



SAN FRANCISCO STUDIO SCHOOL
OF DRAWING, PAINTING, PHOTOGRAPHY AND MIXED MEDIA

What It Means To Be A Painter
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All artists face more or less the same issues, or choose not to face them. They are issues of meaning, of surface and depth, of engagement and avoidance, of passion, intellect, fear, knowledge and irreconcilableness. In terms of art, our interests here are specific and are in relation to the visual arts of painting and of drawing as an integral part of painting. The questions we confront are what painting is and what painting is to us. And these lead to further questions.

There are three viewers of painting, three distinct relationships to painting. One is that of the observer -- the critic, the historian, the curator, the theorist, the appreciative and discriminating onlooker. Another is that of the painter, he or she who paints and who for that reason may be capable of seeing and understanding paintings. (We will mention the third viewer of painting shortly.) There is of course a hierarchy implied in the two viewers we have defined so far. The first cannot exist without the second. Between them there is a vital and at times vibrant symbiotic relationship, for paintings are in large part meant to be seen. However the relationship of these two viewers brings into question what aspect or component of painting is intended for, or rather requires, an audience, and what aspect of painting may desire, wish for, or seek an audience, but nonetheless lies beyond one. To be sure a painting languishing unseen and unknown is not fulfilling its purpose in relation to its presence as a painting, however that physical presence is a separate one than its being brought into life through the actual process of painting. The painting will not exist to be viewed unless it is painted and, in its life, two intertwined but independent acts are involved, one of coming into existence, the other of existing.

These thoughts are directed to painters, to students of painting. And by distinguishing the act of painting from the painting, they bring up the matter of what it means to be a

painter. They suggest there is in being a painter a purpose separate, potentially entirely separate, from its art-world audience. We should probably expand on this to lay to rest the most obvious objections to it. Clearly paintings are to be seen and are made to be seen, and to suggest that a painter needs no, desires no, or imagines no audience seems illogical or cruel; it suggests a person can live without discourse, nourishment and some form of notice, even if it is negative. However at the same time, for the painter, isolation is necessary, and may be unavoidable in small and large ways, possibly for unending periods of time. It must be clear that the painter's goal is not to please an audience; the painter's goal is to find and express him or herself genuinely within the flow of painting over history. The actual and potential isolation we are discussing takes getting used to and requires understanding and a form of acceptance. It is the threshold for considering what it means to be a painter.

As a part of these considerations we sort through layers and levels of involvement -- vocation, occupation, avocation, pastime, diversion, or calling. The categories although incomplete are obvious and largely self-explanatory. If painting is a calling, if it is one's reason for being, those concepts eschew dependence on an audience in the most commonly accepted definition of the term and instead emphasize the process of creation; informed, insightful creation; a life process, perhaps ineffable, but undeniable. But we must inquire of ourselves to see whether undeniability is a fact, our fact. If it is, we find ourselves facing the mirror all artists of serious pursuit must look into, or choose not to look into. Undeniability is a complex matter because one can deny undeniability and in that case the only question is how long and how well and in what name. Perhaps it can be buried, however that is not our subject here. The mention of denial, the denial of what is true in us, is only to acknowledge its devious and sometimes personally convenient power.

We consider that painting is an intimate and isolated act, no matter what sense of community the artist as a person may seek, no matter what the conditions under which the painting is created, no matter what relationship the painter bears to the art world audience. Painting's impetus and history is in the private and aspiring life of the painter, evolved over time and realized through the act of painting. But if paintings are in large part are made to be seen, and the painter must work in isolation, we wonder where the painter finds the discourse so needed in that isolated act of painting throughout his or

her lifetime. Discourse is how we form our view of the world and obviously an interchange of ideas, thoughts and feelings occur as a part of the act of painting, but with whom? The answer is with the third viewer of painting, which is an audience comprised of all painters of all times; the informed and authentic audience accessible only to the painter in his or her most earnest need. They are all present. At times they are vocal and at times they are silent.

We have identified three separate viewers of painting, three separate audiences: An appreciative, interested audience of critics, curators, theorists and informed laypeople -- and we should include those who look kindly upon painting as a result of some indirect tie to it, a son or daughter, father, mother, spouse or friend. They may offer the painter the support he or she otherwise would live without. Vincent Van Gogh and his brother Theo are an example. A second audience is the painter; capable of knowing paintings deeply and essentially as no other person can know and understand them. And there is, thirdly, the audience of all painters of all time, who coexist with the painter as he or she lives painting. Thinking of this and assuming one does not turn away from the mirror, what does it mean to be a painter? Perhaps the answer is less than obvious even if it can be found in obvious places.

A painter has to paint. The act of painting is fundamental to painting and this qualifier is profoundly absolute. It says that a painter must have made time to paint and must continue to make time to paint, must make painting a physical activity, not simply a matter of thought, desire or wishful thinking. In terms of existence and identity, the painter is first of all a painter and he or she must paint to truly exist. He or she is a painter before race, religion or gender.

Then what constitutes painting, this most essential core of one's existence and one's life? A painter paints and through painting he or she spends his life through this act, that is, he or she exchanges time for value, with time equating to life and value equating meaning. The painter is in fact and in poetic truth transforming his or her life into painting. His vision is visual. His language is visual. The paintings may be temporal in their physicality but, as we know, in some works by some painters we find offered possibilities beyond time and, as painters, we seek the form of those possibilities, all without words.

Accepting the idea (and the principle) that the painter must paint, that he or she must paint with or without the encouragement of an art world audience, and that without painting his or her life is not truly lived, we have granted the basic physical and existential aspects of painting. We have also said that only the painter can truly see painting, and by that we mean those painters who have looked and cultivated and searched and breathed painting -- and who also undoubtedly had the charity of fortune to have been put in touch with the continuum of painting, who directly or indirectly have touched genius or touched the deep dedication that can nonetheless persevere without it.

We have said that a sensitive, erudite and sincere art-world audience may experience paintings as powerfully evocative objects representing and inculcating what a painter knows, or has striven to know, objects which may affect them and transport them beyond daily living, but still that audience cannot experience the knowing. The distinction we are making here is critical because it indicates a difference in kind of experience, not a difference in degree. It is critical because it challenges the painter to know what only he or she is capable of knowing. We have said that if we do not paint we are not living truly; and we in our most forthright, unified and vulnerable state have recognized that the painter paints in order to contribute to painting. As a painter one lives within the tradition of painting, aspires to it, attempts to enlarge it, despairs of serving it. However we have not talked about quality, the contribution we must strive to make.

The matter of quality in painting is as ambiguous as the attempt to precisely stipulate what painting is. However while the core of meaning for the painter resists definition, it encourages knowing. Toward the end of "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" by Robert M. Pirsig the following statement is made: "Any attempt to develop an organized reason around an undefined quality defeats its own purpose. The organization of the reason itself defeats the quality." This thought juxtaposes reason or intellect with something else -- perhaps sensing, but certainly knowing. Pirsig's statement is clear and reflects the dilemma of attempting to quantify art, aesthetics and expression just as it overlaps and indicates the transcendent experience associated with some painting. Pirsig allows us to consider that quality is not for the intellect to define. How then can we know quality?

Hans Hofmann said, "... quality, a pure human value, results from the faculty of empathy. The gift of discerning the mystery of each thing through its own intrinsic life... The life-giving zeal in a work of art is deeply imbedded in its qualitative substance." Both art and quality are human constructions. They are complex entities and represent a variable interweaving of physical, emotional, sensate and intellectual experience. In wanting to understand the significance of Pirsig's words we could link them to the thought presented by Hofmann. By doing so we can approach quality as the conceptual incarnation of essence, a metaphysical presence that does not contain a reference to value. Quality must be felt, not thought. In other words, we do not refer to quality in terms of good or bad, or some other hierarchical scale of evaluation any more than we define a single tonal value in terms of good or bad. We refer to quality as the embodiment of essence. And it is we as humans that represent values or value judgments. It is this position that allows us to understand how there can be different depths of appreciation, of savoring, and different levels of sophistication in the appreciation of art according to the viewer. At the same time, this understanding allows the essence of painting to remain constant, even though indefinable. We are able to respond to quality in painting even as its form apparently changes over time. We are able to do so because of how we see and how we respond to visual meaning.

But how do we as painters, working at times in required isolation and at others in forced isolation, accompanied by the painters of the ages, helpless in face of our need to paint, earnest in our desire to know, find our way past the discipline and education to which we are committed -- nourishing intellectual rigor and emotional vulnerability through priorities, demands and vicissitudes toward authentic expressions of our existence as painters. How do we make genuine contributions to painting, even if unseen? This question asks us how we find ourselves and how we exist within the tradition of painting; how we bring to painting something authentic and incremental born of one human life, passionate and in its imperfection nonetheless true.

It is through the process of the search for formation and assertion of our subjective belief and its concomitant testing through profound doubt that we are able to come to some degree of assurance regarding our work and its pursuit. In doubt lives our honesty. Over a lifetime of testing our thoughts, conclusions and actions, the painter through constant

assessing, valuing and revaluing his or her conclusions may achieve a degree of objective surety, an authenticity of action and meaning, even in the midst of doubt.

If we were to speculate on where our tentative surety might originate, it could very well be that this conditional objectivity is not found in fact. The poet Wallace Stevens said, "...The chief problems of any artist, as of any man, are the problems of the normal and that he needs, in order to solve them, everything the imagination has to give." It may be that the imagination so firmly forms the truth of being human, or is capable of doing so, that we should look to it to better understand the fact of being a painter. In the poem *Angel Surrounded by Paysans* Wallace Stevens says of the imagination:

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again

There is an opposition at work in this couplet. One element is fact and another is truth -- and this leads us to the final and practical conclusion of these thoughts, which take the form of an improvisation on Stevens's couplet and is respectfully interpretive. See the necessary angel as our imagination, what we as humans bring to the fact all around us, what we bring to the dispassionate nature of the earth and the air, what we bring to neutrality, to objectivity, to noumenon in indispensable favor of phenomenon. If as Stevens says, "we see the earth again," what would that earth be prior to our seeing it again except for all that is without the coloring our imagination or the values, aspiring and meaning with which the imagination imbues our lives?

Imagine that paint, the pigments a painter uses, are of that dispassionate earth (as many are). Look at a painter's palette and see the paint, admittedly a human concoction, as raw material, inert substance set out in rows of dabs. And see on some palettes the whirls of paint mixtures, the different tonalities and hues that have influenced those dabs with the intent of life. Consider paint, palette, canvas, solvents and mediums as tools, the same sort of tools prehistoric man developed to affect and interact with his world. Think of them for a moment as static. These tools are nothing in themselves in terms of painting except as materials from which something further can be made. The possibilities they hold are within the painter. In these tools, pigments, brushes, canvas lie the bridge between the earth of fact and the world of painting.

In his introduction to “Fairfield Porter, Art in Its Own Terms,” the painter Rackstraw Downes says of Porter:

“He knew what artists are peculiarly equipped to know because they experience it every day in the studio; That is, no matter how skillfully and knowledgeably they organize what in literary criticism are called the Aristotelian elements of a work – in paintings those would be composition, imagery, color, space, drawing and brushwork – a picture will not necessarily catch fire, come alive.” It is possible to read into Downes’ statement what it means to be a painter. It mentions knowing, commitment, skill, experience, labor and magic. We hear confirmed by Downes that we have tools and we have principles regarding painting at our disposal and we still find the issue of quality, “a pure human value,” elusive. However if we live fully through painting, we will know, not define, quality in painting.

If we see the elements Downes refers to as metaphysical elements rather than physical components, painting will be able to know us. Composition may ask us about the ideal of the living whole, balanced between chaos and harmony. Imagery may call on our recall of likeness, and at times, rarely, recognize us by presenting an emotional state quite literally without reference to things per se. Color invades us sensually, rebelling against intellect, demanding to be either put carefully in its place or be allowed to make its own way. Space may favor recollection or invention, but all painting is made up only of contiguous spaces; how we create them determines how we live in the painting and how it lives around us. Drawing is a spatial and psychological structure created through visual forces and metaphor; it is a matter of searching, insight, fixing position in space, and the form of that position. Brushwork is the entirely constructive touch of the painter, conveying his or her being through action, transforming fact to potential and potential to fact. And there is another element implied but nonetheless unmentioned, and that element is the painter, balanced somewhere, bordering on seeing the earth, or seeing the earth again.