

1<sup>st</sup> Lecture given at The National Academy of Fine art and Dartmouth College

Paul Weingarten

The Search for esthetic values by the evolving visual artist

Thank you all for coming and thank you for having me here. My talk today is about the search for esthetic values by the evolving visual artist. Great art, throughout all of human history, the creative process and the challenges that it entails is our heritage and the inspired masters are our family. They are the embodiment of the values and of the enormity of the challenge that comes with the quest to create meaningful works of art.

There is an abundance of talent in this world that goes unrecognized and unheeded. We are all individuals joined by a capability and need to express who we are. Art fills that need. Teaching is meaningful when it enhances each person's skills and aids in the exploration of each person's individuality. Teaching evolving artists should help in the development of their unique gifts and their understanding of the values historically associated with fine art. Teaching should inspire the enthusiasm, commitment and confidence necessary for great work. In the class that I will be conducting in the fall, we will analyze the craft of the masters in relationship to their expressive content because craft without expression, no matter how well done, is just an empty container.

The road to art is filled with contradictions. But it is also a road to revelation. That is why it is somewhat okay not to know things initially but rather to struggle, especially with one's craft. In this uncomfortable place we select unconsciously what is important to us and thus the painting becomes a medium for self-discovery. We are confident that we will progress but humble enough to never

think we have already arrived. We are on a quest for clarity in seeing and conveying our most personal relationship to the world.

-1-

The academic pursuit of competence gives formulas and measurable results which offer comfort and reassurance by teaching a technology so as to chronicle visual information. But it only allows one, at best, to make well rendered pictures. It does not lead to self-discovery. We are better off being less comfortable but more innocent and open to growth. Rilke said that “truth is smothered by facts.” Does this mean we should know nothing? I think not. But know what is needed by you and know it so well that it is you. That means develop the specific skill and vocabulary necessary to convey your vision so completely that it is integrated into your being.

Monet expressed a desire to be blind and then be able to see when he painted; in effect, to see the world fresh and for the first time each time he painted. No preconceptions, no clichés, no gimmicks. Only the truth of his response. Of course this takes talent, practice and skills so well absorbed that they do not impede spontaneity.

Enthusiasm, love, being deeply moved or repulsed, the need to portray your deepest experiences in visual form, sensuality, sexuality, ones inclination to be powerful or gentle, dramatic or delicate, to be subtle or not, ones love of the tactile, the desire to capture various qualities of external reality such as the experience of weight, form, light, animation, texture or to capture that of our internal worlds: our psychology or pain, memories or our dreams. In short, life is our subject. Great works are driven by a desire to first experience deeply and then to express that experience. As if, page by page, each inspired picture is a component of one’s personal biography.

In a quest for expression, self-discovery, growth and clarity, Van Gogh spoke of risking his life for his art. His was the religious commitment of a zealot. But all artists must commit to high achievement the way a deeply religious person commits to God and all the values that infers, such as honesty, humility, integrity and conviction.

One might say that we come to know the creator through the understanding of His creation. To devote so much intensity, to invest so much of oneself for so long is a huge commitment. It is the equivalent of being an athlete. But this event lasts a lifetime and there are no crowds cheering one on.

A personal communion with the universal is where an independent art is born. This knowledgment of self, this consciousness of our responses must safeguard us from mimicking others or falling for an external intellectualism that removes us from ourselves. Our intellects must be at the service of our hearts, not the other way around. To succumb to the methods and formulas of others is the artist's blind ally. Renoir said, "if you follow, you will always be behind". Yet, can anothers light illuminate your way? Maybe. If their lantern helps you to see a world you identify with. Your own light may be more difficult to access or it may not be as brilliant as anothers. But it is yours and what it reveals is you. The light of others, particularly the masters of each age, reveal many of the things for which we share an affinity. Cezanne said that "the museum is like a book that teaches us how to read nature." That is to say, what you feel emanating from an inspired picture is what you will most probably respond to in life as well.

Our feelings and vision are personal but not totally unique. That is why the elements that are needed can, in part, come from those masters that best express the things you identify with. The museums are filled with the living chord of experience that runs through the great masters of every age as well as through ourselves.

The most important driving force in art is the assertion that the establishment of the aesthetic principles by which art has always been defined, and through the force of human intuition, inspiration and temperament, molded by honesty and the power of conviction, will result in works that, for better or worse, reaffirm our humanity.

Fine art, at its best, derives from our emotional experience and is related passionately, gives content primacy and requires that form follow content by necessity. I believe in encouraging the freedom to explore and the freedom to innovate. We should emphasize emotion and/or introspection, glory in nature, glory in the power of humanity, believe that the human spirit is capable of greatness and believe that, as an essential value, we must have the freedom of spirit to pursue our aims. This is only possible when we believe in ourselves. Obviously this requires skill in order to make this concrete and a teacher must be committed to making those skills attainable.

One does need to know how to draw as drawing is the bones of painting. But one does not need lifeless rendering. Thus it is not description for descriptions sake. It is always about experiencing life.

Yet, after all is said, after analyzing and theorizing it is ultimately best to see art as a mystery. What is most enjoyable and perhaps most profound about art is the way this inanimate canvas comes alive, elicits within us the feelings and experiences embodied in it and some how, in the sharing, enables us to find a way to live more completely. It does so by teaching us to focus on that to which we respond.

Art and living are both visceral not cerebral. That great art has the capacity to become life is all we really need to know. To see it happen in the museums or in the great sculpture of Egypt, India and Japan or in the religious imagery of all ages or in self portraits by late Rembrandt, Beckman, Van Gogh or Bonnard is to expose us to that mystery, to bathe us in it so that our vision and hearts are cleansed sufficiently to see for ourselves.

We are able to learn scientifically how flowers fill the air with perfume. But in the knowing a mystery falls away and a part of our innocence is often lost. It is that innocence and awe as we breathe in the scent of life that is crucial to fine art. With that love of life and a love of art and with enthusiasm and desire, by dialoguing with the artists of the past and by revealing the intimacy of our own unfolding and yet unknown vision we grope forward. Albert Ryder, whose first exhibition took place at the National Academy, likened himself to an inchworm on the edge of a precipice, almost completely extended into the unknown.

My underlying conviction is that all things are what they are and also, they are their significance. All things can be named and identified in literal terms and can also be expressed intuitively as a conduit of experience from one human being to another. The task of the artist is to be personal and illuminating. Bonnard and Vuillard for example, often painted intimate visions of people as totally integrated with their environment. Rembrandt and Van Gogh radically departed from this vision preferring the illumination of the individual soul. Chardin and Courbet would paint the weight and tactility of fruit, Cezanne portrayed fruit as if they were the equivalent of figures in a Venetian figure composition and Soutine animated the elements of his still-lives as if to contradict the term “nature mort”. How do we render is not the question we should ask first. But rather, what do we see? Than we will know how to proceed. As Max Beckman put it, “if you wish to get hold of the invisible, you must penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible”

The world is a wondrous place, life is our gift and we are charged with this higher calling. For fine artists depth is revealed on the surface, all things are revealed through our senses and we have the responsibility to maintain continuity by internalizing the great works of the past, recognizing their commonality and employing a similar response to the present.

Thank you