, have landed him in huge controversy. He's no stranger to controversy, but this time, it's different. Losing many sponsors and partnerships, it's a lot harder to separate him from his work because of how extreme and unethical of a person he is. It's not a personal matter between him and someone, like with Will Smith, but rather against an entire religion and its people.

Listening to his music isn't saying you're content with what he said, unless what attracted you to his music are his views. If he starts singing songs about killing Jews, about Nazis, then it's impossible to separate the two because of the work falling in line with him as a person.

Do the artist's actions speak more than their work? Again, that depends on the factors I mentioned.

Take Phil Spector, a hugely innovative music producer who created the Wall of Sound and became a major influence for many artists, including ABBA, The Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, and The Beach Boys. But his reputation is ruined for his murder of Lana Clarkson in 2003. In this case, it's easier to separate the art from the artist because it's not one single piece of work. His contributions, the Wall of Sound, and using the studio as an instrument transcends his conviction. What he did for music has nothing to do with the murder.

But art isn't always better than the artist.

I'd argue the two biggest of this debate are Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby.

Weinstein for being a producer and his company helping finance many films in Hollywood, getting tons of actors, actresses, and directors into the spotlight. His sexual abuse allegations and conviction, for some, have destroyed all that work. You might be able to separate the art from the artist in this case because his involvement in those films varied, and I'm sure for some, not at all. The heart and soul of those movies are the directors, writers, and actors.

A painter, author, or writer might not be as visible as an actor or singer because of their choice of medium, so you generally don't hear, see them as much, or know much about them.

For Cosby, it's for his public persona and The Cosby Show. His reputation as America's Dad was irreparably tarnished by his sexual abuse, assault, rape allegations, and eventual conviction. A man who was so revered, respected, and adored for the character he played was destroyed. This is a tough one to get around, as even Malcolm-Jamal Warner, one of the show's actors, stated the show's legacy is tarnished. Knowing everything about Cosby, it's a show very difficult to watch now, especially since other shows and actors have since been done similarly, but without any controversy.

And that's where it all comes down to, your personal views and attachment to that artist and their work.

I'm a massive fan of Tom Hanks. If something came out about him, it'd be difficult to watch all those movies of his. Or To Kill a Mockingbird. If the author, Harper Lee, was a proven racist, I'd feel lied to when reading the book. Or watching Gregory Peck as lawyer, Atticus Finch, because the actor and character are lined up in their morals.

You might not be a fan of those people, so if those were true, you'd probably find it easier to separate them than I would.

You can appreciate an artists' work and have a disdain for them as a person, and hold them accountable. It'll come down to personal decisions.

It might be impossible to separate the art from the artist. But their work lives on longer than them. The art can be more impactful than the artist. It's a shame when a terrible person creates something so incredible. It's something we'll have to live with.