

Lecture given at the New York Studio School, the University of Wisconsin,
Osh Kosh and the University of the State of New York, Binghamton
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Good Evening

Thank you for coming.

There are two parts to my talk tonight: One is some observations on the art world and how it infects us. The other is about the world of art and how it cleanses us. Then I will show you some slides and open it up to questions.

As we know, the nineteenth century was dominated by an academy that took control of the art world by assuming control of the visual past. While the renaissance encompassed Greek and Roman art to reinvigorate their own art with sensuality, materialism and a heroic vision of the Christian pageant, the 19th century academy deadened art by prescribing a specific view of history and demanding a prescribed means of illustrating it, devoid of life, mannered and formularized. With great effort and pain the great artists of the nineteenth century ultimately defeated this academy. However, it did not last long because eventually a new academy rose in the 20th century. It arose and took firm control by the unusual means of usurping the Avant Garde. It turned the dynamic explorations and evolutions from Delecroix, Courbet, the barbizon school, to the impressionists post-impressionists and early twentieth century masters into a cynical anti formula academy controlled by galleries, blessed by museums, rationalized by critics and perpetuated by universities. It has been a commercial joyride speeding towards minimalism and beyond to levels of cynicism and vapid cleverness the world had never before seen. An art world dominated at first by America as a perfect reflection of its industrial ideal:

America wanted a large, guaranteed consistent product, capable of mass production. In short, an industry. Instead of formula, we have antiformula. Instead of mannerism, we have fashion. At first it was the call for “new definitions” of art, emanating from the Museum of Modern Art which was a huge player in the middle part of the 20th century. But “new definitions” as a concept for art is pure sophistry. For example, if we take the word dog and alter the definition to, let us say, a wooden object with four legs upon which we may eat dinner, do we retain the dog in this definition of a table or just the word (and of course the four legs)? So in the pursuit of new definitions we in effect provide a very different set of products. This allowed for the inclusion of cleverness instead of insight, fashion instead of feeling, invention in place of creation and decorative objects accompanied by rationalization, rather than objects that are beautiful because the emotional impact of their profound experiential insight makes us speechless before them.

More recently, “new definitions” has degenerated into a conventional wisdom that “art can be anything”. Well, as I understand language most concepts are described in words in order to be specific. If art can be anything it is, by this notion, nothing. The dog is no longer the table, or the chairs or a bowl of fruit, it is now anything and everything. Since it is not, by this concept specifically definable, it really does not exist. What is the impact of this concept? It is to democratize art to the point of decadence. If it is anything, than anyone can do it. Where now is its value?

As art students, which we all are, it is very important not to succumb to this art world infection that touches everyone.

The world of art emanates from a universal language of intuition and experience. The art world is, know matter how tempting, to be ignored until one

has something worthwhile to offer. The art world comes with this fantasy of overnight success. The world of art is based on vision clarified over a lifetime.

In short, we have been taught and have come to believe that art can be broadly defined so as to encompass virtually everything. In the fifties, it was said that we were “seeking new definitions of art” and now we say “art can be anything”. But if art were redefined, it would lose its original meaning. And if art was defined as “anything” then it would be rendered nothing. For in language we use words to describe and clarify specific concepts. Anything without a specific definition is nothing. New definitions are manipulations by which the academics become the avante garde. It is in short a ruse.

As an artist, one must take a position. One should be of ones time but mostly one must seek the eternal. “Those who follow”, as Renoir said, “will always be behind”. But it is also true that those who never learn the language and the inspired visions of our great predecessors, will never be eternal. As the oracle of Delphi prescribed, know thyself. But seeking art is to also have a dialogue with history, with humanity and nature in harmony with ones own inner music.

We must take the time to commune with the works of the masters. We must take the time to see their vision alive in nature. We must take the time to evolve a craft that allows us to express our individual visions of the world. We must accept that it is a lifetime of seeking first vision and then clarity of vision.

To create works of art without a vision is more difficult than finding a needle in a haystack.

The quick fix approach has been, for too long, in modern art circles, a search for style. It was Gleyre, the teacher from whom Monet, Renoir, and Bazille rebelled who said, “nature... offers no interest. Style, you see, is everything.” He was wrong. When there is a vision to be realized, style will emerge as an essential aspect of the means of expression. Without the orientation provided by that vision or rather by a point of view impregnated with personal experience, style is vapid, at best clever and nothing more than an attention seeking device and it will be quickly replaced in an art world fired more by fashion than by conviction.

In short, we come to our unique selves and the expression there of by painting nature with honesty and enthusiasm. When you let your paintings teach you who you are style will emerge as the clarification of that self-discovery. Intuition, honesty and integrity is at the core. Integrity in art is when every aspect of the picture is felt, understood and realized. Virtually all great painters emphasized this by making every stroke perform. The absolute honesty of a work of art is clear when every part of the picture sings of true experience. It is a lifetime search and should not be confounded by a search for worldly success.

Acceptance must be discarded as a value and must always be distrusted as it can easily get in the way of progress. Success is specifically a way to make money and to keep the works safe. Two very good things for sure but very seductive.

All great art resonates the same way: as a bridge of experience, founded in the intuitive response. It is a bridge from artist to viewer. We know the creator through the experience expressed by the creation. When John Marin was asked how he selected a subject he said I go out and wink at something, if it winks back I paint it. He was describing the universal need in art to identify with ones subject. It is what we respond to emotionally that leads us to ourselves. The artifacts of a lifelong search for self is what we call art. These artifacts flow as living pages of an autobiography. But make no mistake, our time, for more than fifty years, has been dominated by a self serving art world, producing vulgarities in search of shock value. Our society so corrupt and many “would-be” artists, so easily corrupted, live in a world where the only value is monetary, believing that if a picture is not worth money, it has no worth. There was a time for almost all of human existence over the last 15,000 years that art always had substantial intrinsic value by virtue of religious, social and experiential needs that required no monetary considerations.

Whether it was the magic of the animal on the walls of Lascaux or the magic of Christ’s Majesty on the wall of the Sistine chapel or the magic of a mountain in Aix on Provance or a hill in Ceret or a girls pubescent sexuality in Vienna, art has always been expressed as humanity’s dialogue with nature or if one prefers, with concrete life. The great artists of all time and of every age did what should be obvious but what has become controversial. They all searched for self through the accouterments of their natural and cultural environment. Egon Scheile said, “art is always the same.”

The iconoclasm of inscrutable art that must be supported by cerebralisms and sophistry will, along with nuclear weapons, be the greatest shame to distinguish our time from all others.

Cezanne's views were bastardized when painters tried to separate his theories from nature as in the cylinder, sphere and cone. He was always talking about realizing truths in nature. Not intellectual abstractions. He always referred to his little sensation and the need for a personal vision. Art that is eternal is an expression of how we respond viscerally to the world. It is always sensual and organic.

On a trip to Amsterdam I visited Rembrandt's painting known as the Jewish Bride. This is certainly one of the greatest paintings of all time. With a minimal palette he creates an extraordinary visual richness of color, tactility, weight and light that is an initial introduction to a painting of a man and a woman in a tender moment of devotion. But his is not a beautiful bride in our contemporary sense. Nor is he handsome. She is not delicate and he is not heroic. In fact her features are somewhat worn and both are certainly the antithesis of glamour. But the depth of tenderness and mutual devotion is filtered through a gesture of their hands and the complexity of emotions in their faces to such an extent that one is absorbed into their internal world, into the soul of their being.

Of course the Rijks Museum was filled with tourists and invariably people would walk in front of me, disturbing my reverie, glancing casually for a moment and then moving on.

After the third or fourth incident of this kind my lips parted as I was about to ask this casual observer why he would make the effort to come to the museum and then not make the effort to see what is going on in the picture! Of course my real annoyance had more to do with the interruption of my act of communion with this masterpiece. But before I could speak the thought came to me that Rembrandt could have never painted this work without a profound

belief in humanities capacity for a rich interior world. And I somewhat ashamed but grateful for the enlightenment went back to my reverie.

Art is life and it must be imbued with the life within and without, our internal world validated by the external world and visa-versa. Gauguin prescribed, “dream before nature”.

There are moments when one is so much in harmony with one’s means of expression, with nature and with oneself that we seem to become just an instrument or a medium. The work is passing through us, only barely conscious, immersed rather than in control as if painting were no different than the involuntary beating of a heart or the blinking of our eyes. At that moment, one is only an instrument holding a brush. To be in that moment continuously is the ultimate achievement. That is mastery. One of my mentors, Marvin Meisels, years ago, said that he wished to paint the way Rembrandt drew. I believe he meant that every stroke should be direct, perfect, organic and deeply felt. Rembrandt among others was at once in harmony with life and with the means to express it.