

Where It Comes From

You can learn to paint from books like you can learn to swim on a sofa.
—From a book on materials for the artist.

After years of accepting the development of new work as “natural”, I became interested in how and where and why sources and impetus for the new directions came from. New work didn’t arise out of thin air, but usually from contact with ideas of others, or going to the natural world. Musician Charles Mingus has said, “You can’t improvise from nothing.”

A poem, sculpture, or text usually “arrives” as a semi-formed “pressure”, an energy that begins to infer a subject-direction, along with an impetus to finally “open the box” and see what the umbilical connected murmuring, the “scratching at the door of consciousness” has for a shape. I remember Henry Moore saying he believed that his work began life as a seed in the unconscious, there “marinating” and accruing force and direction until it gained sufficient “mass” to break-out into his conscious mind with enough insistence, enough worthwhile-ness to be taken-up and refined.

In the 1960’s, a researcher found that brain signals indicating an act of decision could be detected several hundred milliseconds before there was any conscious awareness of it. Thoughts are combinations of sensations and memories—or movements that haven’t happened, yet.

Then begins the work of finding the forms and their relationships, hoping that—this time—the idea will lead to a potential depth of significant meaning. At this point, with short-term memory active, the emerging impetus is fugitive, and by necessity must be fixed at least in sketch. Idea directions appearing before sleep and *not* noted down are apt to have flown, as the “mind’s slate” is wiped clean before the dawn.

A T’ang Chinese wrote, “*We see only what we look for; we look for only what we know.*” And Conan Doyle believed, “*We see, but we don’t observe.*” [Which calls to mind Yogi Berra’s comment, “*You can observe a lot just by looking.*”]

Current science says we have a strong biological tendency to discover and imitate *order*—to impose form. It takes time to be able to say—and believe it— that a little sculpture is a language with its own “mental grammar”, its own communication system. And here is the problem for people who assume that “art” should be understood by anyone, even those who have invested little to be familiar with art language.

To comprehend an art language demands the same sort of intellectual process that is required to understand Hebrew. The art viewer’s defensive, “I know what I like,” is rather meaningless and reveals a mind unwilling to confront new experience. Seldom is the maker present to help you figure out the intent of the artist, usually imperfectly conveyed.

That intent is often based in “crazy wisdom”—deliberately swimming against the common current of numbing compromise— attempting to celebrate what Joseph Campbell called “the rapture of being alive.”

For the artist, it often takes a long time, a “heapa livin’”, to arrive at feeling comfortable with self. Of the inventive college students I was close to during twenty-four teaching years, few had reached that plane. Now, at seventy-seven, I have begun to enjoy that state.

Garcia Lorca believed that “. . . *the imagination merely discovers things already created, it does not invent, and whenever it does so it is defeated by the beauty of reality. Sometimes imagination’s hunt is splendid, but the most beautiful birds and the brightest lights almost always get away. Imagination is poor, and the poetic imagination more so.*”

The exciting new concept, arriving at the busy depot of consciousness, the maker is impelled to begin the trials and errors, with false starts, and endless re-arrangements. The work is “figuring out” how the forms are to appear, and in what arrangement, often hinted at during gestation or initial envisioning, until a state worthy of “finish” and presentation. This often requires space—a “putting it in a drawer” detachment—to allow objectivity or simply newer relation-ships to appear.

[Someone observed that the artist is 90% *subjective*, and 10% *objective*.] The maker's esthetic, moral responsibility is the realization of form relationships as "complete," as "understood" as ability level allows.

"We can understand neither ourselves nor our world until we have fully understood what our language is— and what it might do." —Derek Bickerton. Neurophysiologists say, *Creativity—the high end of intelligence and consciousness—involves playing mental games that shape quality*—Karl Popper.

Small sketches, scale models of possibilities, permit alternatives prior to a full commitment to real-time, full scale solutions. They take only the time for mind to be aware, to be conscious of them, without manipulating materials.

Darwin became aware of "intelligent design" as he realized the organic development that gradually fit the organism to its environment [selective survival.] *Music is the effort we make to explain to ourselves how our brains work. We listen to Bach transfixed because this is listening to a human mind.* —Lewis Thomas, *The Medusa and the Snail*.

The ability to construct and manipulate inventive models of creative reality provides humans with a distinctive adaptive advantage. If an artist's model of reality conflicts with that of people around you—their reality being the secure one that they comfortably know—they will probably consider your introduced reality as being "wrong" or painful, not worthwhile. Some people simply may not want to know any new modes.

In those unwanted low periods, when new work is beyond any feeble urge to reach, and the energy to try is unavailable, it is difficult to acknowledge the wonder of awareness, the pulse of just being alive, that makes any new effort possible.

By seeking to organize forms in the dynamic world of awareness, we are, in effect, reinventing ourselves, by guessing at what might lie ahead. The turbulence of “dangerous innovation” makes for obvious hazards—or insecurity. Damn it! Not again?

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