

The Critical Choice

By M.E. "Mike" Bailey, NWS

Recently, in a conversation with an artist, who lives near the east coast, a point was posed about self censorship. She had read an article about what an artist filters out of their minds and their work in order to 'sell' or market their work. Obviously, this subject has been discussed before in thousands of different forums. Underlying this subject is the old business of worrying about whether or not someone will 'like' the work.

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On another level, we find, as painters, that we are frequently restrained by a deep belief system about what art "should" look like. For example, 'it should be beautiful.'

Even deeper are the habitual thoughts that arise in our consciousness about whether the painting will hang well in someone's home. In other words, 'would I put this in *my* house?'

Does anyone out there even bother to wonder if this might look good in a museum? Or, wonder if it will fit into a visual commentary about some disturbing social or political situation? Not that I want to confess that I favor any one of these, or not. But I am as

much victim of my own thinking habits as everyone else.

My dear wife is no exception. She can, with all the positive energy for which she is so famous, kill an idea or a painting. She might love it for all the wrong reasons . . . usually some habitual decorating 'sense' derived from years of evaluating how our home should look.

When standing at the easel, my early inclinations were to 'paint what I saw.' Also, my inclinations were to paint 'pretty pictures.' (Today, the word *picture* curls the hair on the back of my neck! . . . more about that later.) Now, when I paint, I am actually confronted with choices to make before I even put out a sketch. In a recent article for the web, I wrote about having purpose. This choice confrontation reaches to the level of judgment about my own self worth. Yes, you read it right. There still lingers the thought processes wondering if certain people will 'like' it.

This used to worry me a lot. In the developing years of learning technique and coming up with 'good' paintings, I was always seeking the approval of wife, mother, father, children, friends, neighbors and, most of all, painter friends. I also believed that if an artist *sold many paintings* that it was a measure of approval or affirmation.

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Then, one day, I was standing at my easel making another *pretty picture to sell* and the urge to crumple it and throw it against the wall came over me. I walked out of the studio and could not force myself to return for over a month. It may have been longer that that, now that I think about it. Eventually, I returned to complete the painting and begin another and another. Then, it hit me again. Months went by and my colleagues were asking why aren't you painting? I didn't know. But I did know this much: When I was experimenting and coming up with different ways to make color or texture or to get the paint on the surface, I was floating with excitement. I couldn't wait to talk about it!

What was happening? I had become bored with making *pretty pictures* and was excited about *creating something which connected with me on a new level!*

In another vein, I found that some of the most fun I was having with art was the process of making dozens of studies and sketches in my sketch book using just one subject. I had come to a place where the act of *creation* was the excitement. (Oh, what a drug it is!!!)

So, all of this is coming to a point about something very important. If you are a painter, it is about YOU. If you are not a painter or artist, this will help you understand artists and art on a much deeper level.

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Those who have had any art history in their lives have heard how the French art world treated the Impressionists in the late 1800's. In short, they were publicly chastised, ostracized, heckled, panned, criticized and shunned! Today, their work is revered as being masterworks. Huh? Why? Simply, the Impressionists were a group of artists who openly defied tradition in favor of attempting something new and different. They flaunted their opposition to "the rules." They were *creating something NEW*. Yes, their paintings were beautiful in the eyes of today's viewers, but back in their day, they were considered to be obscene!

Should one paint for the acceptable, traditional taste 'what will sell?'

So, here is the crux of the matter: Should one paint for the acceptable, traditional taste or should one paint for their own desires and create (or, at least, try !) something new and different outside of 'what will sell?'

I suppose the answer depends on one thing: Does personal growth matter? Should one be attempting to reach for higher levels of mastery? Should the painter (or sculptor or potter or musician or actor or poet or novelist or) be reaching for his or her own style and, most importantly, their own sense of pride in what they do?

One could look at this in a different way, too. If growth isn't important, then one will never leave from where one began.

Recently, I read this published statement by another artist, Donna Baspaly:

TRUST YOURSELF

One of the toughest hurdles is to believe in yourself enough to break your own trail. To be the final judge of your work and to trust yourself creatively is an accomplishment. Painting for the acceptance and approval of others comes at a high price. Ultimately, you will lose the power to determine your own sense of being. Look to yourself and trust in yourself.

Don't be afraid to venture away from the mainstream to find your way. I have noticed in my own life that some people want me to remain the same. I suppose there is some comfort in that, but if I listen to their advice, I will end up where I began. Only by taking risks can one develop as an artist.

Having enough confidence to trust yourself takes courage, but, ultimately you will be rewarded. The final word goes to Mary Cassatt, who said, "Acceptance by someone else's standards is worse than rejection."

These are strong words. They are especially strong when one considers that many artists today spend much time, money and effort trying to gain recognition (and acceptance) by the art societies or galleries, me included.

I would only ask (if you are a painter) for you to meditate on this for a little while. After all, isn't this approval by our peer groups, such as the big watercolor societies, just another form of the French Salon? Isn't this just another edition of abiding by traditions and accepted methods? Paint something bizarrely avant garde and submit it . . . see what happens. The chances are

extremely high that it will be rejected. Was it bad art? Was it good art?

It boils down to courage and patience. If the artist is finding excitement in creating new, different work and it is not being accepted, I say stay with it. Be patient. If it is seen enough, the public and the critics will, get used to it. It will become familiar, eventually. And that, really, is all the French Salon, our esteemed art galleries, critics and friends are looking for: comfort with the familiar. People don't like change. On the other hand, people who collect original art don't like knowing that they have just another copy of the usual. In fact, the art which draws the highest prices . . . yes, you can include the name of *those abstractionists like Pollock or Picasso or Rothko* is the most different . . . is the most "out there." . . . is the most 'unrealistic.'

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In the end, it comes down to this: It is about YOU accepting YOU. You make the choice: Someone else's standards, or yours?

Do you have the courage to choose?