My comparative study analyses and compares the three compositions: ‘Black Pop’ (2009) by Russ Mills, ‘Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X,’ (1935) by Francis Bacon, and ‘Untitled’ (2012) by Kwang Ho Shin. The compositions differ culturally, aesthetically, while harbouring the same theme of conflict and identity,
Applying McFee’s Conceptual Framework to Russ Mills

**Audience**
The image has been used many times for record covers and posters, such as ENDUSER. Many around the globe have translated the artwork into tattoos. Mills’ compositions are highly praised and commonly described as emotive, expressive, and hypnotic. Some have even labelled them as beautiful, twisted, and jagged ("Russ Mills." Beehance).

**Artist**
When I asked Russ Mills, via email, the significance behind his composition, he replied with “I like to intersperse darker, more sinister pieces from time to time to offset my other images that are usually quite upbeat” (Mills). He said that the piece ‘Black Pop’ was “a play on words as the image represents the Black Pope and the hidden, more unpleasant side of the Vatican” (Mills).

**Artist’s Background**
67 Year old, British contemporary artist and Illustrator, Russ Mills, has a BA in Graphic Art and Design, specialising in Experimental Film and Animation. His current work “dwells in a netherworld between urban fine art and contemporary graphics”. It is a fusion of real and digital media which is primarily illustration based with a firm foundation in drawing. Many of his works are in response to his battle with anxiety and alcoholism, and concept of fear and isolation are motifs. There was a period in Mills life when art was his way of “staying sane”. “The rabid addiction” as the artist describes had taken over his life. Mills attempts to “tackle the isolation” by “channeling that negative energy into something useful that others may find engaging”.

Van Gogh, Picasso, Pollock, and Basquiat have been some of some of Mills’ influences.

**Audience’s World**
The the composition was directly in response to hidden, more unpleasant side of the Vatican such as the Vatican Bank scandal. In 2009, when ‘Black Pop’ was composed, the Vatican said it would spend $660 million on new solar plant, largest in Europe, on 740 acres of land north of Rome. The Vatican also reported its third straight annual financial loss (worldatlas.com).

**Figure 1:**
Russ Mills
Black Pop, 2009
Ink, Pen, Photoshop
Although a majority of Russ Mills artworks are usually quite upbeat and make use of vibrant colours. In 'Black Pop', Mills uses low saturated and dark value colours, making the figure in the image seem passive. The use of dark colours mirrors the darker, more unpleasant side of the Vatican, giving the piece a sinister tone. There is however a splurge of red paint covering the left eye, which further extends the idea of corruption and lives lost in conflict. The stronger and darker coloured strokes are found towards the bottom of the portrait and slowly creep up towards to cover the face. Thus illustrating a sense of being slowly consumed by darkness.

A sombre tone is established through the use of a dark palette, however the use of bleach, bright colours conveys a sense of desolation and futility. The contrast between white and black used to paint the figure, creates depth and thus makes the image look three-dimensional.

It seems as if the source of light is coming from within the man. Mills uses white colours to paint the face. On one hand, the bleached effect may connote the concept of being washed out and empty or the last ray of hope. On the other hand the darker colours used to cover the illuminated face may symbolise ultimate corruption. The juxtaposition of light and dark links to Mills desire to portray the concept of corruption.

Using the rule of thirds the eye is initially drawn from the chaotic strokes of red and black to the vacuous expression seen in the eye of the man. The chaotic nature of the strokes used on the portrait contrasts with the vacant look in the eye of the man, which could perhaps represent a passivity or acceptance of corruption.
Applying McFee’s Conceptual Framework to Francis Bacon

Audience

The composition was received with “outrage and recognition” (Sinclair, 112) as it was inevitably seen as blasphemous against the Catholic Church. It was created when automatism, abstraction, and non-objectivity were favoured forms of painting.

Audience’s World

- British King George & Queen Mary celebrate silver jubilee
- “Italian premier Benito Mussolini and French foreign minister Pierre Laval conclude agreement in which each power undertakes not to oppose the other’s colonial claims” (thepeoplehistory.com)

Artist

Diego Velázquez was one of Bacon’s greatest influences. Despite never actually seeing the Portrait of Pope Innocent X in person, Bacon created over 45 variations of Velázquez’s painting. He stated that he had nothing against the popes and “wanted an excuse to use these colours”, as “you can’t give ordinary clothes that purple colour without getting into a sort of false fauve manner. “

Artist’s Background

- Irish-born, British figurative painter Francis Bacon emerged into major public recognition after the end of the Second World War
- He worked through movements such as Expressionism, Surrealism, and Cubism.
- Bacon was most influenced by Edvard Munch, Diego Velázquez, and T. S. Eliot
- Due to severe asthma, Bacon never received formal education
- Although Bacon misled people about his working process and suppressed information about the sources of his work, he is one of the most internationally celebrated artists of his time and most recognised for his raw, controversial compositions.
- Bacon’s alcohol addiction is one of the reasons his anecdotes require skepticism
Francis Bacon – analysis of formal elements

**Composition**

The eerie painting *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, is of a screaming pope on a golden throne with golden tassels hanging in front of it. The vertical lines that give the effect of a transparent curtain almost silence the Pope's scream. The Pope's headpiece has almost disappeared and his face is slowly fading. Thus perhaps representing the corruption in religion and authority. It is a distorted rendition of the *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* by Diego Velazquez, one of Bacon's greatest influences.

**Strokes / Lines / Shape / Texture**

The faint, broken vertical lines almost give the effect of pouring rain or burning fire which further links to the theme of despair. There is a contrast between the quick, sweeping strokes from under the throne and in the background with the more intricate, fluent strokes to paint the pope. This may portray the complicated nature of law and authority as compared to faith. Broad strokes vertical strokes begin to curve at the bottom of the painting towards the viewer. The composition is two dimensional and smooth. Yet the intricate details of the Pope's jacket and face makes the figure look three dimensional. Bacon used large paintbrushes, his hands, rags, and other materials to spread the paint on the unprimed canvas.

**Colour / Tone / Light**

A sombre and grotesque tone was expressed through the dark colours of the background. The darker colours used to illustrate the Pope and the background are juxtaposed with the bright, warm colours of the throne which may portray a sense of corruption in organised religion and not true faith. Conventionally the colour rich purple connotes royalty, however in this artwork Bacon used a faded purple which may symbolise the slow disintegration of authority. There's a conflict between light and dark in this work. Darker colours have been used in the background whereas the bright colours such as gold and white have been used to paint the pope's uniform and the throne. There is artificial light that seems to be coming from the Pope's uniform. This may also symbolise the brighter side to religion and faith.

**Form and Space**

Due to the unfinished lines and the image of the Pope being cut off at the knees gives the impression of the figure floating, making the painting surreal.

**Feeling**

The shocking expression of the scream, almost a howl, unnerves the audience. The piece also evokes sympathy as it looks as if the Pope's screams are being silenced by heavy drapes. Thus making it more disturbing.
The grotesque visuals of a screaming pope creates is unnerving. To me, the piece is a commentary on the corruption of the church and Nietzsche’s declaration that “God is Dead” (Peppiatt 140). The use of dark colours and grotesque visuals to represent something holy, can be considered a direct statement about the corruption in authorial figures and organised religion.

Although Bacon denied any comments about his piece to be blasphemous, he said that the artwork was a homage to the original work by Velazquez fused with emotions from his “nervous system” (Farr 8; Abrams 8).

Bacon stated that his work was “an attempt to make a certain type of feeling visual. The feeling his own fear of mortality and rage against authority. Painting is the pattern of one’s own nervous system being projected on the canvas.” (“Francis Bacon: His Life and Violent Times” 111).

In reference to howl, Bacon said that he “wanted to paint the scream more than the horror. I’ve always been very moved the by movements of the mouth and the shape of the mouth and teeth. People say that these have all sorts of sexual implications... I like, you may say, the flitter and colours that comes from the mouth, and I’ve always hoped in a sense to be able to paint the mouth like Monet painted a sunset.” (elusiv.com)

The Protestant Catholic conflict in Ireland has had a significant effect on citizens of the country. Although Bacon’s composition isn’t a direct comment on the conflict, culturally, his Irish background may have influenced the painting. (bbc.com)
Kwang Ho Shin

Artist
Shin's works primarily explore and focus on peoples' emotions, which are expressed using large brush strokes and wildly moving colours.

Kwang Ho Shin
Untitled, 2012
Acrylic on Paper
69.5x42 cm

Artist's Background
- Born in 1983, South Korean artist Kwang Ho Shin is based in Seoul
- Period: Abstract expressionism
- Studied Fine Art at Keimyung University
- His works are usually large scale (over 6ft tall)
- Mainly works with acrylic, oil, and charcoal

Composition
The artwork is an abstract portrait, using acrylic on paper, of a person screaming. The man is incredibly distorted and looks like its melting, perhaps illustrating exasperation, fear, or agony, which KwangHo Shin battles with frequently. The neck, the face, and the torso almost blend into each other. The facial features are not clearly defined yet through the use of lines and curved strokes, the viewer gets a sense of the facial features. There are empty spaces in the face created by the lack of pain.

Strokes / Lines / Shape / Texture
There are short brush strokes towards the bottom of the page. The more free flowing lines are used to distort the face. The scream is painted with a quick short brushstroke to create a vertical line. The clear short brush strokes may represent a sense of clarity whereas the free flowing lines may illustrate chaos and irrationality. The juxtaposition between these lines creates a sense of internal conflict. There are no shadows of the man which makes the image 2D, yet the contrast between dark and light colours makes the image have a three dimensional shape.

Feeling
The combined image of a scream and the conflicting colours creates a depressing and disturbing mood. This expressive composition evokes sympathy for the distorted man, and more so the artist.

Colour / Tone / Light
The composition has a very dark concept contrasted with bright colours. The colours white, black, shades of red and green are used in this composition. Conventionally in Western Culture the colour white symbolises innocence and purity whereas the colour black is grim and symbolises death. These two are the antithesis of each other, as are the complementary colours of green an red which creates a dynamic and intense atmosphere. Green usually connotes serenity whereas red usually symbolises anger, war, or love. The conflict between these colours creates an unbalanced mood. The red is fluid and pigmented to look like blood which could relate to the agony and pain felt by the man in the artwork. The artist uses beige and peach for the skin tone.

Form and Space
The short lines at the bottom of the page make the man look like a statue head or like he's floating.
Contextualising and evaluating cultural significance of artwork

Cultural links

Shin’s use of thin dripping paint and swift brushstrokes can be associated with the East Asian art of calligraphy that uses ink. Having a Korean background, Shin may have been exposed to such form of art. Furthermore, Shin uses the concept of keeping a white background like in traditional ink paintings to allow sole focus on the figure. In addition, he uses bold colours such as red and green which also conform to Korean contemporary art styles.

‘Saving Face’ is a core social value in Asian cultures. “Saving Face signifies a desire -- or defines a strategy -- to avoid humiliation or embarrassment, to maintain dignity or preserve reputation” (Brill). Shin’s artwork does not conform to this social value, and instead portrays a very emotive portrait. However it can be argued that although the composition is very expressive, the face cannot be seen. This can be considered a paradox in itself.

Traditional Korean Art

Traditional Korean art often includes calligraphy, painting, and pottery, using bold colours. Ink painting was particularly popular during the 1960s. Korean contemporary art places importance on heavy brushstrokes, and use both Western and traditional painting styles.

Colour Symbolism in Korea

Traditionally in Korea, “blue symbolises creativity, immortality and hope; white symbolises chastity, truth, innocence and death; red symbolises the sun, fire, production, creation, passion and love; black symbolises existence” (Colour Preferences for Traditional Korean Colour 9). Shin predominantly uses green, red, black, and white.
Emotion is clearer and is established through the scream.

Corruption in the Vatican

Both titles address the Pope

Screaming pope on a golden throne

Full body

Screaming head

Pink

Vertical lines

Oil on canvas

Corruption in the Vatican

Both titles address the Pope

Screaming pope on a golden throne

Full body

Screaming head

Emotion is clearer and is established through the scream.

Blank bleach white background

Use of green and red

Acrylic

Light background

Internal conflict

Head shot portrait

Beige colours

Distorted face

Painting

Corruption, emotions, politics.

Simple and plain background

Juxtaposition of jagged and straight lines

Expressionist

Theme of despair

Evokes sympathy

Makes eye contact with the audience.

Vacant expression

One eye visible

Dark colour palette. Grayscale.

Dark contrasted with brighter colours

Sombre face

Unfinished towards the bottom of the painting

One eye visible

Untitled, 2012
Kwang Ho Shin

‘Black Pop’, 2009
Russ Mills

‘Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X’, 1935
Francis Bacon
Comparing the three artworks

Although the paintings come from different cultures, they all explore the themes of despair, corruption, conflict, especially emotional conflict. The juxtaposition of jagged lines and straight lines were perhaps used to portray conflict and confusion. The symbolism could be universal. Furthermore the use of emotive portraiture and distorted faces re-encapsulate darker themes. Bacon stated “painting is the pattern of one’s own nervous system being projected on the canvas.” This could be possibly because we as humanity all face some form of conflict or corruption.

Mills and Bacon

Although Mills and Bacon are from different time periods, their works comment on darker side of the Vatican. Both the titles refer to the Pope. Both Mills and Bacon come from the same British background. With this in mind, although Mills was not particularly influenced by Bacon, the similarity between the significance of their work might show the role that culture plays on art. The fact that both the artists decided to comment on the same political issue could be argued as a coincident or not.

Shin and Mills

Both works by Shin and Mills make use of a simple light toned background which draws attention to the head portrait, whereas Bacon is a full body portrait. By using a simple background, it draws attention to the head and the internal conflict represented, whereas Bacon makes use of a full body portrait to draw attention to the man as a figure of authority and comments on the city that he represents.

Bacon and Shin

The most prevalent similarity between Bacon’s work and Shin’s work is the screaming head. The use of a screaming head has been used in other famous works such as ‘The Scream’. The expression has universal connotations of being in pain and agony. Everyone has experienced such dark emotions at some point in their lives which makes these compositions more relatable in all cultures.

All the paintings use a simple background, with the exception of Bacon’s piece which can be argued to have a striped background. Although the colours of the background are different, for example Mills uses a dusty grey whereas The simple and plain backgrounds in all the paintings allow the viewer to focus on the main subject in the foreground.
Significance of Russ Mills’ *Black Pop (2009)* to my own work

Russ Mills  
*Black Pop, 2009*  
*Ink, Pen, Photoshop*

My own work  
*Fine Art*  
*Ink, Pencil, Charcoal, Wax, Chalk*

My own work  
*Fine Art*  
*Ink, Pencil, Charcoal, Wax, Chalk*

My own work  
*Digital manipulation*  
*Photoshop*
Significance of Russ Mills’ ‘Black Pop’ (2009) to my own work

In ‘Black Pop’, Mills uses low saturated and dark value colours, making the figure in the image seem passive. I used dark colours mirrors the darker, more unpleasant side of the Vatican, giving the piece a sinister tone. The stronger and darker coloured strokes are found towards the bottom of the portrait and slowly creep up towards to cover the face. Thus illustrating a sense of being slowly consumed by darkness.

**Evaluation**

Since I did not like my outcomes, I decided to take another approach, and use another one of Mills technique. I decided to digitally manipulate a photo yet use the same grim colours Mills uses in ‘Black Pop’.

**Burned hole and wax**

I used a pen tool to burn holes into the canvas. I intended to use these gaping holes to portray the empty feeling that comes with depression and anxiety. Although Mills didn’t use it, I used dripping wax to illustrate a corrupted image. Moreover, it can be a metaphor for negative feelings corroding one’s hope and positivity.

**Strokes / Lines / Shape / Texture**

Much like Russ Mills, I used broad and large brushstrokes creating a dynamic look. The juxtaposition of jagged and sharp lines with softer, more free flowing lines illustrates and re-encapsulates the concept of conflict. The uneven texture created by the wax abides to the concept of

**Process**

Much like Russ Mills, I used broad and large brushstrokes creating a dynamic look. The juxtaposition of jagged and sharp lines with softer, more free flowing lines illustrates and re-encapsulates the concept of conflict. Moreover, I also used charcoal and ink to achieve those

**Thematic Influence**

- Identity
- Internal conflict
- Anxiety
- Isolation
**Significance of Russ Mills’ ‘Black Pop’ 2009) to my own work**

**Links to Russ Mills Work**

Mills’ technique of digital manipulation and influenced my piece, as I used photoshop to add the smoke and fire. I tried to mimic Mills’ dynamic brush strokes by adding paint smudges on the body.

**Smoke**

Although the smoke is black, it has quite a slow and calming effect to it rather than a harsh one. It makes me feel as if the flames have just died out but the coal is still hot, and the smoke is rising - like the aftermath of a disaster (panic attack in this case). I went in and changed the opacity of the smoke and tried erasing some of the smoke which added the softness to the composition.

**Fire**

I initially tried to make it look as if my head was on fire, however this was very difficult as the fire was very small. Instead I placed the pictures of flames on the figure, which made it look like I was slowly burning on the inside - a self destructive, corrosive image.

**Colour**

I predominantly used dark colours to represent the grim reality of mental health problems. A white background was used to draw attention to the details of the smoke. The warmer red and orange tones illustrate the concept of despair and destruction.

**I’m Okay**

Digital photography, edited with photoshop

**Theme/Pose/**

The concept of internal conflict is echoed through the use of smoke and fire to create an allusion of burning out. The lack of emotion makes this a corrosive image, rather than a violent one. The black paint smeared over the body in a way that shows handprints on represent a feeling of being attacked. The dripping effect of the paint portrays the concept of being consumed by dark thoughts. The pose of closing and covering my eyes depicts the idea of feeling lost and scared better. This visual encapsulates the similar themes illustrated by Beethy.

**Thematic Influence**

- **Identity**
- **Internal conflict**
- **Anxiety**
- **Isolation**