

On Judging One's Own Work

By M.E. "Mike" Bailey

There are emotional barriers to looking at one's own work and making a clear judgment about it. That is to say, to "Critique It."

In the process of painting, our mind must be in a constant state of evaluation and critique such that values, colors, textures, shapes, etc. are painted, assessed, adjusted and allowed to remain or be restated . . . or eliminated. In the end of the process, one must stand in front of their own work, step out of the painter's mentality (not easy to do!), then enter the consciousness of an art critic or judge.

As I have gotten to know many painters in my life, most fall for the "I like it" or "I don't like it" choice. Then, if they chose the latter, they are tortured as to why they don't like it and wish they did. Frequently, a friend or fellow painter is invited to share the misery.

As one progresses along in their learning about art and painting, they may be invited to submit a portfolio or to show their work or even enter a piece into some vast competitive stage where the world will (or won't) witness the work. This scares many painters out of their socks because they don't know how to judge their own work.

Notably, this subject of "how do I critique my own paintings?" never loses its relevance. It is a constantly asked question and one full of merit. The answer, I think, lies back in the painter's mindset, where the focus of one's

inquiries of a work lie in the elements and relationships (principles) of design. That is to say that the viewer must assess how well the artist handled such things as shape, color, value, contrast, harmony, repetition, variation, balance etc. Whether, or not the viewer is the painter of the work, this shift to assessment of the elements and relationships of design is highly necessary. Otherwise, our works would be judged only on the basis of personal taste. And that is completely reduced to "I like it / I don't like it." Unfortunately, neither of these two statements leads to anything concrete for the artist to use as grounds for improvement or manipulation of the painting. I say avoid these words wherever possible.

Robert Genn, a Canadian artist of note, publishes a blog twice a week and is diligent about insuring that his subscribers receive something twice weekly. The following letter was written by Robert and sent out some time ago. I thought enough of it to keep it and refer to it because he brings a few aspects into the idea of judging an art work that we should all keep in mind. Here's what he said:

"Yesterday my friend Joe Blodgett brought a big yellow print into the studio. It was sort of modern, with a large, undecipherable signature across the lower end. "What do you think of this?" he asked. "Interesting," I said, which is what I say when I don't know what to say. "Why don't you run it through those 'evaluation points' that you

use when you jury?" he suggested. I protested that my points were subject to modification--sometimes there's something major that upsets them. "Like, 'I like it,'" I said. "

"My evaluation points are compositional integrity, sound craftsmanship, color sensitivity, creative interest, design control, gestural momentum, artistic flair, expressive intensity, professional touch, surface quality, intellectual depth, visual distinction, technical challenge and artistic audacity. If you were to assign a maximum value of 10 to each of these fourteen points, an almost impossible top mark would be 140. Loosely speaking, a total of around 50 is often enough for an "in." My system doesn't favor realism over non-objective work, but in my jury duty hard-won realism often wins out with these points."

"Cruising the print and looking at it in different lights and over the afternoon, I was hard pressed to find points to hand out. It ended up with 30. While it had a sort of confident flair and a look of audacity, it was mostly what I call "basic." As a piece of print art--embellished or not--I saw it as unchallenging and average. Though bright in colour, it was dull in spirit. It suggested some sort of bare ambition--which has its appeal, but is often not enough in the big scheme of things. As a juried show-piece the print wouldn't make it. Mind you, some other juror--even using the same set of points--might have evaluated it differently. Joe phoned later and told me the print was the work of Dale Chihuly. "Chihuly's the internationally-known glass artist. That one is worth a couple of thousand--edition's almost sold out." I told him I

hadn't been aware that Chihuly made prints. "That's how ignorant you are," said Joe."

"Once again I had been victimized by my ignorance. Or was it innocence? I'll stick to my guns. Ambition and audacity are quite frequently mistaken for talent and value."

Later, someone asked him to define his fourteen points. Here is how he responded:

Thanks Leah. So many asked this question that I have to make myself clearer. Please keep in mind the limitations I mentioned in my letter. Please also keep in mind that these "fourteen points" are only my current ignorant prejudices and are subject to change without notice. Thankfully also, jurying outcomes can be further upset or overturned by other jurors who may have more valuable discernments or even powers of veto:

Compositional integrity. A composition that knows its edges, balances internally and "works" in the "big picture." The superior creative eye often simplifies and is not distracted by minor elements or extraneous detail.

Sound craftsmanship. No sloppy craftsmanship detected. Artist appears to be grounded in accepted means of application, order, and seems to have knowledge of media chemistry. Work looks like it is not liable to fall apart shortly.

Color sensitivity. Appears to have understanding of color choices—complementary, analogous, etc. Often

shows color paucity and attention to sophisticated grays. I hate to use the word "taste," but I will.

Creative interest. Subject is creatively different so that it attracts, leads and holds my attention to the artistic and creative elements within the work. I often become aware of a greater creative mind at work.

Design control. Artist appears to have an understanding of how the eye is managed and led by the design, flow and activation of a work—effectively 'seducing' me. I often have the feeling of a masterful eye managing mine.

Gestural momentum. Brushwork or line-work is often expressive and has bravura, bravado, courage and élan. It often shows variety of stroke and is generous in the "hand made" conveyance of visual energy.

Artistic flair. Artist does something beyond blind representation and/or just moving the materials around in some form of lazy play. Work has style and panache and captivates in its artistry. "Wow, that's artistic!"

Expressive intensity. All stops are pulled to enhance the central idea or general motif. It can be a "look," a mannerism or an illusion, but the intensity convinces me of the presence of a non-jaded, passionate, particular author.

Professional touch. Artist avoids amateur methodology and gives a direct, confident, seasoned look to the work. Some people seem to know what they're doing, others do not. Professionals often, but not always, tend to leave their strokes alone.

Surface quality. Up close and personal the surface is intriguing and a joy to cruise. This may be because of the texture, handling of pigment, or the complexity of surface abstraction, gradation, or other quality—anything that makes the surface fascinating.

Intellectual depth. Artist gives me something to think about. There is an enduring resource here—not just a pretty picture but a thoughtful metaphor or other device that has staying power without retreating to sentiment or kitsch.

Visual distinction. The art has a look of uniqueness, either with style, subject matter or handling. It looks different from what I've seen before, or if similar, arrests the eye with a unique feeling or look that denotes "character."

Technical challenge. Artist has chosen something that requires above average skills or technical ability. Not just something that anybody could do. I love to see artists challenge themselves, take the technical risk, and win.

Artistic audacity. Artist is "in your face" with some element that dazzles—skill, idea, technique, or some other in spades of the above mentioned points that makes me sit up and take notice.

Mr. Genn has something here. There is much to be said for all of his thoughts on this subject. I find these points combined with using the elements and principles of design some of the most well articulated ideas about judging a painting I have ever come across.

I hope you do, too!