The School of Nihilism
Module 3 – Appreciating Nihilism in Art

Nihilism and nihilistic themes occur in a variety of art, yet these concepts are often overlooked or misunderstood, and so this module in the School of Nihilism will help you appreciate nihilistic aspects beyond what may be evident from a purely superficial assessment. Presented here are several famous paintings along with questions and suggestions intended to expand your awareness of these themes and ideas.

George Grosz (1893-1959) was a German artist who worked primarily in the period between the World Wars. He often criticized the German social order he observed around him. Grosz often painted grotesque caricatures of social figures in an attempt to criticize or mock their perceived value, for instance the rich getting fat while others starved, the politicians in collusion with wealthy industrialists, and the foolishness of war-makers upheld as heroes after wrecking their country. Grosz contradicted the popular consensus in order to deliver a critical message.

Study George Grosz’s 1917 painting ‘Dedication to Oskar Panizza’, shown below. Look at the symbols and characters and consider how Grosz depicted the people, and physical structures, as well as the color and composition creating a sense of movement.
1. What general direction are all the people headed?

2. Does the situation appear stable, or about to collapse?
Diego Rivera (1886-1957) painted the huge mural ‘Man Controller of the Universe’ in Mexico City in 1934. Rivera depicted the enormous potential of human intelligence and technological development, but also warned that it could be misdirected and abused, leading to war and dictatorship.

3. Diego Rivera's mural was made during the Great Depression. Is the mural's presentation negative and pessimistic about the future, or optimistic in outlook?

Rene Magritte (1898-1967) was a famous Belgian painter of Surrealist artwork who challenged the viewer's perception, as well as their conception of what’s real and what’s illusion or mental image. For instance, ‘Treason of Images’ was a painting of a pipe along with the statement ‘This is not a pipe’. Take a look at his painting ‘Personal Values’ from 1952:
4. How does the title relate to the objects presented in the painting?

Winslow Homer was a maritime-themed painter who lived from 1836-1910. Study his 1899 painting ‘Gulf Stream’. It appears that a man on a ship with a broken mast is in a rather precarious situation.
To me this painting represent the necessity of struggle for human survival, often against very difficult odds, and the need to avoid panic in the face of grave danger!

5. Look carefully at the horizon. How many possible future outcomes does it portend? What does this suggest the main character should do?

Extra: Art can be a fascinating and entertaining vehicle for conveying human emotion and ideas. For more nihilistic artwork visit the Beyond Recognition Art and Nihilism page (http://www.counterorder.com/art.html) at The CounterOrder. Pick one of your favorite pieces of artwork and consider aspects that you think are nihilistic, then search online or visit your local library to find more from the same artist. Try the Art Cyclopedia: http://www.artcyclopedia.com/index.html.
Was the nihilism intentional or incidental? What motivated the artist to produce what they did?

Click here to read the answers: http://www.counterorder.com/school/3_art_answers.pdf