

# EDITOR'S COMMENTS

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## *Why Make Art?*

Life is complicated, busy, challenging, difficult. In daily life there is enough seriousness going on that artmaking can seem like a trivial pursuit, a discretionary expenditure of time for the idle and the self-indulgent. But this is an oversimplification of what artmaking is really all about.

In this time of war and political strife, in the age of AIDS and global warming, I was recently challenged by a political activist to “get serious and get engaged” in the meaningful things of life. She proposed that my indulgence in artwork was somehow flitting away the valuable hours of my life when I could be doing something that made a difference. The structure of her criticism brought into focus the fact that so many people do not understand the role of art in the world. In a pragmatic society it's too easy to think of art as a game, or perhaps an entertainment. It is, or at least can be, so much more than that.

### ***Communication***

The fundamental reality of life is that *life is relationship* – relationships with our families, our friends, our communities,

our world, our history, our ethics and morals, our sense of destiny, and our place in the universe. Artmaking is an extension of this fundamental communication.

At its most simplistic, artmaking is communication with the viewers who will look at the fruits of our efforts. But in some regards this is the least important form of communication that takes place as a result of having made art. There is a certain egocentricity in craving an audience for one's art – an egocentricity that can be unhealthy if its primary motivation is limited to “look at me.” If the connection with viewers is based on a more healthy approach about sharing, I think an audience can be important. But, fundamentally, as so many of us have discovered and admitted long ago, having an audience for our work is the dessert of artmaking, not the primary motivation.

Of more importance to artmaking is our communication with artists from the past – our response to the universal questions of human existence that all artists throughout time have asked and answered in their artmaking. We pick up the thread of those who have gone before us and, in

our turn, add our responses to life and communicate these through our artwork to artists in the future. It's this relationship both backward and forward in time that makes artmaking important. It's not mere idle speculation; it is our fundamental response to life that connects us with every other human both in history and in the future. We may not be able to speak directly to those in different times, but we can communicate through our artwork in ways that make our responses alive.

And there is another form of communication that, I believe, is even more important than these – and that is the communication with our deeper self. It is human nature to think all day, every day, even in our dreams. The mind is a constantly running dialogue on life. But the constant chatter that fills in our normal waking consciousness is not our only self. The subconscious bubbles up in dreams. Our soul shows itself in our fundamental perceptions and assumptions about life. Every one of us is the accumulation of our years of learning and trained behavior that filter all of our perceptions and thoughts and reactions to all that parades before us in daily life. There is a deeper self in every one of us that lies behind the mask of our public face. Our deepest thoughts, our innermost feelings, our subconscious reactions may not be visible, may not be easily accessible, but they are a part of us nonetheless. Artmaking is one way to

communicate with this deepest self and see what it is that lies behind the curtain of our everyday existence. It is a spiritual pursuit; it is a personal pursuit; it is a meaningful pursuit for each and every one of us.

### *Limitations*

The moment we try to make art we confront in harsh realities our own limitations. Satisfaction in artmaking is both fleeting and a rare commodity. More frequently, the idealized artwork that we visualize in our mind's creative eye fails and suffers in the translation to molecules and reality. None of us are as talented as we would like to be. None of us are as creative as we would fantasize ourselves to be. The confrontations – the *battle* – is one of the greatest reasons to be an artist. It is humbling; it is motivating; in its frustration it is challenging. One of the great purposes of life is to try, as best we can, to exceed our own limitations. It is human nature to strive for that which we can reach. It is human nature to pursue that which cannot be done. As individuals we strive to do that which is beyond our capabilities. This is the heart of artmaking – especially. To play a composition on the piano that is beyond our fingers; to paint color or reality that is beyond pigment; to express in words that which cannot be spoken; to photograph that which cannot be seen – these are the fundamental wings on which art flies that makes our work

both inspiring and worthy of achievement. If it's easy, it's not quite art, which is why photography has often struggled to be accepted as a sophisticated and legitimate art form. It does appear to be so until one picks up the camera and tries to use it to express a personal statement. No one appreciates photography quite like another photographer because other photographers are best equipped to appreciate the achievement of a stunning photograph.

### *Perceptive magnification*

In the biological sense, our physical senses exist for only two purposes: fight or flight. We are constantly on the lookout for danger or opportunity. As human animals, our ability to scan the environment is far more important than our ability to see the environment in the artistic sense. And this is one of the great reasons to make art. So much of life is involved in scanning, quickly looking and assessing a situation for its danger or opportunity. But, artmaking is not like this at all. The artist doesn't scan; they look deeply. Watch a painter or someone drawing with pen and ink. Then look, and look again. They search for details and relationships. They look at the same area of the composition a hundred times until they see it precisely. It is this magnification in the perception of detail, in the perception of relationships, that differentiates normal consciousness from the seeing used in artmaking. Scanning looks for big

things; artmaking is minutia. Scanning is instantaneous; the seeing in artmaking is extended in time. By changing one's perceptive magnification in scale, in detail, in time, the world becomes a different place than the threat we live in on a daily basis. Artists soak up what is before them whereas everyday consciousness tends to bounce off of it. In everyday consciousness a stoplight is just red; in artistic consciousness that red is a variety of subtle reddish shades, shadows and highlights, and in it we see far more than a mere traffic commandment. It is a cliché in art to discuss the fascination of watching, for hours, a spider build its web. We've all done it. But this is a fundamentally different relationship to life than that of the gardener for whom the spider might merely be a pest. Audubon saw birds differently than most of us because he painted them. Weston saw his vegetables differently because he photographed them. It is far too common and erroneous an assumption that artists make art because they see the world differently. I think this is backwards: They see the world differently because they are artists. We can, too.

### *An Excuse*

Peer pressure is a powerful thing. Genetically, biologically, we are herd animals. There is safety in numbers and it's far easier to do what everyone else does. So, artmaking becomes one of the handiest excuses to break from the pack. An artist

can linger over a sunset for hours, with permission, because they're doing the important work of making art. Artmaking is a culturally acceptable form of stepping outside of time and normal comprehension. If you're a "normal person" to sit and intently watch the clouds come and go for hours at a time would seem to be an idle waste of time. But if you're an artist, you can employ the excuse that you are waiting to see how the clouds change and how the light affects the landscape differently. People will smile at you and grant you that permission. I remember once photographing a museum of Chinese culture and history in a small town in eastern Oregon where tourists could learn about the Chinese laborers of the nineteenth century. I found it fascinating and wanted to photograph there. By making my interests known, the museum director was more than willing to grant me full access behind the rope barriers to do as I pleased in the pursuit of art. I could stay, I could go, I could move things, I could change lights, because I was making artwork – and they were supportive. Being an artist has given me access to things, places, and people I would never have been able to explore had it not been for the excuse of artmaking.

### *Pursuit of perfection*

Everyday life tends to be a pragmatic exercise. It's been said that "enough is as good as a feast" – which is true in every-

day life, but not when you're an artist. In everyday affairs "good enough for government work" is good enough, but in artmaking there is a different standard. Artmaking pursues excellence in quality regardless of time, regardless of money, regardless of effort. It is one of the few things in life that we do with this total disregard for economy. This is one of the reasons why artmaking and commerce are such uncomfortable bedfellows. What is the value of the piece of artwork in the market? No matter the answer, it's not likely to be commensurate with the value of that artwork to the artist who made it. To the artist, artwork is not simply a commodity; it is a manifestation of the artist's best and highest efforts, their noblest accomplishment in life. It is the pursuit of quality that makes artmaking so addictive in a world in which pragmatism is the rule.

I wish I had said these things when I was told to "get serious." I'll admit that instead I fumbled and hesitated because I'd never really thought about it before. I'd never been asked *why* I make artwork, or thought how important artmaking is in our imperfect world. Now that I have thought about it a bit, a more logical question would be: How could we possibly go through life *not* making art?

