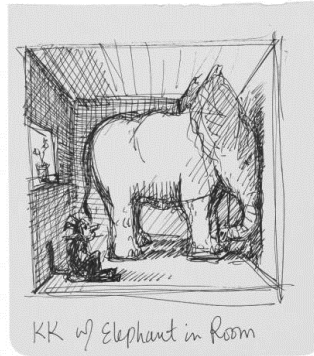
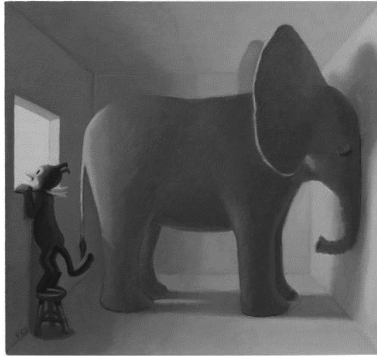


Elephant in the Room

Brandi Welch



Not just a common phrase, *Elephant in the Room* is also a captivating piece of art. I had the pleasure of seeing *Elephant in the Room II*, 2020, by Vonn Cummings Sumner at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art. The piece is oil on canvas over panel, with its size being 15 x 16 in. (38.1 x 40.6 cm). This piece conveys how we all, as people, have “elephants” in our rooms of life. The “elephant” refers to something we can choose to ignore or face regarding the sanctity of our own sanity. In this paper, I will breakdown this meaning by discussing the background of the piece and its message while also describing the artistic elements used.

To start, it is necessary to discuss the artist Vonn Cummings Sumner. Sumner was the son of a picture framer and teacher, and he grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. Traveling to different countries and seeing the art his father framed helped shape Sumner’s visual aesthetic during his formative years. He attended the University of California, Davis, earning both a bachelor’s degree and an M.F.A. in painting with highest honors.

In order to break down this piece of art, we will begin with some history about the character, Krazy, that you see in the artwork along with the elephant. The figure is a 2020 version of Krazy Kat, the protagonist of the comic created by George Herriman in the early 20th century that is beloved by many artists, including Philip Guston and Jess. Wayne Thiebaud has passed along his love of Krazy Kat over the years to his students, including Sumner. As Grace Munakata recounts in a video interview, Thiebaud compared Herriman to Francisco Goya (1746–1828), emphasizing the importance of Herriman’s work and elevating him and his genre — comics — to a status usually accorded only to the great painters of art history. (Vonn Cummings Sumner, 2021b)

Sumner’s version of Krazy is not a replication of the comic strip. Rather, his version is gender-fluid and explores his own identity.

To break this piece down, let’s begin with what is happening—specifically with the two characters Krazy and the Elephant. Krazy, looking out the window, has a sense of innocence about him. You can interpret this from the gleam of the light and

what appears to be a smile across his face. Using the color white, when his body is more grayscale, brings out that element. Along with the smile, he stands on his toes on a stool like most children do when they are too short to see or reach high things. Sumner, using different lines to produce dimension and shape, creates the appearance of a window in this two-dimensional painting. Krazy is looking out the window, and although it seems like nothing is out there, it appears as though it is bright outside. A contrast of light with darkness is created beautifully with shading. "Shading is a technique that allows for depth and character to be added to an illustration. In drawing it shows the levels of darkness by placing darker shades to show shadows and less dense shades to highlight lighter areas." (The Power Of Shading - How To Bring Illustrations To Life, n.d.). On the side of the piece where the window is, it is shaded deeper and darker because, realistically, the light from a window wouldn't hit those walls. As you look towards the right side, it gets brighter where the window would hit, and a shadow was even created for the Elephant.

The Elephant is quite the opposite of Krazy, specifically in size and aura. At first glance, you can see how the Elephant is quite literally the Elephant in the room. When you think of the common phrase, the Elephant is usually a symbol for a sizeable issue that everyone can feel but chooses to ignore because the conversation or confronting it makes them uncomfortable. In this piece, the Elephant is taking up most of the space in the room. Although you would think it quite noticeable, a naïve Krazy goes unphased. In contrast to the happiness Krazy feels, the Elephant is quite somber. "Lines are used to create shape, pattern, texture, space, movement and optical illusion in design. The use of lines allows artist to demonstrate delicacy or force." (Ontavilla, 2021) With the Elephant's head against the wall, the use of lines creates the illusion of closed eyes that look sad. Overall, the piece also has a dull-like texture. "Texture is the perceived surface quality of a work of art. It is an element of two-dimensional and three-dimensional designs and is distinguished by its perceived visual and physical properties." (Wikipedia contributors, 2021) In this piece, the texture not only displays the dimension, but the gray dullness gives a similar feeling to a prison cell symbolizing being trapped with your "elephant".

A similar piece that gives the contrast between two elements is *Elephant in the Room* by Mark Bryan. In his piece, he illustrates a similar scenario. One where an elephant, taking up the majority of the space, looks sorrowful. Meanwhile, there are two women, who look unphased and enjoying their lives, being this piece's version of "Krazy".



Although aesthetically different, the messages of both pieces have quite similar meanings. The situation being displayed is a symbol for what we as people struggle with every day. You can interpret it as the everyday person being Krazy, going through life trying to look for the brighter things ahead. On the other hand, the Elephant can be the issues, both internally and externally that we face on a daily basis. We encounter many elephants in this room we call life. This is where we must make the choice to confront the issue or live in ignorant bliss at the cost of our own sanity.

What is the elephant in your room?

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