

"MURKY WATERS"

**MURKY WATERS:  
NAVIGATING THROUGH THE MYTHS AND RULES  
OF ART MAKING**

by

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THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploration of some dominant myths surrounding western art and art history, and how various 'rules' around art making have emerged from the influence of these myths. Often inadvertently perpetuated within art education, the myths that surround art making impact everyone who wants to make art. We cannot escape their influences and it is my premise that the rules we adopt are largely responsible for determining our views on what art is, who an artist is, and how art should be made.

Utilizing academic research, conversations with twelve professional artists, and excerpts from my journal, documenting my painting process while visiting New Mexico, I explore; the reality of how artists make art, the fears engendered by the myths and rules we internalize, and how artists navigate through rules to find their own voice. I then look at how art educators can best address the issues I raise.

*To Mark,  
For his enthusiasm and encouragement along this path,  
and his acceptance of my need to make art.  
You help me reach further,  
and with you I see more.*

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# Introduction

**January 17 2005, Albuquerque, New Mexico.**

*It is not what I expected. I had hoped for an epiphany. Instead, it is the same struggle it always is. I want to paint and I do not want to. I am not ambivalent about it. No. It is just that I both love and hate it. I wonder why it is often so difficult to paint. I fear I am lazy yet my intuition tells me that it is actually the opposite. It is just that the progress is slow to translate into physical artwork. I have high expectations, a desire to make good art, to make honest art. It is simply very difficult to make work that I think is good enough. Almost every painting I make must be wrestled with, painted over and over, both to achieve the patina I want and also because I am compelled to paint over what I dislike, constantly reworking what is there in my search for a perfection I expect does not exist.*

*It is interesting that I thought it would be somehow easier to work here. Many artists have found it easier to work here, but really what does that mean? I know that making art is work and that sometimes it goes well and sometimes it is a struggle. That is part of the appeal: the challenge of each new painting. It is interesting that while I feel compelled to paint I also often find myself disliking the process and the fact that it has such a hold on me. It is a necessity and without it, I fret, consumed by anxiety about the purpose of my life.*

*I was looking for an easy answer, a fairytale, a magic 'art place' where I can clear the pathway and create nothing but really good paintings - effortlessly. I guess I will always be searching for this dream, this myth of how an artist should be.*

While visiting New Mexico in 2005 I began keeping a 'painting diary'. This was to provide me with a venue to explore my creative process both in the mundane aspects of how I go about making art and to record my thoughts and emotions as I navigate the illusive nature of creative inspiration and its application. As the above journal entry attests, making art is difficult for me. At times, I wonder why I continue, and yet I do, compelled somehow to keep making paintings. Simply put, it is the only activity that completely satisfies me regardless of whether I consider the products of this activity successful or not.

While art has largely been an impulsive activity for me, one I simply did without really considering why or how my own creative process worked, when I began to teach art, I realized that becoming aware of my own art-making process would better allow me to understand the processes of my students. Not only did it help me to better understand my students, via a better understanding of myself, it also became clear to me that the sharing of my art practice and, in particular, the expose of the seldom discussed accompanying fears, frustrations, disappointments and self-doubt, can have a significant impact on my students. Simply put, honest sharing allows others a glimpse into the reality of the art

making process and I have found that this is a significant first step towards demystifying art making and promoting its accessibility.

Beyond helping my students, contemplation of my creative process has provided me with important insights into my own art making and the principles that guide it. This self-reflection initially surprised me with its illumination of key issues I struggle with as an artist and how these issues influence my ability to make art. In my discussions with other artists in the past year, it became obvious that I was not alone in these struggles and while every artist has their own unique response, I have identified that the core issue of the struggle to make art is located in every artist's preconceived notion about art. That is; how an artist defines who an artist is, what art is and how art should be made.

Of course, there is no single definition of how an artist should be or how art should be made, indeed, if there was one general agreed upon definition of 'the artist' and 'art' then the struggle, as I have identified it, would likely not be the issue. Indeed, it is the very open-endedness of creativity and art making, the very freedom that it offers, that perpetuates the problem.

Freedom can be terrifying. We often want others to tell us what to do, to define the parameters and provide us with options from which to choose. Many of my students simply cannot start to make art at all if I do not propose some rules that impose a certain amount of structure to their process. While rules are useful to start with, development as an artist is contingent on challenging and going beyond imposed structure. The old adage that infused elements of my art college education, that one has to know the 'rules' before one can break them, would

seem to be true. That being said, there was no consensus amongst my college instructors about what the 'rules' of art were, indeed, some instructors vehemently disagreed with any conception of art and art making that began with a 'rules' based approach.

Regardless of this diversity of opinion, I assimilated a set of 'rules' about art and art making that made sense to me based on the kind of art I admired, what art techniques I had been taught and a subsequent conception of how art should be made. These rules included, adopting a definition of what I considered to be art based on the opinions of instructors and well-known artists that I admired. With my definition of art in place, I then decided what art forms I would include and which ones I would exclude. Those that I included then provided me with guidelines for how to be an artist and how to make art. This aspect of my 'rules' involved determining which techniques to use, the order in which these techniques should be employed, how much time should be spent making art and how to behave as an artist. With these 'rules' providing me with a frame of reference against which I could explore and make comparisons, I went about my art explorations with a new awareness of the watchful eye of others. In looking at my own set of 'rules' it is evident that my education at art college had the greatest influence on establishing my 'rules', however, my entire education from primary school through university, has impacted the choices I have made about what 'rules' of art to adopt and which ones to ignore.

The presence of 'rules' presents a serious dilemma for the artist. The only examples of art making we have is the work of other artists, and the only

references we have for being an artist are other artists as described in their writings or, more importantly, in what has been written about them by art critics and art historians. It is therefore inevitable that we look to those who have successfully travelled the path for inspiration and guidance. Acknowledging one's influences and working with them to develop one's own art work can be tremendously empowering and can lead the artist to explore beyond the boundaries of the 'rules'. However, it can also prove to be a comfortable trap if the artist clings too tightly to their influences rather than allowing them to be the stepping-stones towards new explorations. As Bayles and Orland (1993) note, "We do not long remember those artists who followed the rules more diligently than anyone else. We remember those who made the art from which the "rules" inevitably follow" (p.95). I would further add that we are not privy to the art making processes of those artists who are not deemed 'successful'.

Understanding the 'rules' we have adopted is then the first step in moving beyond the 'rules'. My recent awareness of how I imposed 'rules' onto my art making, has shed light on how my definition of art, artists and art making has 'contained' the art I have made and, as such, has been at the centre of my struggle to discover the art I am meant to make. For myself and for many of the artists I interviewed, this means making art that pushes beyond the direct influence of others, that is not self-conscious or pretentious, an art that is honest and engages others in a meaningful communication. For myself this requires a constant readjustment of the 'rules' and a willingness to evolve individually and creatively by embracing new ways of thinking and amending the old.



I have learned from my own experience that letting go of comfortable frames of reference is a terrifying experience. It is akin to conceptually launching oneself off a cliff without a safety net. Even after decades of making art, without some sense of structure I get lost and ramble around within my insecurities, often wondering if I will ever be able to paint another reasonably good painting. Yet, I also know that this is the only way for me and countless other artists. Simply put, making better art requires a curious, open mind and a willingness to allow oneself to be lost. Making good art requires that the artist take risks and break the 'rules'.

I believe it is this willingness to continuously move forward within one's art and art definitions that is essential for an authentic and satisfying creative experience. As important as I think this is, it is interesting that this notion seems to be rarely supported within our education system. With an emphasis on the canon of High art within art education at the college level, the focus is often on examining the work and art making processes of established artists and comparing it with one's own work. While this can be a valuable educational tool, in that it helps students of art to develop their technical skills and conceptual ability, it also serves to reinforce the mythology that surrounds art. I argue that it is from this comparison and adoption of aspects of the mythology that students and artists develop their own frame of reference about art, and this frame of reference then informs the 'rules' we adopt.

As I will explore, there are many dominant myths that surround art making and artists in western art. These myths inform our frame of reference about art,

and we are quick to adopt them as rules for art making and for defining whom an artist is. Many artists, art educators and non-artists alike adopt a particular myth or an amalgamation of myths that they accept unconsciously. Some of the most common myths readily embraced about art making and the artist are:

- The notion that artists possess innate talent (sometimes referred to as genius).
- Art making is easy (if it is not, then you are not talented enough).
- Artists must move to 'art centres' to make great art.
- Artists are isolated and misunderstood by society.
- Artists need to suffer for art.
- Artists are heroic and all knowing.

These myths then become the foundation for the emergence of 'rules' when the myths are internalized. Adoption of a particular myth provides a justification for then accepting this myth as a 'rule', and for reinforcing this with accompanying skills and methods for art making. To use an example, if an artist embraces the notion that all artists suffer for their art, then it is probable that she may reject artistic expression that comes easily and may reject possible monetary success from her art. She will likely also reject art and art making practices that are not consistent with her set of rules.

As I will explore, we all learn and adopt various 'rules' for making art throughout our education. While I will argue that there are no set 'rules' for making art, that the 'rules' are themselves mythological, the interweaving of

common myths with common rules creates, for many, a finite definition about how art should be made and about who an artist is.

While it can be argued that embracing some 'rules' allows artists to hone their skills and develop, I will argue that a willingness to embrace change, and experiment is really the cornerstone of true creativity in art making. If we cling too tightly to our initial frame of reference, and the rules and definitions we adopt from that, we risk inhibiting our own creativity regardless of whether we are amateur or serious artists. By this, I mean to say, that from an arts education point of view, the measuring of one's own creative progress against the canon of High Art is both inevitable and problematic.

This thesis is then an exploration of how artists really make art and an examination of the obstacles and struggles that often characterize the process. Utilizing my own journal entries about my art making process while visiting New Mexico, along with information collected from interviews with twelve artists working in a variety of mediums, and by examining published interviews with artists, I will look at how serious practicing artists really make art and engage with the struggles that emerge from their art-making process. This will include an exploration of the factors I have identified as influencing the artist's ability to create.

I will begin with an examination of western art history from the Renaissance to present day, focusing on how the mythology of art, the artist and art making emerged, evolved, and was adapted to suit new art movements. I will then explore how artists make art in relation to the pervasive influence of art

history and manage to navigate; the 'rules' of art, art education, strategies for art making, uncertainty, judgment, success and failure. Through this exploration I hope to shed light on how we view creativity and the process of art making and, in particular, how the multi-layered mythology of art and the artist contributes to the creation of sets of 'rules' that often work against the practicing artist. While the creation of these 'rules' is often unavoidable, indeed, I acknowledge that 'rules' can, at times, be very useful, it is my premise that the serious artist must learn how to navigate through them in order to develop as an artist. Clearly, this has implications for art education, and I will explore this in the final chapter.

I would like to note my methodology concerning the interviews I conducted. These interviews were informal discussions with artists about the mundane aspects of their art making process. I visited each artist in his or her studio or home and the conversations took place there. I did not intend these conversations to be detailed ethnographic accounts or case studies. I did not adhere to a strict protocol of questions, rather, the questions I asked evolved from the conversations themselves and were all aimed at illuminating aspects of each artist's process. I have prepared brief descriptions of each artist in order to provide readers with some background information. In the order in which I interviewed them, the artists who graciously agreed to take part are:

**Barbara Zaring:** Established painter and printmaker based in Taos, New Mexico. Barbara is in her fifties and has recently gone through a radical change in her art making style from realism to abstraction; even though her realist works

had established her reputation. Barbara maintains a full-time art making practice and exhibits regularly.

**Linda Coale:** Emerging painter and printmaker based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Linda is in her fifties and has recently committed to making art full time. Previously an elementary school teacher, Linda draws on the free experimentation she encouraged in the classroom for her art.

**Lilly Fenichel:** Established painter based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Lilly is in her late seventies and an active exhibiting painter. Sent as a refugee to the USA from Vienna during the Second World War, Lilly trained at the San Francisco School of art in the forties and fifties where Mark Rothko and Clifford Still taught and influenced her.

**Florence Pierce:** Established painter based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Florence is in her eighties and well known in New Mexico for her minimalist poured resin “paintings”. Trained in Anthropology, Florence’s art training in the forties was largely informal, influenced by the artists of the “Taos School”.

**Carol Sanchez:** Emerging printmaker based in Albuquerque who specializes in mezzotint. Carol is forty and maintains a full-time art practice. She obtained an MFA and then returned to Albuquerque to be close to her family and her Hispanic culture. Carol saved for many years to purchase her own printing press – a \$10,000 investment.

**Anonymous:** Established sculptor based in the Hemez area of New Mexico, this artist wished to remain anonymous. Self-taught, this artist took individual courses

and worked with artists he admired to learn his craft. He maintains a full-time art practice and has been selling his carved wooden sculptures in Santa Fe for several years. He also works on large-scale commissions.

**Margi Weir:** Established painter and sculptor based in Placitas, New Mexico. In her fifties, Margi holds two masters degrees. Her recent paintings are abstract, and she creates large-scale sculptures on a commission basis, and makes smaller poured resin sculptures. She enjoys the diversity that working in a variety of mediums offers.

**Jane Wolsak:** Emerging painter based in Vancouver, British Columbia. Jane is in her sixties and is a realist painter. Educated at St. Martins School of Art in London, England, Jane has lived in Canada since the sixties. She maintains a part-time painting practice, and also works as a court artist and illustrator.

**Eri Ishi:** Established painter based in Vancouver, British Columbia. In mid-career (Eri declined to give her age), Eri has a Masters degree in Counselling and little formal art training, choosing occasional select courses and the support of a mentor instead. Eri maintains a full-time art practice and now makes her living solely from the sales of her large-scale figurative paintings.

**Elaine Mari:** Emerging painter based in Vancouver, British Columbia. In her fifties, Elaine went to Art College in her mid-thirties. Originally from Newfoundland, Elaine has explored many mediums, and has recently settled on creating paintings that embrace a multi-media approach, addressing the issue of home and dislocation. She maintains a regular part-time art practice.

**Scott Massey:** Emerging conceptual artist based in Vancouver, British Columbia. In his thirties, Scott is a photo-based artist who also utilizes multi-media approaches in the creation of three-dimensional works. With a background in woodworking, Scott went on to study at Art College in his late twenties. He exhibits his work in public and artist run galleries. Scott's art making practice is project based rather than a set regular practice.

**Anonymous:** Emerging painter based in Vancouver, British Columbia, this artist wished to remain anonymous. With formal art training in her background, this artist has been exhibiting her paintings for many years. She maintains a full-time art making practice.

## **Chapter One - The Rules of Art Part 1: The Yardstick of Art History**

**January 19**

*There is no doubt that the landscape is inspiring, yet, while it can illicit gasps of astonishment from my lips as I round a bend, in my heart I already know that it is not my landscape. I feel an acute sense of disappointment, an emptiness slowly replacing the excitement of visiting this 'artist centre'. So many of the artists who loved this land have been important to my own development. This land of enchantment inspired artists such as D.H. Lawrence, Agnes Martin and Georgia O'Keefe. It was obviously the right place for them to be, it fed their creativity and inspired their souls. At least that is what I have been led to believe. It was also many years ago, long before contemporary tourism left its mark. Or is it just that I can't see the place clearly because I am looking for something that is tinged with the romanticism of the past?*

**January 20**

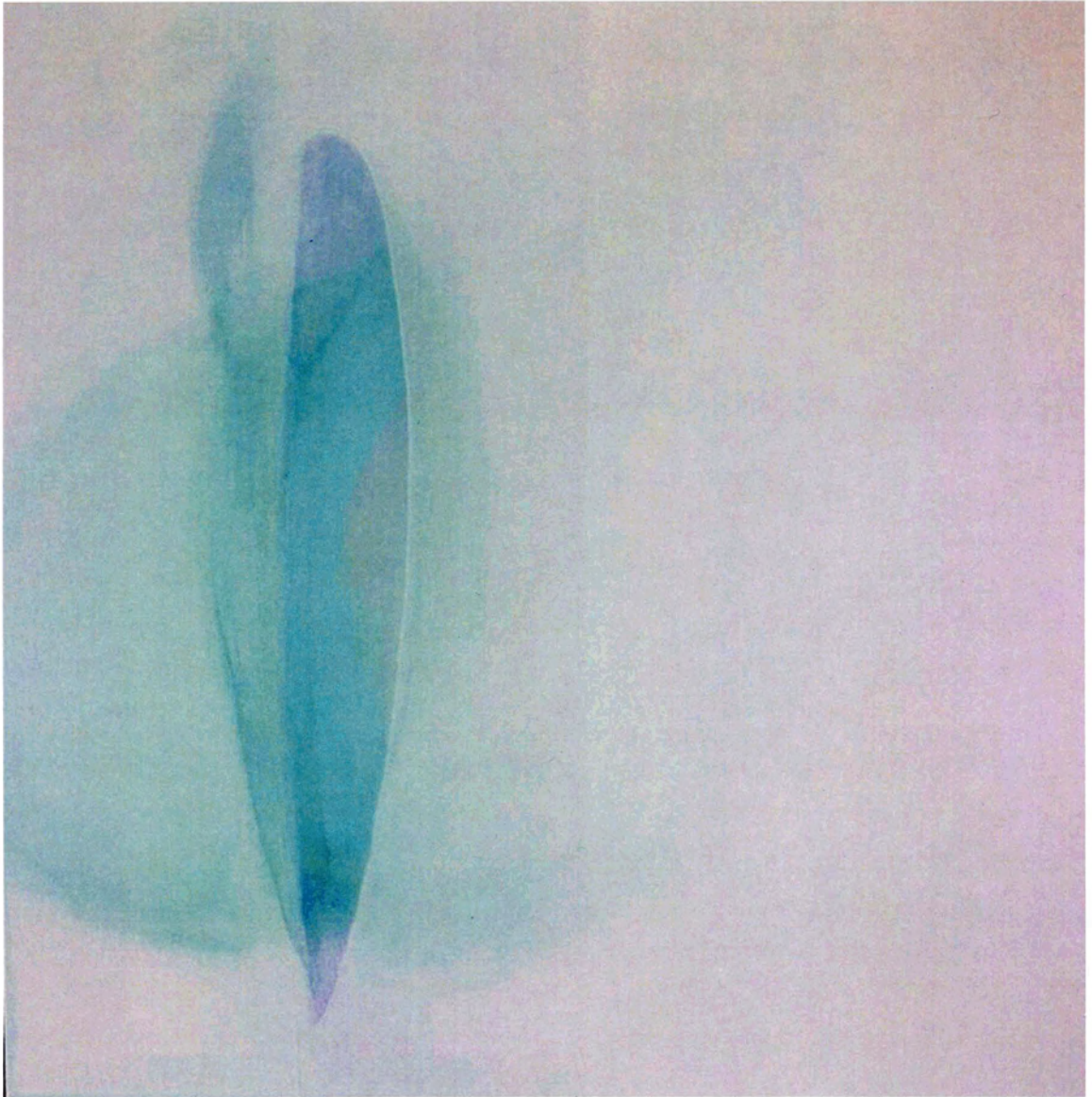
*I have been dabbling around with two paintings this week. I feel completely lost with them. I am trying to break away from working in my old, known way. It is so difficult to let go of it, especially when I don't know where I want to go. I feel like I have no ideas, that my brain is empty. In panic I reach for the cobalt teal paint – my last series of paintings is all about water and every*



*painting is blue. I always use cobalt teal to begin – it calms me to use it, allows me to feel secure and even confident, allows me to believe for a moment that I know what I am doing and I know what to expect. I try using other colours over top, trying to find a way to convey the sense of light here. I use pale yellows, gold and veils of white, and sit back to look. I hate what I have done. In fact, I hate it so much that I must paint over it immediately.*

### **January 31**

*Sat in on a class called Image and Imagination. This may be just what I need to get me out of my creative funk. The feathery dried grass inspired the drawing I made in class. I even allowed myself to use my favourite cobalt teal in it, a small section, a pond perhaps. I like the drawing. Finally, it feels like I am beginning to develop the visual language that I need to paint here. When I get home, I tackle one of the blank boards and map it out using the drawing as reference. For the first time since I have been here, I go to bed feeling hopeful about my art.*



*Image 1 - Untitled # 1*

When the opportunity arose for me to visit New Mexico, I jumped at the chance to visit this well-known art centre, excited about how this place would affect me and curious about how it would influence and change my own art. In retrospect, I realize that my excitement about visiting New Mexico and my vision of it was largely based on my own mythologizing of place, and I was quite surprised to discover that this mythology was largely based on my understanding of this place through the eyes of well-known artists whose work and vision I had long admired.

Informed by my education in art and art history I had unconsciously adopted a vision of the New Mexico landscape informed by the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe. My excitement about the anticipated change to my own art was largely modelled on the romantic notion furthered by O'Keefe and Agnes Martin (regardless of whether they intended it) of the strong and solitary female artist finding herself and her true artistic vision within the harsh beauty of this environment. I am embarrassed to admit that I carried this preconceived notion of what I thought I was going to experience with me, allowing my experiences of New Mexico to be filtered through it.

It is therefore not surprising that I was acutely disappointed to discover that the reality of this place did not fit my fantasy, as my journal entry attests. I was forced to confront my romantic interpretation of the significance of any place that is steeped in the images, history and personal stories of the well-known artists who have lived and worked there.

I will come back to this notion of 'place' for artists in a later chapter. What initially struck me about this very personal revelation was just how much other artists have influenced me, and in particular, how I have adopted a mythology of art and artists based on my own unique interpretation of the work and personalities of those artists. By this, I mean to posit that there is no universal mythology of art and artists, after all, art is highly subjective and my version of what is and is not art, and which artists I respect, is subject to my likes, dislikes and interpretations. That being said, young artists are subjected to the myths that surround the lives and artwork of historically significant artists, and it is hard to escape their influence.

The reality of making art for me has involved a great deal of self exploration and with it a willingness to evolve and grow by learning new skills, experimenting freely and being open and interested in other mediums. This has meant that I am constantly challenging and adjusting my frame of reference about what art is who an artist is and how art is made. Yet, as my experience in New Mexico attests, I was surprised to discover just how far reaching my frame of reference is and how it can affect my conceptions of art and artists.

I should clarify here that I am not suggesting that artists need to rid themselves of all influences; this would simply not be possible or even useful, after all, artists learn how to be artists from other artists. However, I am suggesting that there is a difference between conscious and unconscious influences. I am advocating that creative freedom is to be found through a conscious knowing of the influences that are responsible for each artist's frame

of reference and adopted set of 'rules', and the desire to work with, and through, these influences in order to develop one's own work.

However, the mythology that surrounds art, artists and art making is a very seductive one and I will argue is very much alive within both the western art world and society in general. Hughes (1990) argues that American art collectors of the 1980's "...had been raised on folk myths of the totally expressive artist as scapegoat or hero - Van Gogh and his ear, Pollock and his booze, Rothko slitting his wrists, Joseph Beuys wrapped in felt and fat beside his crashed Stuka" (p.302). The artist as tragic hero then prevails within the commercial end of the High Art world; suffering and self-abuse glamorized in the name of art, the search for the next alienated art star promising wealth for the dealer or critic who finds him. The work may be shocking, indeed, a shock factor is encouraged, but above all, it must be highly original. It is also assumed that the artist will possess a great deal of natural talent and that this talent alone will allow the artist to create consistently brilliant artwork.

At this time, it is important to acknowledge that this mythology is commonly attributed to male artists, not surprising since the canon of High Art prior to the late twentieth century is predominantly male. While many feminist theorists and art critics have taken this to task, this is not the aim of this exploration. Rather, while I acknowledge that there is a gender bias inherent in this mythology, and that it has been and continues to be critiqued, what I am interested in is how the myths continue to flourish within the commercial High Art

world, continue to be passed on to art students and remain the most common interpretation of the artist within the public realm.

Why is this mythology still writ large on the consciousness of western society? Why does this mythology continue to be embraced by each new generation of artists, and why is western society so willing to continue to embrace and perpetuate this particular mythology of the artist?

An exploration of the history of western art to look at how art and artists have been documented and which art and artists have been included in the canon of High art, sheds some light on how this mythology of art and artists emerged.

The advent of the Renaissance in Europe, and the massive social and scientific changes ushered in during that era saw the beginning of a major shift in both the technical aspects of visual art and of the social status of the artist. Sharon Bailin (2003, p.2) notes that in the Middle Ages, prior to the Renaissance, artists were considered to be craftsmen who learned their trade like any other tradesman. Organized into guilds, the artist had to prove he possessed the necessary skills before he was considered good enough to be a master. Once accepted, he could open a workshop, hire apprentices and accept commissions.

Guilds, like our contemporary unions, were politically powerful and membership was essential if an artist wished to be financially successful. The guilds promoted the advantages of art and in so doing, secured a market for its members and protected their interests (Gombrich, 1978, p.184). Of course, only wealthy individuals and organizations, such as the Christian church could afford

the services of artists. This then resulted in Patrons, rather than individual artists, determining the nature and content of the art. Created in a collective and even anonymous process, "Art-making was not about individuality, freedom or self-expression. The arts were about the works, not about the artist "(Bailin, 2002, p.2).

Due to significant shifts in political, economic, scientific, social and intellectual ideals, the structure of the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance. Many art historians view Florence, Italy as the birthplace of the modern world. It is here that capitalism began to emerge, perspective was invented and the notion of genius in the arts developed. Inspired by a renewed interest in the aesthetic principles of Classicism, the stage was set for a conceptual shift in how artists and art making were viewed (Chadwick, 1991, p.37).

This began with the conceptual separation of art from craft, due largely to the emerging new respect for the artist's creativity as well as skill level. The resulting elevation of the social status of artists emerged from the notion of the artist as learned and gifted. As Chadwick (1991) notes " The origins of art history's focus on the personalities and work of exceptional individuals can be traced back to the early Renaissance desire to celebrate Italian cities and their achievements by focusing on their more remarkable male citizens" (p.15). Within this context, artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo came to be revered as geniuses and visionaries by art critics.

Interestingly, both of these artists continue to be glorified within western art history and, as a consequence, within western society. Even those who

possess very little education in visual art are familiar with the names Da Vinci and Michelangelo. Indeed, it can be argued that, along with Picasso, they are the most famous artists, and as such, become a yardstick against which all other artists are measured.

It is then evident that the Renaissance and the classical traditions it established in the arts set the stage for the elevation of the artist from lowly craftsman to artistic genius. The resulting social acceptance of the artist as a learned and respected member of society whose contributions were considered significant, paved the way for acceptance of the artist's individual expression. However, it was not until the Romantic period that artists and philosophers placed a high value on individual expression alike.

Gombrich (1978) noted that the break with the classical tradition of the Renaissance and the advent of the Romantic period was a direct result of an erosion of faith in the values of classicism (pp.183-4). Prior to this break, the role of art and of artists "was to supply beautiful things to people who wanted and enjoyed them" (p.376). While there was no consensus on what beauty was; whether it was to be found in the skilful imitation of nature or in the idealized depiction of nature, there was general agreement on how an artist should be educated and on the unsurpassed beauty of the artworks of classical antiquity (p.376).

Philosophers and artists, disenchanted by the political upheaval of the French Revolution and the dehumanizing and far-reaching impact of the Industrial Revolution, began to question and ultimately to reject the values of



classicism. As art historian Norbert Lynton (1980) notes, this began with Rousseau's rejection of the values of civilized society which, when coupled with Goethe's claim that it was in the unconscious that creative work originated, laid the foundation for artists to question and reject the established traditions of art and supplant them with a new vision influenced by the social changes of the era. Musicians such as Beethoven challenged the inherited, traditional framework of harmony and style while writers such as Wordsworth rejected idealized language and utilized the vernacular of everyday life (p.13).

Influenced by the identification of the unconscious and its role in creative pursuits, the development and acceptance of 'The Sublime' within aesthetic theory, offered artists an opportunity to move away from conventional beauty and reason in order to explore the realm of the irrational. Within visual art and literature, many artists chose to delve into the world of their individual unconscious for imagery, seeking a visual language that would allow for social and political commentary (Rosenblum, Janson, 1984, pp.58-9).

The resulting art works embraced an independence from the conventions of representation; the artist rather than the patron was choosing what to create and how to create it. Imagery was often borrowed from dreams and fantasy rather than direct representation, as the arresting imagery found in the work of prominent Romantic artists such as Francisco Goya, Henry Fuseli and William Blake illustrates.

Like many artists of the period, Blake despised the official academies of art and the standards set by them. Indeed, he is generally attributed to be the

first artist to deliberately challenge the accepted traditional standards of art and replace them with his own vision and chosen imagery inspired by his mystical beliefs. Not surprisingly, Blake's work was considered by many to be shocking and consequently dismissed as the work of a lunatic, his relevance within the development of art not recognized until a century later (Gombrich, 1978, p.388).

Even though both Blake and his art were alienated from the established, traditional art community during his lifetime, and he was subject to the scorn of that community, Blake continued to make the art he wanted to make. His alienation, madness and dedicated passion, then became important components of the myth that was inevitably created around Blake once his art and its significance were recognized. The actual alienation of the artist, in combination with the echoing of this alienation within the new industrial societies of Europe, garnered sympathy from art critics and philosophers who elevated the importance of engaging in authentic, original expression over accepted classical traditions. It is here that we begin to see a division between artists emerge along with a division between the artist and society begin to take hold. Gombrich (1978) identifies the division that began to emerge in the visual arts.

Now that this unity of tradition had disappeared, the artist's relations with his patrons were only too often strained. The patron's taste was fixed in one way: the artist did not feel it in him to satisfy that demand. If he was forced to do so for want of money, he felt he was making 'concessions', and lost his self-respect and the esteem of others. If he decided to follow only his inner voice, and to reject any commission which he could not reconcile with his idea of art, he was in danger of starvation. Thus a deep cleavage developed in the nineteenth century between those artists whose temperament or convictions allowed them to follow conventions and to satisfy the public's demand, and those who glorified in their self-chosen isolation (p.397).

It is clear that it is from this division in the art world that the myth of the misunderstood alienated artist began to emerge. While many of these artists remained obscure in their lifetime, they were rewarded posthumously for their vision, honesty and originality of expression, values that would become the cornerstones of Modernism a century later.

Modernist artists embraced and promoted unique individual expression, authenticity and the idea of the artist as an 'extraordinary individual'. The resulting fame of many modernist artists such as Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock is testament to the superstar quality awarded them first by art critics and historians and then within the public realm. As Suzi Gablik (1991) identifies, modernist artists are associated with mastery, originality, hegemony and masculine authority (pp.4-7). The art itself may have changed, however, as I have explored, these valued traits of art originated in the Renaissance and Romantic periods. The artist is still considered a genius, self-expression is encouraged and originality, which began to be valued during the Romantic period, now takes centre stage. In other words, Modernism simply reinforced the existing mythology of art.

Looking to the art of non-western societies for inspiration, and to so-called 'primitive' art in particular, modernist artists were actively seeking new visual languages, and new modes of expression in art. The role of art as an expression of beauty through idealized images was seriously challenged as many artists sought to authentically express their experiences of modern life (Gombrich, 1978, p.448). Artists were clearly engaging art with politics in their search for honesty in

art. Gombrich (1978) notes that the expressionist painters of early Modernism "...felt so strongly about human suffering, poverty, violence and passion, that they were inclined to think that the insistence on harmony and beauty in art was only born out of a refusal to be honest " (p.449).

This desire for honest expression in art continued throughout Modernism, and with it, originality of expression gained a deep foothold. In breaking the hold of the remnants of classicism in art, artists now felt free to explore without restriction the myriad possibilities of creative expression. It is here that originality began to flourish. With the challenge to the traditions of art evaluation, the search for original, authentic expression became highly valued.

The correlation of creative art making and originality continues to be a pervasive one, despite postmodern attempts to dismantle it. Originality is often seen as a dramatic shift from the past, both conceptually and technically, and tends to be connected with the idea of something new and divergent from what is readily accepted (Bailin, 1994, p.3). However, within post-postmodern contemporary society, and especially within popular culture, we are very aware of the fallacy of the notion of 'pure' originality. Within popular music we have come to accept 'everything old is new again' or rather referenced and revived within the expanded boundaries of contemporary life.

I would suggest that the same is true within visual art. It is impossible to remove oneself from what has gone before and from what has been learned and absorbed. Even if this knowledge is unconscious rather than conscious, it is all at our disposal in the process of creating. After all, all artworks emerge from an

existing framework of understanding and knowledge, and as such, are inextricably linked to what has come before. Thus our concept of 'originality' in the reading of artworks lies on a continuum, with some art considered to be more original than other art, and judged so, depending on whether they are deemed to add to the continued development of art (Bailin, 1994, pp.9-18).

This judging of the originality of art works only reinforces the mythology of the artist. The valuing of originality in art, by implication, values the makers of this art. Postmodern art historians and critics have challenged this notion of originality and of the artist as a supremely talented genius. By acknowledging that this myth has played a significant role in reinforcing the elitism of the art world and by challenging the hierarchy of traditional mediums of art, postmodern artists have successfully challenged our understanding of who the artist is and of what art is.

Postmodern artists have embraced technology and moved away from the traditions of art, pursuing an art that is often more interested in process than product and attempts to grapple with the issues inherent in contemporary life (Richmond, 2004, p.111). While there is no doubt that postmodern contemporary art practices have helped deconstruct and demythologize the artist and art making for some, surprisingly, there are still many artists and non-artists who remain influenced by the myths that remain attached to Modernist artists and art practices. As Gablik (1991) identifies,

Cultural myths do not die easily, especially when our personal commitment to them is so strong that it is difficult even to entertain explanations or possibilities based upon different premises. Most of us "see" art as we have been taught, through the language and concepts of Cartesian aesthetics, a tradition in which individuals

and individual artworks are the basic elements...In modern society, artists see themselves as quintessential free agents, pursuing their own ends. Our cultural myths support economic advancement and the hard-edged individualist writ large... (p.116).

Since individualism is still very much alive and well within contemporary western society, and the commercial fine art market is a well-established and respected means of financial investment, there is really very little incentive to dismantle established myths that surround artists from the past. While it can be argued that within the most current contemporary art, few myths about art and artists are generated, it remains to be seen what will happen to some of these artists posthumously.

The upholding of the myths surrounding art and artists is supported by the excitement generated by the investment potential of art works and the commodification of all artistic activity. As Terry Eagleton (2000) identifies, "there is now hardly any high culture which is not tightly framed by capitalist priorities" (p.71). All of the arts now require the financial support of capitalism in order to survive and the marketplace has now become the true determinate of success or failure. As Gablik (1991) notes "It is all about individual artists, individual careers and individual marketable art works – the kind of 'parts thinking' that values only objects while ignoring the context, or field, around them" (p.147). The resulting inevitable elevation of some art over other art, and the accompanying interest in the financial gains possible for collectors of art, serves to reinforce a mythology of art that celebrates and elevates some art and artists, regardless of whether they work within the traditions of painting and sculpture or embrace postmodern values and contemporary mediums.

Valued artists from the Western canon, such as Vincent Van Gogh, are lionized within the contemporary public realm, admired as much for the mythology that surrounds his life as for the exorbitant prices his paintings now fetch. The fact that he only sold one painting during his short and turbulent life is somehow seen as proof of his tortured genius, proof that he believed passionately about what he was doing and that this passion allowed him to continue to make art even in the face of ongoing rejection. The documentation of his struggles with mental illness and his eventual suicide further adds to the myth that equates tragedy and madness with the artist, while the current financial value of his art is seen as clear and unquestioned proof that he was an extraordinary talented individual who contributed to society by creating valuable masterpieces. As Gablik states, "Every time we place art into the context of the marketplace, we give life to that idea as a relational phenomenon" (p.147).

It is then evident that the myths that have emerged throughout art history, about artists and art making, are many, varied and contradictory, and yet, they are very much alive within the imagination of the public realm. These myths have been adapted to best suit various major art movements, yet the core elements of these myths remain intact. This includes definitions of the artist as; male, genius, celebrity, wealthy, poverty stricken, talented master, engaged in original, individual expression, an authority, alienated and isolated.

For art students and even seasoned artists, the prevalence of these myths cannot be ignored. Most artists embrace an amalgamation of the myths that make the most sense to them, though this will likely fall into one of two

categories: the artist as alienated misfit, or the artist as celebrated art star. These are the two most common mythical conceptions of the artist, and though contradictory, if we look at artists such as Van Gogh, we see that they can coexist in the mythology that surrounds the career of an individual artist. By embracing either of these versions of the mythology, these artists are simply embracing what they have interpreted to be expected of them from art history, the commercial art market and the public realm. They adopt it hoping that fulfilment of the myths will offer them a path to success within the art world.

Choosing to dedicate a significant amount of time to making art does not come with a guidebook; one simply has to find one's own way. Faced with the uncertainty of choosing this path, it is therefore very comforting to adopt an accepted framework of being or set of 'myths' that can provide a definition of who an artist is, what art is and how art should be made. The various myths that then surround artists, offers a framework for being an artist, and for making art, that provides some reassurance that there is a place within society for young artists. Regardless of the fact that these myths offer an idealized image of the artist and of art making, they continue to appeal to our collective imagination and to the hopes and dreams of many young artists.

For most of society, the upholding of various mythologies of art means that art simply becomes an unknowable object, a realm where kinship with those who make art is not permitted. The promotion and support of the myths by much of the writing on art and art history throughout both the Romantic and Modern periods, has served to reinforce this alienation by promoting the notion that works



of art are the products of genius. The continued distancing of these products of artistic activity from the activity itself (and the meaning inherent in engaging in that activity), promotes the idea that art, and the making of art belongs within the realm of the expert (Bayles, Orland, 1993, p.89). The resulting alienation of both society from art and the artist from society is therefore inevitable.

I wish to make it clear here that I am not dismissing the myth of genius. While postmodernism has challenged the notion of genius and has encouraged the deconstruction of the artist as expert, it has not provided any explanation for how good art is made and who the artist is. How the artist decides what art to make and how to make it, is an unknown. While we can look at the technical aspects of an artwork, this will seldom provide us with a glimpse into the thinking process of the artist, or of the evolution of the artwork itself. Indeed, many artists themselves are unable to explain their own artworks, and are often unclear about why the artwork evolved as it did. The spontaneity and intuitiveness of the process (in combination with the hard work I will be exploring), means that the process tends to take on a life of its own, something that the artist is used to and comfortable with, yet, is largely foreign and uncomfortable to non-artists within the public realm.

Perhaps then, there is a grain of truth to the notion of the artist as genius. Since there are no rules for finding and deciding what to create, the ability to create something, that is judged to be significant, seemingly out of nothing is awe inspiring to many – even the creator herself. It is then very difficult to dismiss the notion of genius outright and it is highly understandable how this myth of the

artist as genius has prevailed throughout the centuries. While I think that the notion of genius has been overblown within the public realm, I also understand that it provides many with an explanation for who artists are.

The myths that surround art, artists and art making are deeply entwined with western art history, the commercial art market and with the collective imagination of the general public. While this mythology has been largely propagated by those who write about art rather than make art, all artists adopt a version of this mythology and the accompanying frame of reference about how to be an artist and how to make art.

With centuries to support it, it is obvious that this mythology is going to take some time to dismantle, and it may never be truly dismantled as many psychological and market forces are satisfied by such myths. The challenges of Postmodernism have merely scratched the surface of how and why this mythology proliferates. With the involvement of the capitalist marketplace and the lure of the investment potential of art, the myths surrounding the lives and work of famous artists become a vested interest, one that is actively encouraged for its potential to increase profits. As long as art continues to be valued in this way, I think it is safe to say that the myths that surround art will continue to thrive.

A version of the mythology of art, the artist and art making is then adopted by western artists regardless of their education in art. Even artists who are self-taught cannot escape its references, since the mythology is so prevalent within society in general.

What is especially interesting is how the myths surrounding the artist and art making become stimulus for artists to adopt rules for themselves and their work that they believe will be a path to success. Artists adopt sets of 'rules' that reinforce their own interpretation of who an artist is, what art is and how art should be made. The laying down of the 'rules' of art begins early within our education system and is reinforced by the various myths surrounding artists and art making. How artists respond to and navigate these rules determines their entire philosophy of art and art making, and for many will determine whether they continue to make art or not.

## Chapter Two - The Rules of Art Part 2: Art Education

January 23

*I feel a pressure to produce, after all that is why I came here, to make art and to write. It feels like a heavy weight on me and even though I am beginning to paint, I am already feeling impatient with my pitiful attempts. However, it is never enough; or rather, I never feel that I am accomplishing enough, especially at the beginning of a new series. When I am deep into a series of paintings it is easier, the paintings come together with less anxiety, I feel a calm confidence that I have a sense of where I am going and of what to do to get there.*

*At the beginning of a new series it feels like I am learning to paint all over again, that I know nothing about paint or about what it can do because I can't seem to get it to do what I want, and often don't know what it is I want! It is the messing around with the paint and in quiet contemplation that a new direction will begin to coalesce. For that to happen I have to be patient, to temper my frustration and production agendas.*

*Many of my artist friends suffer from the same anxiety; an anxiety rooted in insecurity, that no matter how much work I do the work itself is not good enough, not professional enough for the eyes of others. Even though I may be considering how others see my paintings, I am my harshest critic. I am a*

*perfectionist about my art and no matter how good I may consider a painting to be, it can always be improved upon, always be better. It is what keeps me painting but it can also cause paralysis if one lets it consume the self. All artists find their own yardsticks with which to measure and beat themselves.*

It is an inevitable part of any artist's education that she looks to art history for guidance and reassurance that the work she is making is good enough, and can be referenced with, the existing canon. For the great majority of working artists, admission to the High Art Canon will remain a fantasy, yet, the measuring of one's work and art practice is, for many, the only reference they have for being an artist. As I have already mentioned, artists learn how to be artists initially from art teachers and thereafter from other artists. With a great variety of art and artists to choose from, we tend to choose those artists whose work and working habits we can most relate to. For some artists, the adoption of rules can be a powerful constraint, translating into a staunch adherence to one style and way of working, or a theoretical belief that they have the solution to define what good art is and how it should be made. Philosophers, art critics and theorists also wade into the fray freely expressing their own opinions on art and positing their own theories for what is and isn't art, advocating for what they consider to be the best art or best subject matter for art. The resulting lack of agreement and perhaps, more importantly, unwillingness to validate that diversity in art is inevitable and should be celebrated rather than argued over, raises many issues for art education.

For the serious artist, navigating this wide array of criticism is unavoidable, but for many, the disagreements and criticism about the art they have made ensures that art making acquires a level of anxiety that is contrary to a common conception that making art should be relaxing and enjoyable. Artists feel anxiety about not living up to the various myths of being an artist, not following the 'right' rules, not making politically correct art, not following a prescribed path, not making enough work, making bad work, lack of recognition, etc.. While most artists struggle with one element of this anxiety at a time, there is no denying that it can have a powerful impact on an artist and her work. One of the artists I interviewed who made a successful living selling his sculptures in a respected Santa Fe gallery, talked about constantly being dissatisfied with his work. He feels anxiety about not producing enough work, anxiety about the quality of the work, always suspecting that he should be producing more and therefore better work according to some vague mythical conception of how much art an artist should produce.

In the preceding journal entry I acknowledge the anxiety that accompanies my art making. For me this anxiety has very deep roots, roots that have grown from a secret core belief that I am not good enough to make art, and should therefore stop making art. Acquired at Art College, and bolstered by my continuing interest and education in art history, this insecurity has had the power to stop me from making my own art, and even stop me from making art entirely for significant periods of time. Over time, I have learned to manage the anxiety and accept that it is simply a part of the process. However, for many, the anxiety

inherent in making art can prove to be too great a challenge and cause them to give up entirely.

Upon graduating from Art College, I stopped painting allowing the anxiety to paralyze me, choosing to believe that I lacked what it took to continue painting.

It was seven years before I painted again. While I did not abandon my creativity completely in that time (I found work making costumes and painting sets for theatre companies), I was not engaged in the creative exploration that was most important to me. Until this point, art had always been a large component in my life. It informed my sense of self through identity, and as such gave my life meaning. My experience at Art College had left me riddled with self-doubt and fear, I was both afraid of continuing to paint because I felt I was a failure as an artist and because I was afraid of what the art I might make would reveal. As Bayles and Orland (1993) note, "Making art can feel dangerous and revealing. Making art is dangerous and revealing. Making art precipitates self-doubt, stirring deep waters that lay (sic) between what you know you should be, and what you fear you might be" (p.13).

How an artist is educated and supported in her early art making attempts, is then an integral component in determining, for many, whether they continue making art or not. The majority of art students will simply stop making art upon graduation (p.85). Many lose faith in their own abilities and allow themselves to become distracted by the routine of daily life. Confused about the 'rules' of art and feeling that I couldn't live up to the myths of the artist, I lost my confidence. No longer feeling that my art could measure up to the art of those artists who had

achieved success, I sank into depression and gave up. My art education had left me disheartened and with a narrow view of what constituted success. I believed at that time that there was no point in making art unless it was really good art. The time for exploration was over and since I clearly did not have it together, I had failed.

While no one instructor had overtly suggested this to me, my young mind interpreted a notion of what an artist should be from the entirety of my experience at College. My interpretation of a successful artist created a set of criteria gleaned from the various 'rules' and 'myths' I had learned. This included being able to make work easily, being consumed by an all encompassing passion for art, knowing and utilizing the 'right' rules for making art, achieving immediate commercial success, and feeling that only the very talented could achieve success.

In retrospect, I recognize that my disillusionment was partly due to my youth and my naive assumption that I would learn all I needed to know about art from my Art College education. This is a myth shared by many students. Somehow, I expected to be filled up with art skills and knowledge, as I had been in high school, and for this to be a direct path to my making good art. Instead, I was presented with a confusing and contradictory array of opinions on art and how it should be made, and expected to navigate my own way through it.

At Art College, I was surprised to discover how polemic discussions about art were and how quickly they could become heated. As a student, I witnessed some of the instructors engaging in animated discussions about art at the school



pub, while others made their views known within the classroom. Ours was the only Canadian Art College with two painting departments, the Experimental Arts department created because the Fine Arts department had no tolerance for abstract painting. Starting out in the Fine Arts department, I quickly learned that any abstract leanings or desire to use non-traditional colours or materials was disparagingly discouraged. Feeling stymied, I switched departments the following year, and while I initially felt supported to explore any media or mode of expression I wanted, I did notice that overtly figurative painting and the use of more traditional mediums was not encouraged.

The instructors in the Experimental Arts department had no contact with the instructors in the Fine Arts department, and collectively all of the painting instructors had little tolerance for those who taught in any of the commercial design departments. While this message was seldom overt within any classroom teachings, it became part of the subtext that permeated what and how we were taught and was evident in our critiques and evaluations. Divisions created by the staff were adopted and upheld by the art students. As an abstract painting student, I felt it was my duty to adopt the hierarchy of art I was inadvertently being taught, and for many years, I really believed that certain genres of art had more value and were therefore intrinsically better than other genres.

The desire to contain and define art is a natural one. Faced with the enormity of the possibilities art offers, and the elusiveness of its nature, it is understandable that many young artists are seduced by the promise of 'the right path'. While the adoption of a hierarchy of art may provide an initial sense of

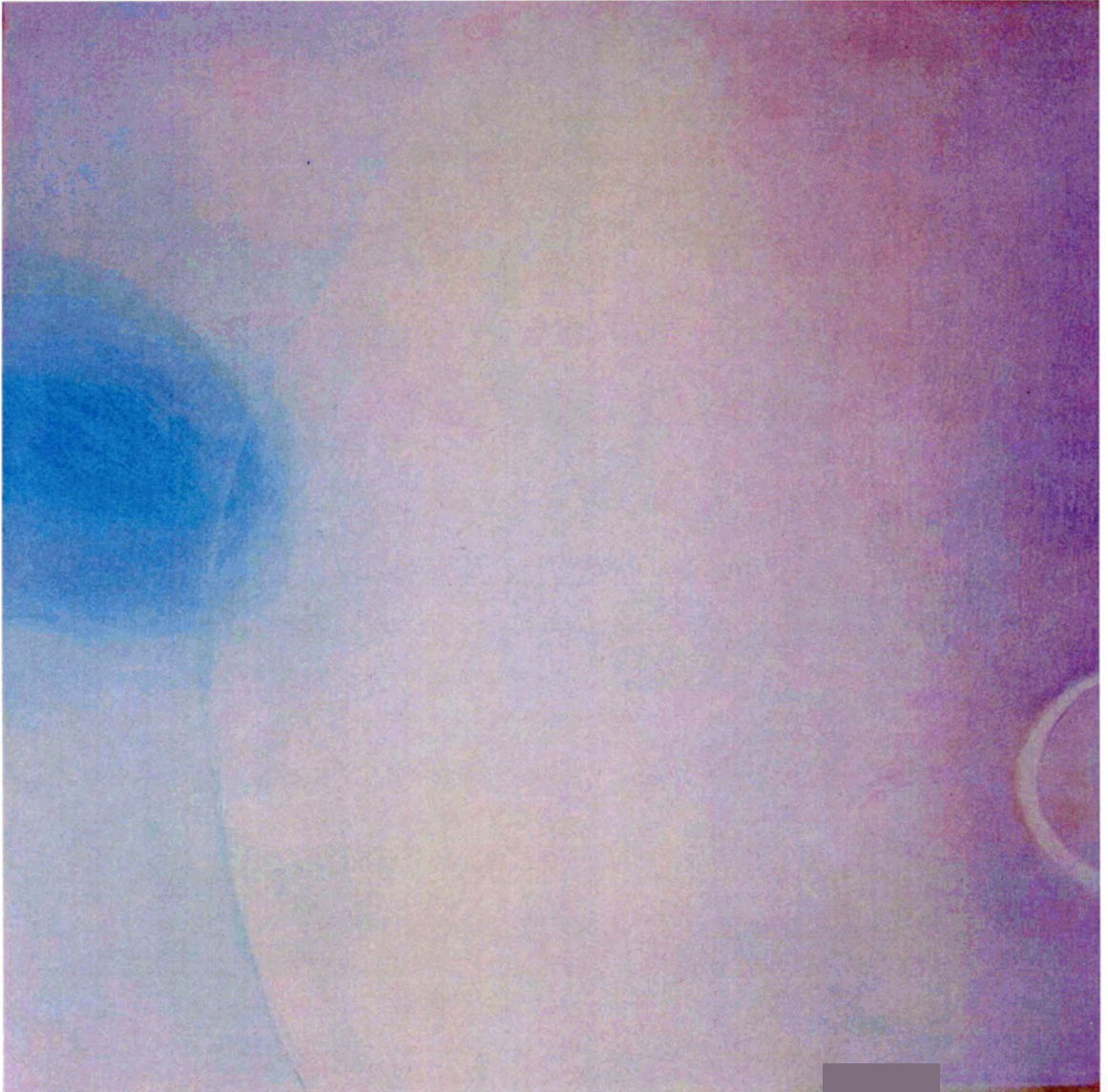
security about the art one chooses to make, it is really nothing more than a house of cards built on the overwhelming sense of insecurity that is at the core of every artist. Placing limits on art is to deny and limit the possibilities of it and to insist on a uniform and knowable concept. As Wittgenstein (1967) argues, "Concepts with fixed limits would demand a uniformity of behaviour. But where I am certain, someone else is uncertain. And that is a fact of nature" (p.68). Narrowing the focus of art with definitions of certainty does not benefit the artist who adheres to it. While such narrowness may make the challenge of making art easier at first, ultimately it can be a fatal constraint. Open-mindedness is essential if we want to have any chance of doing our best work. Uncertainty is simply art's companion and the anxiety it generates an unfortunate side effect.

It has been twenty years since I graduated from Art College, yet the impact of that education is still with me. My break from painting and confusion I felt about art in general, and my art in particular, was a direct result of my time spent there. It would be easy to say that my education failed me but I don't really believe that to be true. Rather, in an odd way, because I have such a deep commitment to making art, my education ultimately pushed me forward, opening my eyes to the complexities and pitfalls of choosing to pursue art, and of the specific dangers of adopting fixed rules for making art and for being an artist. As artist Howard Hodgkin notes, "...the fact remains that what artists do cannot beyond a certain point be taught. People have to teach themselves. You cannot teach the authenticity required by art" (Nairne 2002, p.33).

## January 26

*Spent all day painting and wiping off what I had done. It is very frustrating. Everything I do to the paintings I hate. I have nothing to show for my days work. Grumpily I leave the apartment and drive out to the base of the mountains. I wander amongst the cactus and clamber up a rocky bluff where I have a great view of the city. I breathe the sweet dry air and feel myself beginning to relax. I had set a goal before I came here of producing one painting a week, had told myself that to go home with 10 paintings would be a satisfactory accomplishment, a good use of my time here. Well so far I have nothing and I realize that that is part of my intense frustration with myself – I am not living up to my own expectations and as a consequence I am disappointed with myself. This is not a good frame of mind for my creative process. I need to be relaxed if I want to be open to observation. I need to empty my mind, to banish all preconceptions if I want to be open to the joy of new discovery. I need to abandon my production schedule and just let it happen naturally.*

*I see an interesting plant and pull out my sketchbook to draw it. It is a dried grass completely curled in a feathery circle. While drawing, a concept begins to suggest itself to me; I begin to see images of horizon lines, of opposites meeting, of the space in-between, of the contrast between the land and the sky, between wet and dry. I jot down my ideas and watch the magnificent sunset. It has not been a completely wasted day. I pluck a few of the curled grasses to take home; after all, they may inspire other creative thought processes.*



*Image 2 - Untitled # 2.*

## **Rules for Making Art**

Deeply embedded within my Art College education was the belief that there were 'rules' for making art. Teaching art is a challenge precisely because there is no consensus on what art is or what the 'rules' for making it are. Consequently, there is no consensus on how it should be taught. While many artists and theorists may agree that art cannot be taught utilizing conventional teaching methods, the fact remains that art continues to be taught, and how this is accomplished is largely left up to each individual instructor.

Some instructors at my college chose to focus on the traditional art skills and embrace the 'rules' that accompany them. The majority of these skills have been taught since the Renaissance, and are therefore considered by many to be tried and true technical approaches for traditional mediums such as drawing and painting. This includes the implementation of 'rules' regarding; traditional perspective, the Golden mean method of proportion, various composition devices, chiaroscuro and how it should be accomplished, techniques for shading such as hatching and crosshatching, positive and negative space, colour theory, egg tempera mixing, various rules for painting such as lean to fat, light to dark and neutrals to colour etc..

While some of these rules are universal within the traditions of drawing and painting in western art, such as the mechanics of colour theory, and Renaissance perspective, others are open to interpretation. When it comes to painting and drawing techniques, it is the individual interpretation of the

instructor's version of these rules that the student is encouraged to accept.

Regardless, many instructors posit their own approaches as universal and 'right' rather than an adaptation that is open to interpretation. As a result, I discovered that not all of the instructors who preferred a traditional rules-based approach to art making agreed on which rules were most important, which ones to adopt or on how they should be implemented.

While this promotion of a traditional rules-based approach to art making was really a subtle endorsement of the instructor's personal vision of how art should be made, some of my other instructors preferred to blatantly promote their own methods and techniques in favour of traditional rules. What is interesting about this approach is that this method of teaching art simply imposes another set of rules in place of traditional rules, yet fails to acknowledge that prior knowledge of traditional rules is required if one is to replace them with new rules.

Some of my art instructors recognized the problematic nature of adopting rules, and chose instead to advocate for new approaches to art making that abandoned traditional rules, and encouraged the experimental as a means of developing new, less rigid approaches to making art. While this can provide students with freedom to explore, the complete absence of direction can create anxiety in students who are used to receiving detailed direction in their other classes and do not know how to move beyond a rules-based approach. While this diversity of opinion on how art should be taught provides art students with a wide variety of approaches to choose from, the contradictions a full time art

student encounters as artwork after artwork they create is criticized, can prove to be very confusing and therefore difficult to navigate.

The wide array of art courses on offer at local Art Colleges serves to illustrate that this is as true today as it was when I first entered Art College in 1979. The choices a student makes about which courses she pursues then determines both how she will be taught, and which rules she will be encouraged to adopt. While this becomes more evident in an Art College setting, we begin to learn about the rules of how art should be made when we first begin to make art.

The young elementary school student who paints the sky green and is told by her teacher that the sky is blue not green, begins her indoctrination into the 'rules of making art'. She learns from this that it is wrong to paint the sky green, wrong because it is not realistic and that realism is what is valued. Through this experience, she begins to understand that creative exploration is encouraged only within the finite limits that are established by the teacher. If she wants to receive praise for her art then she must make art that meets the criteria established by that teacher. It is here that we are first encouraged to accept the notion that art has 'rules'. From this the great majority of us then assume that since art has rules, there is clearly a 'right' or 'proper' way to make art and failure to identify this results in disapproval.

This can be very discouraging for many children; indeed, many begin to feel like failures at art, while others simply lose interest in an art making that is increasingly defined for them. For those who do continue, high school provides most budding young artists with their initial serious art training and support. The

art education philosophy of the art teacher or teachers then either reinforces the existing rules or offers new rules about art making that the young artist cannot help but internalize.

This is an integral component in the development of young artists, after all, it is here that portfolios are developed for entry to Art College and grades assigned that determine whether a young artist is deemed good enough to continue. Following the 'right' rules then becomes important to those students who wish to study art at the post secondary level.

As young people, we are encouraged to excel and to please our teachers. Making art that does not conform to that teacher's definition of art, or to how that art should be made, does not usually garner praise. As a high school student I learned to make art that continually received praise, after all, I wanted to be liked and to receive acknowledgement for doing well. This resulted in me churning out art assignments in a manner that I knew the teacher wanted and even producing similar art at home since it impressed my family. As a result, I internalized the notion that good art was realistic, that having good traditional skills in drawing and classical oil painting were essential and that pure abstract art or art that utilized non-traditional techniques was not really art. At a young age, I had made the assumption that good art making required the 'right' set of rules if it was to be accepted. In other words, I believed there was a right way to make art.

While I enjoyed the praise I received, I was not making art that was challenging or even terribly satisfying to me. At age fifteen, I was sent on a two-week residential art course that radically challenged and changed how I defined



and made art. Randomly, we were assigned to various art teachers and I found myself in a group led by a young art teacher with a passion for contemporary painting and drawing. In retrospect, I realize that had I not been assigned to him my work may not have evolved in the way it has. He challenged our compulsion to make art whose only function was to please others, and instead encouraged us to make art without a safety net, art that was raw and expressed who we were, rather than what we thought others wanted to see. It was a pivotal moment in my career as an artist, to this day, I still have the paintings I made on that course, and I am still astonished by their open freshness whenever I look at them.

While my own high school art teacher was not so enamoured with the new direction I was taking in my art, I knew instinctively that this was what I had been looking for. Working abstractly provided me with the passion and excitement that had been missing; it challenged me to seek new solutions and instilled a freedom of expression that I had not felt since I was in first grade. Many of the rules I had previously adopted were now in question. My belief that only realist art was good art was challenged, and marked the beginning of the dismantling of many of my previous conceptions of art.

Interestingly, I did not abandon all I had previously learned about art, indeed, I do not think that is even possible. The traditional skills of observation, drawing techniques, design, colour theory and composition, provided me with a strong foundation, a foundation that supported my exploration. However, I no longer accepted the rules of making art that I had been initially taught, and now

began to see that art making was more diverse than I had been led to believe. This marked the beginning of my realization that I could make my own work rather than work that served to please others; it offered exciting new opportunities for exploration that utilized the skills I had learned in order to find my own voice. As Richmond (2004) identifies

Originality may partly be a function of the ability to navigate rules, without necessarily knowing where they might lead, to rely on trial and error and have some luck, but artists must also be able to think for themselves and to some extent operate freely, outside of the rules, if the language and methods of art are to serve any creative purpose (p.113).

Art College provided me with the opportunity to further this exploration within an environment where many opinions about how art should be made coexisted. The challenge was in wading through the great diversity of opinion and determining which rules worked for me. This was not an easy task. Some of my instructors were very forthright and even rigid about which techniques could be used in their classroom. Others were so open and non-committal, that the lack of direction provoked anxiety rather than creativity. Most of my instructors fell somewhere in the middle, encouraging exploration, but at the same time subtly advocating for an art making that was reminiscent of their own approach and therefore promoted their own rules of art making simply because it was what was familiar to them.

As a result, I fell back into old art making patterns and as a result, much of the work I made at Art College was tailored to pleasing individual instructors rather than about exploring the art I wanted to make. This meant that my artwork

was not particularly consistent, since the expectations of instructors varied greatly, even between instructors within the same department. While one of my teachers encouraged me to explore figurative painting, and received that work favourably, another teacher did not and encouraged, and expected, pure abstraction only.

While I had aligned myself with the Experimental Arts department, and had determined that painting was my main area of interest, this did not preclude me from being interested in other art mediums. My explorations led me back to the Fine Arts department and to printmaking in particular. While I did feel free to explore my own imagery within printmaking, interestingly, I did not find that the results of this very traditional medium were received favourably within my own department. As a result, I began to interpret that engaging in this art form was not considered as valuable as painting or other contemporary art practices.

Printmaking then became a guilty pleasure for me, an activity I never felt completely free to explore because of the lack of interest I received from my instructors in Experimental Arts. Inevitably, I gave it up; too immature to understand that I could make my own decisions about whether this medium was relevant or not and too concerned that continuing meant risking my grades and standing within my department.

It is not surprising that I, and many of my fellow art students, acquired conflicting ideas about art and about how art should be made. While many of the mature students fared better at discerning what worked for them and discarding what did not, as a young student, I was less able to make this judgment. With a

wide variety of rules available through each instructor, and my own belief that a 'right' set of rules for art making existed, the assimilation of these rules was contradictory and overwhelming. Regardless, it never occurred to me, at that time, to question the existence of a 'right' set of rules.

It was several years after I graduated from Art College before I began to question the whole notion of rules for art. My belief in a definitive set of rules for making good art was responsible for my not making any art at all. I began to understand that rules were personal and conceptual, rather than universal and fixed, and as such, there was no magic set of rules that ensured the 'right' way to make art. My previous conception of rules had included notions that art should be made in a particular manner, I should produce a painting each day, painting is easy, I should only use certain mediums, I should adopt a style of painting that is contemporary and fashionable, and I should be able to achieve commercial success quickly and easily.

This limiting and unrealistic definition of how to make art and how to be an artist had left me creatively paralyzed. While I did not discard the skills of art making or the rules that accompany them, (indeed, in my current art explorations I still use the rules of composition and colour theory and have learned many new paintings techniques from other artists and instructors) it is how I view them that has changed. Rather than seeing these rules as a component of an all-encompassing set of rules, I now accept them as useful tools that allow me to access art making. This realization allowed me to start painting again and to

explore an art, and way of making art, that moved freely outside of the rules I had been encouraged to embrace.

My current art has then been developed from experimentation and accidents rather than following any of the rules of art I learned in Art College. This was also the experience of ten of the twelve artists I interviewed. Indeed, New Mexico artist Margi Weir, who holds one BFA, one BA and two MFA degrees from respected American universities, went so far as to say that all of her work has developed and evolved from her own experimentation rather than anything she learned at college. Curious about why she had pursued so much art education she replied that it was the community these colleges provided that she sought, rather than any expectation that she could learn anything of value from the instructors. Margi expressed that she had been very self directed during her graduate degrees and therefore quite clear about what she wanted to explore and why. As a result, she felt supported within each of the academic environments she entered. Art College can then offer a supportive environment and resources for those mature, self-directed students who carefully choose which instructors to work with.

However, the fact remains that the vast majority of students entering Art Colleges are recent high school graduates and, because of their youth, are more malleable and susceptible to imposed rules of art. In my teaching I struggle with teaching rules of art because I know so many of my students will assimilate them without challenge. Yet, as an instructor of drawing and painting I cannot ignore that the basic principles of these mediums need to be taught (indeed, they are

really the only aspects I can teach) and understood by students. My own education in the traditional skills provided me with the knowledge, understanding and skills I needed in order to continue exploring. I can only hope that like me, my students will come to their own conclusions about the rules of making art, determine which of these rules work for them to benefit their art, and which ones do not.

In summary, the rules of art as we come to understand them first emerge as soon as we begin to make art. Influenced by the reception of our early art works, we assimilate the rules established by our teacher(s) and tailor our work accordingly. Some simply give up, either bored or disillusioned by the restriction of the teacher's rules, while those who continue to make art adopt the teacher's rules and learn to enjoy the praise that accompanies this. This will vary depending on who the teacher is and what her art making philosophy is. Some students may have teachers who prefer and promote realism and traditional skills, while others may encounter teachers who value expression and diversity in art and encourage experimentation. Regardless, a set of rules about art making, and an assumption that rules allow students to access the 'right' way to make art, will be accepted and become the knowledge base from which all art exploration begins.

For budding artists, Art College is where many face their greatest challenge. Rules abound, grades are assigned and art factions form as students attempt to both find their own work, and determine which rules are useful to them, and which are not. For many, the confusing and conflicting opinions on art

making can prove to be too difficult to navigate, causing them to give up rather than continue to grapple with the confusion until they find their own way. The belief that there are rules about art and art making, and that some of these rules must be more 'right' than other rules, lodges in the psyche of every young art student. While the particulars of these rules vary from student to student, it is really the continued belief that a magic formula must exist, that is largely responsible for the confusion and insecurity that takes hold.

Rules about making art are then both inevitable and unavoidable, both useful and destructive. They provide us with support and structure, yet can also hamper free expression and exploration. Dismantling the rules we have learned is essential for artists if they are to discover what their own work is. We simply cannot find our own work if we adhere to the rules established by someone else. As Wittgenstein (1980) observes,

Every artist has been influenced by others and shows traces of that influence in his works; but his significance for us is nothing but his personality. What he inherits from others can be nothing but eggshells. We should treat their presence with indulgence, but they won't provide us with spiritual nourishment (p.23).

## **Rules for being an Artist**

Accompanying the rules for making art are the rules for being an artist. As I have explored, art students look to teachers and other artists for the rules of how to make art, it is then not surprising that they also learn how to be an artist from these same rules. I am referring here to how an artist chooses to live within society and how she chooses to present herself as an artist. While certain personality traits may determine aspects of how an artist interprets how to be, the

uncertainty that surrounds art making and the role of the artist in society, tends to motivate artists to seek approval and advice for who they are and want to become from those who have gone before them. Art history then forms the primary source of mentorship for most young artists, and this is augmented by the availability of movies and novels within popular culture that have explored the lives of famous artists. In this context, 'myths' and 'rules' become much intertwined.

Popular culture has provided us with the most visceral and accessible descriptions of the lives of a number of artists. The fact that such a large number of movies (especially in recent years) have been made about artists illustrates the ongoing fascination we have with them and the enduring nature of the myths that surround them. The more difficult and tortured their lives, the more interested we are in them. We are seduced by drama and adversity, and are fascinated by those who overcome life's hurdles in order to make the art we now revere and consider part of our cultural legacy. Perhaps it is their drive that most interests us, a drive to pursue their vision regardless of how impractical it may appear to do so. As painter Gerhard Richter (1995) observes,

One has to believe in what one is doing, one has to commit oneself inwardly, in order to do painting. Once obsessed, one ultimately carries it to the point of believing that one might change human beings through painting. But if one lacks this passionate commitment, there is nothing left to do. Then it is best to leave it alone. For basically painting is total idiocy (p.78).

I agree with Richter that a commitment to making art is necessary, and it is through this commitment that artists find their sense of purpose. While some



may consider a life devoted to art a life of self-indulgence, the passion cannot be denied. I have come to understand that it is the passionate obsession that Richter identifies that is so seductive to contemporary culture. We envy those who can feel strongly and passionately, who literally pursue a vision in order to make their art, regardless of any personal costs or ridicule. It has connotations of the spiritual, of connecting with something otherworldly and powerful, travelling bravely into the unknown at the service of art even if it risks madness.

This romantic myth makes for riveting drama and I would argue that this is why so many films have been made about the lives of painters, musicians, writers and performers. They are different; eccentrics who are gifted idealists, mad geniuses ahead of their time, bohemians who make their own rules and ignore or rail against the establishment. Interestingly, it is the bestowing of these terms, and the subsequent adoption of them by artists who are desperate to somehow find where they can fit into the social order that, ironically, becomes the cornerstone around which the rules for being an artist congregate.

While it is important to acknowledge that Postmodernism has challenged this notion of the artist as hero, and within contemporary western society the role of the visual artist has and is changing, the business of art (which is separate from art theory and largely market driven) is still very much involved in maintaining the heroic image of the artist simply because it has a vested financial interest in doing so. American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat is a good example of this. Famous as much for his early death from a heroin overdose in the late 1980's as for his raw graffiti laden canvases, Basquiat was considered important

enough to become the subject of a popular movie dramatizing his life and art. Initially mentored by Andy Warhol, Basquiat was quickly subsumed into the commercial gallery scene of eighties New York. While he had marginal financial success in his life, his early death solidified his fame and ensured fortune for the collectors who held his work. Hughes (1990) identifies that part of Basquiat's appeal to dealers and art collectors was to be located in the, "audience's goggling appetite for self-destructive talent" (p.311). Lauded posthumously by art critics in a wide variety of publications, the twenty-seven year old Basquiat was quickly ushered into the American pantheon of artists because his paintings were commanding up to \$300,000 (pp.311-12). While many, including Hughes, question the validity of the reputation that has been posthumously bestowed on this artist, the art market has assured that the myth they have helped to propagate will maintain the financial value of the work he did make in his short career.

The relationship of art with money is a complex one, and while many artists working within the post modern umbrella reject the relationship of art with capital, it is a pervasive connection that every artist must address whether they enter the professional art world or not. Money is a necessary fact of contemporary existence and as such becomes an interesting component of how an artist determines what kind of artist she will be.

The annals of art history are full of artists of all classes and financial statuses; however, the majority of my students embrace a common myth of the artist that equates them with poverty and lack of recognition in their lifetime. This

conception of the artist with poverty is a pervasive one amongst the general public; after all, artists live lives that veer outside of the socially accepted structure of middleclass life and so it is assumed that it is difficult for them to earn a comfortable living. The stories of those artists from art history that have been embraced by popular culture, because they have led the most dramatic lives, have provided our culture with the most common conception of who an artist is and what their life is like. Van Gogh, Pollock, Kholo, Basquiat, and Carr have all captivated our imagination through various dramatizations of their lives. All shared a common struggle with lack of recognition and subsequent poverty and obscurity in their lifetime.

Regardless of the fact that this is a generalization, and one that certainly does not embrace all artists, the romanticism of the artist as underdog is a seductive one that plays to our collective desire, both artists and the general public, to escape the mundane aspects of everyday life. It is simply more interesting than a vision of the artist as a routine oriented family man who generates a respectable yearly income from the sale of his artwork.

Consequently, many art students become suspicious of those artists who achieved success in their lifetime, and choose instead to embrace the idea that only those artists who suffered (financially and emotionally) were true artists and therefore, the work produced by them considered the best art. Considering suffering *de rigueur*, the pursuit of art became enmeshed with a desire to feel, as these artists must have felt, welcoming poverty and choosing an exterior image that fit with this myth of the artist.

My fellow students and I adopted this notion from both the instructors and from popular culture, and reinforced it to suit our idealized image of the artist. I remember many discussions with other students about the evils of turning our talents towards commercial art, and about the necessity of keeping our art pure if we hoped to make great art. While idealism is common in college, and even considered to be a rite of passage by some, this particular idealism is embraced by many artists as one of the rules for being an artist. For these artists, poverty is then equated with honour, determination, drive, and the quest to make great art. Artists such as Van Gogh, Cezanne, Pollack, Carr and Blake may become the models of 'how to be an artist' for all those artists who identify with them.

While it is true that many artists have, and do live, financially marginal lives, many artists are financially independent, while many more live comfortable lives from the proceeds of their art. Those artists who reject the notion of art and poverty, and embrace the idea that financial success and critical acclaim can be theirs, may choose artists such as Picasso, Da Vinci, Bourgeois, O'Keefe and Bacon as role models. Similarly, those artists who reject the equation of art with the capitalism of the art market may look to the lives and art practice of Duchamp, Beuys, Christo, Sherman and Wall for inspiration and guidance on how to be an artist.

Connecting with the work of other artists is another significant factor in determining how an artist interprets the rules for being an artist. Artists are less likely to listen to, or seek out, those artists whose artwork they do not feel a connection with; artists become interested in those artists whose work they

admire and feel relates to their own. The connection will be further deepened if the admired artist is also of the same gender, race, class and sexual orientation of the young artist. If all these factors are met, the young artist is very likely to develop rules for being an artist that carefully emulate the life of the admired artist.

Many of my fellow students willingly embraced rules about how to be an artist from the lifestyles of their chosen mentor artist. This would often include how to make art, how much art should be made, how much time to spend in the studio, whether the art was made in the studio or in situ, how to relate to other artists, what art to like and dislike, how to dress, what to read, etc.. I was envious of those friends who seemed so assured about their direction and about how to project a confident artist persona. They had managed to adopt some rules that allowed them to feel comfortable about being an artist and helped them find a place within society where they felt accepted, largely because another had travelled this path before them. Much as I longed for a strong art role model, I found it difficult to find an artist I could identify with.

I was very enamoured by the work of the Abstract Expressionists as an art student and, in particular, the work of Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell. However, as a female student painter, I could not relate to their lives or lifestyles, so I looked to the few female painters acknowledged in art history for role models to help me navigate and learn how to be an artist. While I could identify with some aspects of the lives and struggles of painters such as Emily Carr, Georgia O'Keefe, Lee Krasner and Joyce Weiland, I was unable to deeply connect with

the artwork of any of these female artists largely because they were not of my era. This was further complicated by the fact that this was the very early 1980's and painting, along with other traditional art mediums, was challenged by post modern artists and critics, some of whom were advocating for all artists, and especially female artists to abandon traditional art mediums and embrace new conceptual models of art making.

Feeling confused about the value of continuing to paint in an era when painting was seen as problematic, and unable to find a role model I could truly identify with throughout my Art College education, meant that I had trouble seeing myself as a working artist in the world beyond Art College. I graduated at age twenty-one disillusioned and confused about art and my connection with it. What had once seemed sure and known was now unclear and in a state of flux. I was lost and unable to find a way forward. Paradoxically, it is these same facts that allowed me to access and develop my own art language with relative ease when I began to paint again several years later. While finding a strong role model may have helped me through those difficult times, the other side of identifying closely with another artist(s) is that your artwork, working habits and lifestyle may become overtly connected to that artist(s). This can provide a false sense of security that can actually prevent the individual growth that is essential if an artist is to learn how to speak in her own voice and make her own art. Role models can provide the artist with much needed guidance, however, clinging to a strict set of 'rules' about how to be an artist does not encourage the personal development required for independent confidence and exploration.

Unhampered by any specific template of how to be an artist, I plunged back into painting in my late twenties and, interestingly, found myself making paintings that were unlike any of the paintings I had made before. It truly was a new beginning, and through the surprising power, that these fresh (though definitely imperfect) paintings provided me with, I discovered that I did intuitively know that my path was unique to me and only required the continued development of my visual language in order to continue. What became most important was that I was making art that was for me, an art that was not about the approval of others or about following the rules of others. I regained my passion and love for the activity, and found myself slipping into a disciplined routine of art making with surprising ease. I felt I was finally making the art I was meant to make.

Taos artist Barbara Zaring expressed similar sentiments about the art she is now making. Finding herself no longer interested, or able, to make the landscape paintings that had provided her with a lucrative income, Barbara took the brave step of honouring her need to make her own art, radically changing her painting style in the process, and accepting the financial and professional insecurity it created.

Since art making is a profession of uncertainty that lacks consensus on who is an artist, art students and young artists discover that they must navigate this to the best of their ability. In determining how to be an artist, it is then natural for young artists to look to the lives and careers of established artists. The rules for being an artist are gleaned from the personal details of artists' lives we learn

from art history and popular culture. From this, art students choose artists whose artwork, values and personalities they identify with. They are often from the same class and financial backgrounds, are the same gender, race or sexual orientation and usually work in the same medium(s). These well-known artists then supply student artists with a variety of templates for 'being an artist' and from these, students adapt their own set of rules about how to be an artist that are suited to their practice. While finding a strong role model to emulate can be very helpful in the initial development of an artist's career, there are pitfalls in adhering too closely to the rules of another.

Some artists ultimately find it difficult to move beyond the security the rules they have adopted provide, and find that the growth of their art is hampered by the rules that once helped. As Peter London (1989) identifies,

We fear getting lost. We believe that we are not lost when we know where something else is and how far we are from it...the disabling effect of this thought process on our creative endeavors is this: if we feel lost without the familiar, without guidelines, without interior orientation, we will never stray far from home. We will stay around familiar territory, which is nice, but certainly not news (p.50).

Since rules are such an integral part of our social structure, imparted to us early in childhood through our education system and continuing throughout it, it is difficult and clearly frightening to let go of them. Many artists do not, happy instead to adopt a style of working that is amenable to rules and a viewing public that respects and supports them for doing so. Even for those artists who seek to abandon the rules of art and search for new ways of working in order to develop their own visual language with which to communicate, rules once learned are not



easily forgotten, and while some of them can be useful, others can prove to be barriers that hinder rather than promote creative exploration.

While the common myths surrounding artists herald them as interesting people with dramatically interesting lives, the majority of the artists I know would not be considered very interesting at all. Far from being insulting to these artists, I merely wish to point out that making art is hard work and requires discipline and dedication. Most of these artists work diligently and quietly, creating bodies of work that allow them to journey along their own path, evolving and gaining more insights as they go. This is hardly the stuff of blockbuster movies and is often uninteresting to those who demand a juicy myth rather than reality. While the myth is also seductive to artists, after all it can provide them with a map of how to be an artist and of the type of art that is most likely to be rewarded, most serious and committed artists learn how to navigate through the rules of art and find their way into making their own art with their own voice. This is an art that is frequently divorced from any of the prevailing myths of art and artists that they may have clung to early in their art careers.

After all, it is from those artists who have broken the old rules that the new rules are made from, and invariably it is their innovation and break from tradition that is most attractive to young artists. As Marcel Duchamp notes about his own art practice, "Tradition is the great misleader because it's too easy to follow what has already been done – even though you may think you're giving it a kick. I was really trying to invent, instead of merely expressing myself" (Kuh, 1962, p.83).

In the following chapters, I will then explore how artists really make art and learn how to navigate through the rules and myths propagated through art history and popular culture. This will include an exploration of the various strategies artists employ in order to facilitate art making.

# **Chapter Three - Strategies for Facilitating Art Making Part One**

## **The Physical: Time, Place and Peers**

Regardless of what myths or rules any artist is navigating at any point in time, the life of any serious artist is involved in the challenging process of making art. There are many things that influence this process, and the next two chapters explore a number of factors that influence the making of art.

In this chapter I examine the physical conditions artists require in order to make art and explore the variety of unique ways that each artist has of ensuring their own art making process continues in the context of the stresses of critique and in dealing with the struggle around 'rules'.

Understanding what conditions are most conducive to ensuring that art gets made is essential. In my own art making practice, this falls into two categories: the physical and the emotional. Physical aspects include the importance of time, place and peers, while emotional factors that must be addressed are various fears involving judgment, uncertainty, success and failure.

As children, we make art when and where we want to without worrying about any aspect of engaging in the art making process. It is an uncensored, instinctual expression that is simple and enjoyable. As we emerge into adulthood, making art becomes a very different experience. Socialization and the influence

of prevailing views on social structure and education affect how we think about all aspects of our life, including art. We learn to discern between good and bad, often encouraged to utilize the most famous artists from art history as a means of measuring our own abilities. Falling short is inevitable; even the most talented young artist lacks the experience and practice of the seasoned veteran. Regardless, the myth of raw talent prevails, dramatically changing our relationship to art making by replacing the simple joy and freedom of expression we feel as children with an anxiety and self-consciousness that can turn art making into an unpleasant, fear filled experience.

This emotional response results either in an abandonment of engaging in art making or a resolve to continue and learn to deal with the emotional responses. While some artists develop a thick skin early on in their career and manage to find a way to make the art they are meant to make, regardless of the response that art receives, many more artists struggle to make 'their' art within a climate that frequently offers a lukewarm reception and plenty of critical opinion.

In this context, efforts to understand and control their art making environment become crucial to the artist who wishes to continue making art. Learning how to weather the storm of critical opinion is essential for all artists, yet, this is not an easy task. As an activity and a profession, art making is not considered very important, indeed, within our current K to 12 education systems, the arts are usually the first programs to be cut in times of fiscal restraint. This serves to reinforce the marginalization of the arts and strengthens the belief that the pursuit of art is not financially lucrative and therefore not an advisable or

useful way to spend one's time. Flying in the face of public opinion is not easy, it is the uncertainty and fear that this engenders that contributes, in large part, to the fact that making art is difficult and riddled with doubt.

Accompanying this general lack of interest is the fact that art making is only financially rewarding to a few. As James Elkins (2001) notes, "Out of a thousand art students, maybe five will make a living off their art, and perhaps one will be known outside her city "(p.67). With the odds so stacked against them, in a society that is obsessed with financial success, it is really no surprise that many art students become discouraged and simply stop making art. Along with myself, many of my fellow painting students stopped making art upon graduation from Art College. Faced with the realities of daily living and of securing gainful employment, I know that many left the field entirely or chose to follow more financially lucrative creative paths such as commercial art and art related fields. I spent many years working in the theatre and film industries as a costume tailor and set painter, and while I was certainly able to utilize my creative abilities in the service of others, I was not making the art I wanted to make and had little time left over to devote to it.

For many, family obligations and the sheer business of contemporary life will ensure that their own art will never be made. A few find their way back and learn how to juggle life's obligations with their desire to make art. I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of available time for art making and realized that without art in my life I was increasingly unhappy. Making art

fulfils a part of me that cannot be satisfied any other way. Simply put, if I do not make art I am miserable.

Identifying this was very important for me. Instead of trying to deny that I was an artist, I began to accept that art was the one subject I was passionate about and that I was the only person stopping myself from making art. After all, a negative critique from the public realm might wound me emotionally but it cannot physically stop me from making my own art. Beginning to paint again was tenuous, yet the sheer joy of engaging in something I loved was so rewarding that it was surprisingly easy to make a commitment to making art on a regular basis.

## **Commitment**

Artists must make a commitment to their process, must make a conscious choice to engage in art making and learn how to filter and sift through the myriad opinions on art. Artists must learn how to make their work under the umbrella of art history, to find their own path; regardless of the conflicting opinions of art educators and specialists on aesthetics, and to put aside the popular mythologies that surround the artist and art making. Making the commitment to art and to choosing to follow one's own path is the first step in ensuring that art will get made. The second step is to combine this commitment with practical strategies for a sustained art practice.

Art making is difficult, I may start a new series of paintings with high hopes of moving radically forward only to have it fail miserably and unceremoniously.

Ironically, these can be my most creatively lucrative times - since failure often generates a more sustainable idea, however, they are also my most vulnerable times. It is here that I am most likely to succumb to various fears about my art such as uncertainty, self-doubt and the opinions of others. However, my commitment to make art becomes the bridge to the next day and continued art making.

On other occasions, maintaining the self-discipline to continue working is also a challenge. Another common myth is that artists always enjoy what they are doing and create art effortlessly. While this may occasionally be true, most artists find that making their work can be a real struggle, and parts of the process laborious and boring. I have days when I go to the studio, look at my current project, and feel an overwhelming desire to flee. Procrastination is always lurking and I discovered through my interviews that it is a common issue for all artists; reading, napping, going to movies, shopping, going for coffee and visiting other artists were all common procrastination devices. For some artists being in the studio can be overwhelming, forcing honest encounters with the work and offering no escape from it. As painter Howard Hodgkin admits,

Being in that white room without anyone to talk to, it's quite demanding and so I think, well...it's time to have a cup of coffee, or five minutes later it's time to go out to have a cup of coffee again. Or I just go across the road to the British Museum. The trouble with being in your studio is that there is nowhere else to go. I haven't got a window I could look out, I can't see the clouds in the sky, and the loneliness is something that I have never really got used to... I hate painting. There's always a wonderful moment, however, when finally I decide the painting is finished. And then, less and less now because the time is getting short, you think I've got to paint another one, or rather finish another one, and being alone with your deadlines in your studio on the one hand, and alone – for want of a

better word – with your muse, which keeps going away, or disappearing round the next corner; it's not easy (Nairne, 2002, p.37).

Faced with the challenge of maintaining a disciplined art practice, artists rely primarily on their commitment, that is, the commitment they have made to themselves to make art. As Hodgkin observes, this is not easy, and since he is a well-established English painter, it is important to note that recognition and success do not make this process any easier. How then do artists manage to make their art? While commitment is undoubtedly an essential component of a continuing art practice, in order for artists to make sure their art gets made, rather than just staying in their head, artists require the support of various strategies in order to help facilitate art making. I will now look at some of the physical strategies that artists employ to ensure art is made.

## **Time**

Most artists discover that making art consumes large amounts of time and any desire to make better art is only attained through a sustained art practice. Like most activities, we can become better through continued practice, art making is no different. Many non-artists and beginning artists come to art with the mistaken belief that art making happens quickly and with little effort. Contrary to this myth, art making can be labour intensive, time consuming, and requires patience if one is to learn from and enjoy the process

Without time, art does not get made. Setting aside blocks of time to make art requires both a commitment to the art making process and compromises in



other avenues of one's life. For every artist the amount of time they can or need to devote to art making varies. Often the medium itself, or the labour intensity of the techniques employed, determines how much time is required. How much time artists can actually devote to their art is most often dependent on whether that artist has employment obligations other than art making. Most of the artists I interviewed were unable to make their living entirely from their art and as a result most work at other jobs in order to supplement their incomes. Even those who have attained financial success through their art have business obligations that arise from this success and impacts upon the time they spend in the studio.

Family obligations are another factor that determines how much time artists have to spend in the studio. Artists who have children have the added complication of needing to split their time between family obligations, any outside employment and studio time. For many women artists with children, the ongoing tradition of being the primary care giver results in having very little free time and energy to devote to art making. For some this can signal the end of art making entirely, while for others it can be either a temporary sabbatical, or an opportunity to discover mediums and modes of art making that are conducive to snatched moments of time. Jane Wolsak, a Vancouver painter, found that drawing was the medium that worked well and allowed her to keep up her skills and continue making small art works during the years she was caring for her two young daughters. Not surprisingly, many women artists simply choose not to have children keenly aware that the compromise required may be too difficult for them to make.

Time is also a necessary component in coming to understand what your own art and art practice is. As such, time is not only required to make art, but also to reflect on making art. Through reflection comes an increased awareness of one's own style and of the direction the art needs to go in order to advance and grow. Finding your own art and art form is perhaps the most elusive aspect of art making and can take years to emerge for some artists. The question I am most frequently asked by my students is how one finds one's own style. There is, of course, no definitive answer to this question other than to be oneself and continue making art. Faith in one's ability and a level of comfort with the uncertainty of it all is also important. After all, even when you do find your own style and the art you will feel 'you are meant to make', it is not an end in itself. Art is not stagnant, and the artist who continues to grow with and through her art will desire the art to evolve also.

Some artists make a habit out of exploring other mediums and welcome the opportunity to explore other styles. David Hockney chose to move away from painting and explore making collaged photographic images. While he eventually returned to painting, it was with a renewed perspective informed by his photographic explorations. Lilly Fenichel, a painter I interviewed in Albuquerque, is consistently pushing the boundaries of painting. Now in her seventies, her most recent series of paintings was evidence of a dramatic shift in style, embracing a rawness of expression that created controversy and garnered some criticism when she exhibited them in Taos. Regardless, Lilly simply stated that these paintings needed to be made, that for her, making art is about engaging in

honesty and honest communication, and her explorations are in the service of this, about making the art she needs to make.

Discovering what your own art is and furthering your growth as an artist only happens if enough time is devoted to art making. Committing oneself to a regular studio schedule usually means that compromises will need to be made in one's lifestyle. While full-time employment may guarantee a more secure financial life, those artists who work full-time at other jobs, regardless of how related that job is to their own art practice, will have depleted time to make art.

Many artists eventually choose to compromise on their standard of living in order to free up more studio time. As I have already mentioned most of the artists I interviewed have various part-time jobs, some art related, others not. Most will work the minimum number of hours they need in order to make ends meet so they can have as much time as possible in the studio. While the artists I know do not live in abject poverty, they are certainly not in the upper income brackets of society. While this serves to reinforce the myth of the starving artist, it is important to identify that all of the artists I spoke to are very clear about their choice to pursue art and the compromises it requires.

This then raises the problem of having enough time to devote to art making if the artist is working at other jobs. I used to work as a contract costumer for the theatre and film industry. This job allowed me to work very hard for periods of time and save enough money to take time off between contracts to paint. The problem with this arrangement was that there were long periods of fallow time in between my painting breaks, which became increasingly

frustrating. Teaching art part-time has given me the time to make art on a daily basis, however, I have had to compromise and make adjustments in my lifestyle to accommodate my smaller yearly income. Interestingly, this is not a sacrifice for me; rather, it is a relief to finally be able to spend most of my time making art. However, this decision to spend more time making art has raised the question of why I am making art and what its value is both to myself, and to society.

Within contemporary society, we have learned to determine worth in financial terms and to devalue activities that do not generate a profit. This is not lost on artists who struggle to make their work and then struggle with the worth of the end result and, by implication, the value of spending one's time making art is then in question. Furthered by the lowly place art occupies within our education system, there is a general notion within western society that art making is not a valuable use of one's time. This is where connections with other artists become important, indeed, knowing that there are others also engaged in the same activity and struggling with the same issues is one of the reasons that I continue making art.

Time is then the cornerstone upon which any art making practice is built. Success (regardless of how we interpret it) is unlikely if art does not get made or only gets made sporadically. Volume is important since it is only through doing that the artist learns and becomes more proficient at her craft. As Bayles and Orland (1993) identify, "The function of the overwhelming majority of your artwork is simply to teach you how to make the small fraction of your artwork that soars...you learn how to make your work by making your work, and a great many

of the pieces you make along the way will never stand out as finished art” (pp.5, 6)

Self-discipline is then a very important partner of time. Maintaining a regular and consistent schedule of time spent in the studio is the only way to guarantee that work is made, and as Bayles and Orland so astutely note, making lots of work is the only way to ensure that at least some of that work will be your best.

## **January 22**

*I gesso two more boards in anticipation of another day of wrestling. My hope is that working on four paintings at once will encourage something to coalesce. I stare at the blank boards and nothing comes to mind. The two turquoise glazed boards seem more interesting in the morning light. The light glazes underneath are showing through, altering the colour of the turquoise. This is the beauty of working with glazes – even my mistakes can create depth and contribute to a satisfying under- painting. I feel some of the panic abating. There is something here that can be built on and this is enough of a glimmer of hope to allow me to continue working on the two turquoise paintings. I am both anxious and excited; feelings that always accompany the beginning of a new series. The anxiety is always lurking, I always doubt that I will be able to paint anything good again. It is a self-doubt that I am continually learning how to manage. The only solution for me is to jump in and work. Even if I hate what I do, it is better than feeling paralyzed by fear that I will not be able to make another good painting.*

*One painting is paler and I try to preserve that. I work with light green and gold glazes over it trying to enrich the existing colours and faint forms. The other is going to be a blue painting. I feel some relief at accepting that it is alright to stick with something familiar; perhaps through it I will discover something new. I need it, I am in an unfamiliar land, a strange apartment and completely alone.*

## **January 24**

*I went hiking with Tom. We went into the backcountry and drove for miles on dirt roads before hiking out to petroglyphs and a slot canyon. I was struck by the fact that the land was empty. We saw no one. The sun here is intense, unrelenting, bleaching much of the landscape. It is in sharp contrast with the vibrant colours that are to be found in some elements of the landscape; shocking red cliffs, bright gold hoodoos, spectacular pink and orange winter sunsets. I can feel the environment beginning to make its mark on me. I need to get to know it before I can learn from it, before it can seep into my unconscious and emerge in a conscious knowing of how to depict it in paint. Even though my paintings are abstract, I have always gained inspiration from what I see around me. This means that landscape is a major factor, and in particular, light. I don't understand the light here yet, it seems too bright, too large, too glaring and the relentlessness of it gives me headaches if I spend too much time outside. It is as if I cannot see clearly, as if my eyes have become suddenly acutely sensitive to light. I am so used to the grey-blue light of Vancouver, not this sharp-white light. I am feeling confounded by it.*



*Image 3 - Untitled # 3*

## Place

As these journal entries attest, my relationship with place not only affects my ability to make art, it can influence the content of my paintings. I am certainly not alone in my sensitivity to environment; many artists make very deliberate choices about where they live based on their creative needs. Seven of the eight artists I interviewed in New Mexico had migrated there from other parts of the country and all cited the importance of place as one of the components that helps facilitate making art. Five of the six artists I spoke to in Vancouver were also either migrants or immigrants and, despite the small size of the professional art market here, all recognize that the environment is key to sustaining their art practice.

Contrary to the myth that great art is only made in the major art centres, and therefore any artist who wishes to achieve success should move to that centre, art, including great art, is made everywhere. While it is true that the greatest proliferation of galleries and that the largest communities of professional artists are to be found in cities like New York, Berlin, Paris, London, Toronto, Santa Fe and Los Angeles etc., not all serious and accomplished artists choose to live in these so called 'art centres'. Many well know artists chose to live and make their work in locations far removed from the 'art centre' of the day. Georgia O'Keefe, Agnes Martin, Emily Carr, Andy Goldsworthy, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Khalo were all captivated by the places that they chose to live in and found the inspiration for their work directly from this place.



The first issue I then want to explore is how place influences the artist and the content of their art. While the landscape may be the first thing we think about when we consider place, in fact, we have a variety of relationships to place. I have identified two levels of place, macro and micro. The macro level place is about the environment we inhabit on a large scale. This includes the city, the province and the country. On a micro level, place includes our community, workspaces and home. The places we choose, and our experiences with them, are layered with culture(s) and our responses to culture(s), as well as memories and personal histories. Place is then clearly a complex notion that embraces many meanings and understandings, can be inspirational, memorable and evocative. As Lippard (1997) identifies, "Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth" (p.7).

Since place is layered with our own personal experience of it, it is then no surprise that two people cannot share the exact same experience. The importance of place, and of particular aspects of it, then varies greatly amongst artists, indeed, it will likely change over the lifetime of all artists. Regardless, place plays an important role in facilitating art by providing us with an environment, both macro and micro, in which we feel able to create. Place also enters into the imagery of an artist and can influence what we make and how we make it. For some artists this takes on an overt role by providing the subject matter and visual imagery for their art. This is especially true of landscape

painters or photographers and any artists engaged in political critique. For other artists, place is the foundation that allows for the facilitation of art making by allowing the artist to feel at home, while the visual impact of the place may be subtly layered into the work.

## **Macro Place**

In a Macro sense, the influence of place on the process and artwork of an artist is largely predicated on their experience of culture, sense of belonging and ability to receive inspiration. Within contemporary North American culture, displacement and the ways that it affects our understanding of place is shared by the many immigrant and migrant groups that have created this new culture. I recognize that my own acute sensitivity to place is likely because I am an immigrant. My family emigrated from Scotland when I was fifteen, there is no doubt that the overwhelming sense of displacement and culture shock that accompanied that move forever changed my relationship to place. A benefit of this experience is a level of awareness through which I am able to make comparisons between places and develop a deeper understanding of my response to different environments and cultures. This has allowed me to discern the various elements of place that are important to me. As Lucy Lippard (1997) identifies, "All places exist somewhere between the inside and the outside views of them, the ways in which they compare to, and contrast with, other places" (p.33).

Lippard argues that as a culture we have a tendency to romanticize place and imbue space with our memories whether real or imagined (p.9). In Canada, we have a long history of identifying with the land itself and of honouring Canadian landscape painting over many other art forms and mediums. The resulting romantic image of the Canadian landscape has been (and continues to be) deconstructed by many post-modern artists. While this critical examination of the landscape is best left for another discussion, I do agree with Lippard's theory that we tend to romanticize place and imbue it with selected memories. It would then follow that their romantic notions of that place most likely influence artists who deliberately relocate. Regardless, the environment an artist works in, and how the artist responds to that environment, are necessary components that enable the art making process. Each artist must develop her own relationship to place and determine which place is most conducive to enabling her art making process.

Eri Ishii, a Vancouver painter originally from Japan, chose to settle in Vancouver because it felt more like home to her than Tokyo. She simply feels she can be herself in this smaller city and spacious landscape, while the multi-cultural and socially progressive aspects of the culture sustain her choice to pursue art. Had she remained in Japan, this would be a more difficult path to follow. While no elements of the Vancouver or west coast landscape appear overtly in her large figurative paintings, the 'sense of space' she spoke about is quite evident in her work.

In my own work, this sense of space is also evident, yet the environment of Vancouver - the place I now call home - is an important aspect of the structure I need in order to keep painting. The geography and climate here is somewhat familiar to the Scottish landscape I grew up with and after spending ten years living in southern Ontario, I have come to understand that living on the coast is essential to my sense of well being. Since my engagement with art is fraught with the unknown, I require stability and an acceptance of and by my environment in order to make my art. Like Eri, this is simply a feeling of belonging, of being at home.

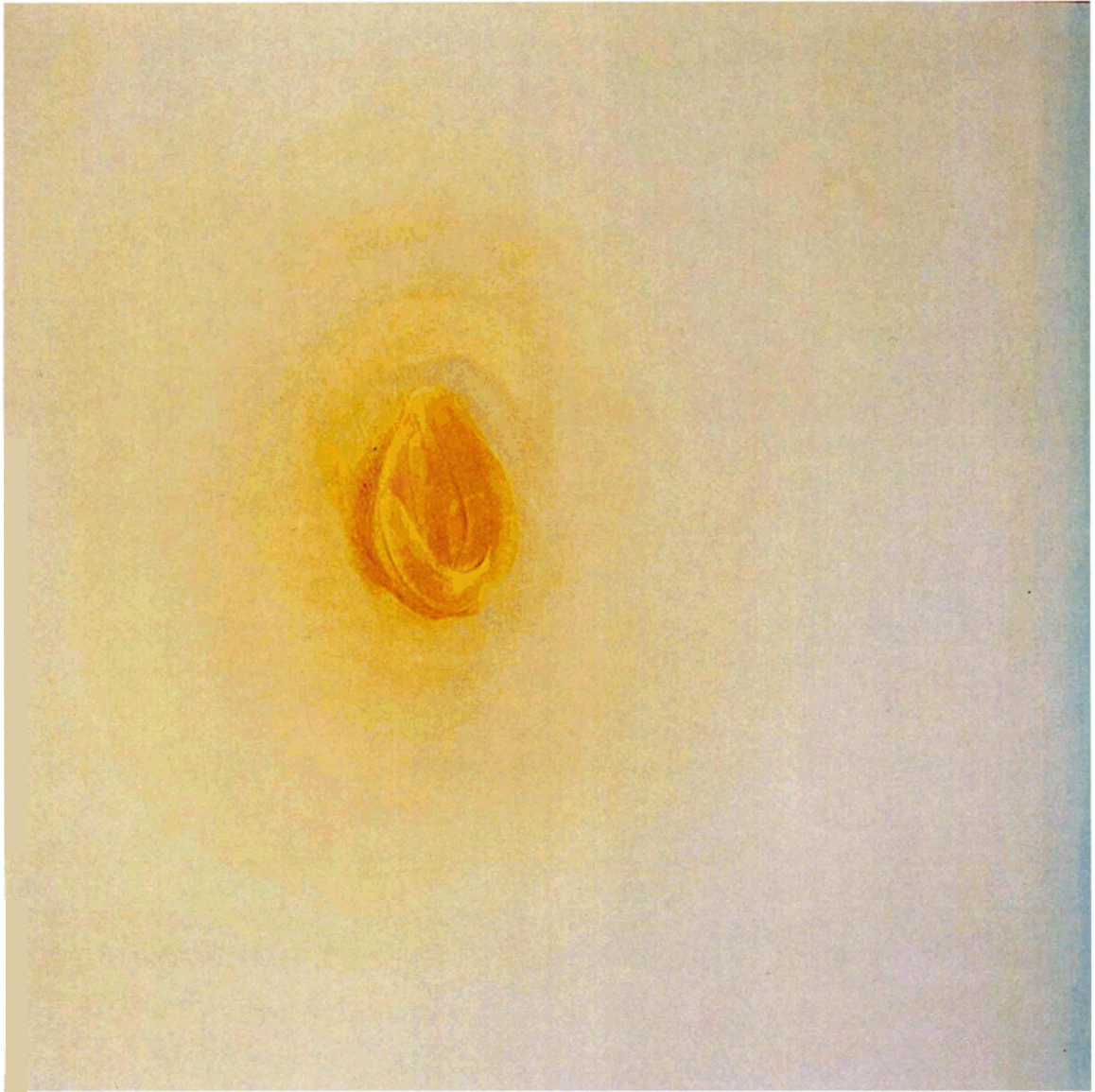
For many artists, change of place can have a tremendous impact on the art making process, affecting the art itself as well as the process of making art. Changing my environment is traumatic for me, reminding me of the isolation I felt as a young immigrant. Feeling as if we belong is important to us all, and for me it is the cornerstone of my ability to make art. It is then not surprising that I felt disconnected in the dramatically different landscape of New Mexico. My obsession with trying to understand the light there was my response to this disconnection and my attempt to find something I could understand and relate to in this new landscape.

My struggle in coming to terms with the light in New Mexico was played out in the paintings themselves as I sought to capture elements of the place. While my abstract paintings are not about landscape, I am very sensitive to my environment and to feeling comfortable enough with it that I can get on with my work without it intruding. I cannot imagine having made my ongoing series of

water paintings anywhere but Vancouver, even though the colours I am using seem to have more in common with the South rather than the North Pacific. The evolution of these paintings happened here and the mood of the paintings is firmly ensconced in my relationship to this environment.

## **February 5**

*I spent the last couple of days in southern New Mexico. I visited the White Sands; 300 square miles of pure white sand dunes. It both frightened and amazed me at the same time. I hiked out on one of the marked trails and climbed the highest dune to take in the view. I sat there for an hour allowing the peacefulness of the place to seep into me. The sun bouncing off the pure white sand was almost blinding. I took many photographs of the sand patterns, of the sheer vastness of it all; yet, I know that they will all be hopelessly overexposed. Perhaps I should use this as an idea for my paintings – overexposed light, bleached, blurred, obscured, and hard to see. These are ideas I have been working with for some time in my art but I had not considered how or why I would use them here. Now it makes perfect sense to use these concepts to visually describe the light here.*



*Image 4 - Untitled # 4*

## **Micro Place**

The next aspect of place I want to explore is the place where art is made and the importance of its characteristics to the process of art making. While feeling that I understand my environment is one element of place that is important for my art making, the notion of 'feeling at home' is especially evident for me on a micro level. My home and studio workspace are areas where I have a lot of control and can therefore set them up to meet my needs. While I was still adjusting to the foreign environment of the New Mexico desert, I turned my attention to creating a comfortable home environment and an organized and efficient workspace in my apartment. This bridge allowed me to begin work right away since it provided me with a place where I felt at home. On a general level, I need to feel that I can count on certain aspects of my immediate environment to remain constant and knowable (as much as this is possible). This helps contribute to the creation of a routine and the subsequent degree of comfort that routine facilitates allows me to engage fully with the uncertainty of making art.

## **The Studio**

Every artist I interviewed spoke at length about the importance of having a designated workspace. Many myths exist about where artists make great art, and within contemporary western culture, the artist's studio is commonly imagined to be a large and airy urban warehouse. Contrary to this myth, the majority of artists cannot afford this conception of the studio, while many more would not find this type of studio conducive to their particular art making practice. Far from being

generic, workspaces vary from artist to artist. It can be as simple as an assigned space (desk, corner of a room, etc), a room in one's home, rented commercial studio space, a garage, a barn, or a custom-built studio. Regardless of whether an artist's studio is humble or grand, they all share the same premise; to provide the artist with an organized workspace that is permanently set up for art making, and allows them to feel free enough to take the risks required in order to make their own art.

The issue of permanence is a very important one; without a designated space for art making it is unlikely that art will get made on a regular basis, indeed, the hassle of setting up and cleaning up in a temporary space is enough to deter most budding artists from making any art. However, in an era of increasing housing costs and smaller homes – especially in the city – finding actual physical space to work in can be a challenge.

Many of my students have expressed to me how difficult it can be to find a suitable workspace in their home. Many contemporary city apartments and houses are small and, with space at a premium, finding a spot where one is free to be expressive and messy is difficult. However, faced with the frustration of having to pack all art supplies away each time, I encourage my students to find a spot where they can leave their supplies set up permanently no matter how small this space may be. Carpets, tables and walls can be protected, and while a very small space may not be ideal, it is a beginning and sometimes all the encouragement we need to continue making art. In other words, even a tiny space is better than no space.



While staying in Albuquerque I set up my workspace in the living room of my rented apartment. I covered the carpet with an old rug and taped plastic onto the walls so I would not spatter paint on them. I then set up my easel and my painting table in the same configuration as my studio in Vancouver. This served to both bring some familiarity into this new workspace and to promote efficient working habits. While this was a much smaller workspace than I was used to and I found myself without all the facilities and tools I wanted, it did not, in the end, hamper my ability to make art.

The workspace of an artist is another area where myth can overshadow reality. My furnished New Mexico apartment is far from anyone's idea of what a studio is and how it should look. Many of my students have expressed how they would love to have a large, airy, white studio to work in. Influenced by photographs of artists working in city warehouses, many artists and non-artists associate the 'studio' with an idealized notion of a large, open space with high ceilings and lots of light. While this idea has now become further promoted by trendy real-estate development, the reality is that most urban artists simply cannot afford to either buy or rent large studio spaces.

The artists I interviewed work in a wide variety of work spaces. In Albuquerque, Linda Coale had set up a very small workspace in her kitchen and when I inquired about her choice of setting it up there, rather than her fairly large and empty living room, she told me she finds it easier to work in a compact space rather than a large one. Many of my artist friends in Vancouver also work in relatively small studio spaces where one to two hundred square feet are common

sizes within commercial shared studio space. While some artists, like Linda, prefer a small work space, for many studio size is largely dictated by affordability. Artists are not, as a rule, affluent members of society. The pursuit of art making does not guarantee large incomes for most artists which often means that artists must make the best of the studio space they can afford.

For many this may mean that a workspace in the home is the only affordable option. I once lived in a small one-bedroom basement apartment and converted the entire living room into my workspace. I banished all furniture from the room so I could work on large-scale paintings. In another house, I took over the spare bedroom, which meant that any guests had to sleep on the couch, while in another apartment I took over most of the bedroom. I know many artists who work in their garages, others work in their basement and I have even heard of one artist who worked in a walk in closet because that was all the space she had available.

Of course, once an artist becomes established she can often afford a larger workspace. This often means either a large rented commercial space or a custom-built studio. Five of the artists I interviewed in New Mexico lived in homes with custom built studios. Interestingly, all of the custom spaces I visited shared the look of the 'ideal' contemporary myth of the studio; large, high ceilings, airy, lots of north and east light and always white. There are very real reasons why artists want these features. A large studio allows the artist to make more work and the freedom to make very large works if desired. It also permits them to work on many pieces simultaneously, often important when

contemplating new directions. High ceilings and white walls allow light to bounce around the space while north and east light is considered the truest light for those artists who work with colour. The myth of the contemporary studio has then emerged from some of the very real needs and desires of many artists. I am also very aware that within contemporary society, the studio of an artist is often seen as an indication of her status, in terms of how closely it measures up to the photographs of the studios of famous artists.

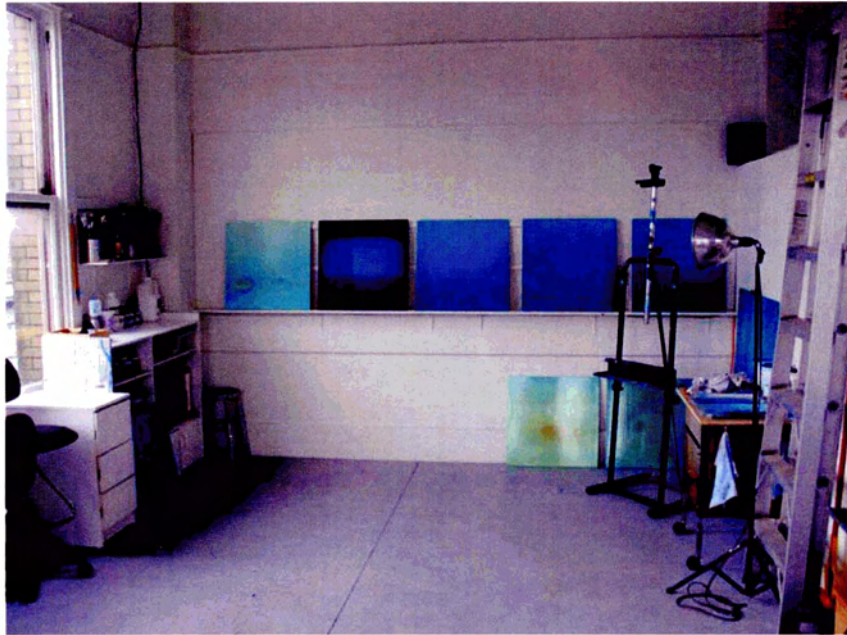
I have recently upgraded my own studio to a larger one with lots of north and east windows and a high ceiling. While I primarily wanted this larger space because I had outgrown the size of my previous space, I also wanted it in order to project a more professional image. At this stage in my art career I am about to embark on seeking gallery representation and perceive that projecting a deep commitment to my art is very important if I want to be taken seriously by an art dealer. Having this larger studio space helps me to feel more professional and serious about my art making practice. I am aware that the idealized image of the studio is very much a part of my conscious desire and that my new studio space fulfils this desire. However, I am also aware that attaining this studio space has been a part of the process in my art making journey and I have worked very hard and in less than ideal situations to get here.

## **Studio Setup**

How a studio is set up is particular to the needs and personality of the artist using it. My own commercial studio space is shared with four other artists

and each of us has our own unique way of setting up our workspaces. Since I have just moved into a new larger section of the studio, I need to get used to working in this new space before I can determine what my requirements will be in terms of arranging my necessary furniture and supplies. Of course, I start with what I think will be a good arrangement, however, if my past habits are anything to go by, I will likely rearrange this space three or four times before I will be happy with how it works for me.

This has been referred to as 'Linda's renovations' by one of my studio-mates, and I think this is an accurate term for it. It is a fine-tuning in the arrangement of both my furniture and art supplies with the aim being to achieve maximum efficiency of the workspace. Efficiency for me is measured by the ease with which I can begin to paint each day and by whether I can work on (or look at) as many paintings as I want at the same time. Having an efficient studio is essential for me. The act of painting is a struggle, a wrestling with each painting in order to bring it to life, having a well-organized and efficient studio means I can focus on the struggle with the painting and not the struggle with an inefficient workspace.



*Image 5 - My studio #1*



*Image 6 - My studio #2*

Having an organized studio is a common trait amongst artists. All of the artists I interviewed were very adamant about how their studios needed to be set up. Most required multiple work areas especially multi-media artists. Margi Weir, who lives outside Albuquerque, has a painting area, a sculpture area and an area where she casts resin. Her large custom-built studio was specifically designed to accommodate her various mediums and her particular work habits. The centre of the studio was open and Margi referred to this as her 'multi-purpose' area. This meant that it could be used for a variety of tasks, as determined by the individual requirements of each art project.

Having a multi purpose area, or area where furniture can easily be rearranged, is an important feature in any artist's studio. Like Margi, I also like to leave the centre of my studio empty and most of my studio tables and storage units are on castors so they can be easily moved with a minimum of effort if required. This allows me to use this central flexible area for constructing stretchers and frames, sanding surfaces, mass gessoing, varnishing and any other miscellaneous tasks that accompany my art making.

Of course, it is only through consistent art making that the artist comes to understand what she needs from her space in order to best facilitate art making. There is certainly no formula for creating a studio space, after all, no two artists work alike even if they do work in the same medium. The art making itself will dictate what kind of studio space one needs and how it should be set up. However, since it is not always possible to acquire one's dream studio, many compromises have to be made in order to make the space that is available

workable. Vancouver artist Elaine Mari works in the small second bedroom in her apartment. While she would prefer to have a larger workspace, she has carefully organized this space so that it meets all of her creative needs, and maintains its organization with a daily tidying routine, and a ruthless approach to the accumulation of 'stuff'.

Many artists work in studio spaces that are less than ideal for the art they make. Regardless, a dedication to art making requires the artist to adapt to the workspace available to them, in order to ensure that their art gets made.

## **February 20**

*Taos is such a disappointment. It is much more of a tourist trap than I anticipated. The countryside around it is spectacular though and I am especially taken with the vastness of the Taos plateau. Seeing its immense flatness ringed by mountains all around actually fills me with a sense of joy. It has a spiritual power that I cannot explain.*

*I am working on sketches while I am here. They are not going well. I am repeating the same struggle here, every coloured sketch I do seems to turn into a muddy mess. There is no television here so I read or play endless hands of patience to escape from my failures.*

## **February 23**

*The D.H. Lawrence memorial was incredibly peaceful and a short drive from where I am staying. There is a great sense of the wilderness here, in many ways it reminds me of areas of the interior of British Columbia. I was so pleased*

*to see that it has been preserved as is. I felt like I was seeing it as it was when he and Frieda lived here. Georgia O'Keefe visited this place also, so it was a very satisfying excursion. I will stop in Santa Fe on the way back and visit the O'Keefe museum. Perhaps that will inspire me.*

## **Peers**

A connection with peers is an important and necessary aspect of the artist's practice. By peers, I mean not only colleagues and fellow artists, but also other serious artists throughout art history. Many artists work alone, due to the isolation inherent in this, and because of the anxiety that is the companion of art making, forging connections with others who are also travelling similar paths is vital for emotional well being. I have identified three ways in which peer relationships play an important role in the life of the artist. Firstly, peer relationships help the artist to position herself within a lineage of art makers, secondly, they provide the artist with a social network within the art community, and lastly, they provide companionship and understanding within the solitary process and struggle of art making.

As I explored in chapter 2, artists look to art history to learn how to be artists and invariably find artists they admire and look to for inspiration. Typically, artists tend to feel connected to those artists whose work they feel relates, in some way, to their own or whose personal life also relates to their own.

While I have already explored how generating a set of 'rules' for being an artist based on the life of other artists can hinder artistic development, looking to



these artists as peers, rather than idols to be imitated, can in fact support development. Cultivating peer relationships with artists from other generations, or a sort of 'peer feeling' with artists from previous eras, helps artists to position themselves within the lineage of art makers and therefore helps them establish a sense of belonging within their own art community and even the art world in general. This is not about adopting rules for being an artist but about identifying aspects of an artist's life that you admire, and gaining support from that to continue with your own art practice.

Peer-like feelings with artists from the historical canon may even cross art genres. I began reading the books of DH Lawrence when I was seventeen and by the time I was nineteen I had consumed all of his works. I related to his working class English roots and sensibility, since my family had emerged from similar modest backgrounds in working class Scotland. As a new Canadian, I found that his books transported me back to Britain and to the British sensibility I yearned for. His was a tortured life; he battled tuberculosis and his books were ignored and even banned, forcing him to leave his country. While I come from a more privileged background by comparison, I struggled, at that time, with my own sense of alienation from society and found solace in the words of Lawrence. I was impressed that he had continued to write even in the face of public denouncement, and through this, I felt a perceived connection somehow, a validation to continue regardless of what life might throw at me.

Similarly, I find myself fascinated by both Georgia O'Keefe and Emily Carr. Interestingly, it is not the art of these two female painters that I connect with, truth

be told I am not a great fan of O'Keefe's paintings, rather, it is the dedication to art making and single minded pursuit of it by both of these artists that I find so fascinating and inspiring. Unfortunately, few female artists have been granted admission to the fine art canon and as a result, there are few female role models for women artists. While I may not be completely inspired by the art of many of the female artists in the canon, locating female role models shows me that it is possible for women to be a part of the art world. This is an important affirmation that encourages me to continue making art and to feel that I can take my place in the lineage of art makers.

Similarly, Vancouver artist Elaine Mari remembers fondly, and knows she was influenced by, the many framed prints her mother collected and displayed in their home. Goya, Delacroix, Rubeens and Fragonard then reminded her in her small town Newfoundland life; precisely how much of an impact art could have on an individual. To this day, she still feels a peer-like feeling with these artists.

Fostering connections with one's peers and fellow artists in the art community is perhaps even more important than perceived connections with well-known artists. One of the key reasons for this is to foster a sense of community or camaraderie with others who share many of the same struggles. Making a commitment to art making usually involves sacrifices. Many artists toil away in obscurity for years before the art market takes an interest in their work, and many more will never reap any financial rewards for the art they make. To engage in serious art making is then no guarantee that success will follow, rather, it is about making a commitment to one's desire and need for expression

regardless of any social expectations. This usually means that artists have to earn an income by means other than selling art.

Even artists who have achieved a degree of success often teach art in order to secure a steady income since art sales tend to fluctuate. American painter Harold Altman no longer has to teach since the sales of his paintings generate sufficient income. However, he continues and cites as one of the reasons; "While one doesn't have to have the money, one always has a sense of insecurity. If one sells one's work, markets can disappear. The American public can be very fickle; yesterday's hot artist is today's dead artist, figuratively speaking" (Risenhoover, Blackburn, 1976, p.18).

In the context of this uncertainty, artists need to feel connected to others experiencing similar challenges. A second reason for the need for peers is the valuable feedback they can provide. Artists need to talk about their art and art making, to give and receive feedback. While many non-artists are often willing to express their opinions about the art of others, it is only another artist engaged in a similar practice, who can fully understand the complexity of emotions that a fellow artist must engage and learn to manage within the slow progression of making art. Self-doubt constantly haunts me and, if my conversations with other artists are any indication, it haunts most artists regardless of whether they are artists of stature, students or amateurs. Social support from one's art community is then very important. The art community then offers the opportunity for mutual support within a world that many artists feel has been hostile or indifferent to art

making, and also allows for connections to be made with other working artists who can relate to and understand what the solitary struggle of art making is like.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the subculture that is the artists' community embraces a wide variety of artists, and as my experience at Art College illustrates, not all artists share common interests about art or its philosophies. Many of my students assume that all artists get along solely because they are artists. This myth has emerged because artists are assumed to be part of the same subculture, when the reality is that disagreements abound and lines are drawn between artists and art practices. Within the art community, many subcultures coexist. It is common to find that abstract painters will gravitate to other abstract painters, realists with other realists and conceptual artists with other conceptual artists, etc.

Regardless, it is then companionship, support, and understanding of the process that connections with one's peers in the art community can offer. The myth of the misunderstood and socially isolated artist may be true for some, but most artists recognize that connections within one's own community are essential. Since art making is largely considered a marginal activity by western society, peer support provides many artists with the necessary emotional support to continue along their art-making path.

However, there is a danger in artists relying too heavily on peer support. There is a fine line between seeking support and seeking approval and for many artists seeking approval of one's work from peers crosses a dangerous line. As Bayles and Orland (1993) note, "courting approval, even that of peers, puts a

dangerous amount of power in the hands of the audience” (p.47). The artist must determine her own relationship with her work, this is the only opinion that matters and it is only the maker of the art who can truly determine whether the art is successful and how to success should be measured. I measure my own paintings against the progress I am making along the path I have set for myself. This is not a finite determination, indeed, I may judge one painting successful and three months later I may find myself very disappointed with it and much happier with subsequent paintings.

It then follows that relying heavily on the opinions of others for approval and permission to continue is certain to bring disappointment and even confusion. Doing so means, you are willingly subjecting yourself to the diverse ‘rules’ of others. After all, critics and art historians have been arguing about what art is and about which art and artists are successful for centuries, so it is unlikely that the artist seeking approval from her audience will receive a consensus about her art. Difficult as it may be at times, art making is a solitary pursuit that requires a stoic belief in oneself and in what one creates if one is to continue. In order to manage this challenge, serious artists often tell their peers whether they want feedback on work they are showing, or define what kind of feedback they want. While support from one’s peers is important, since it alleviates some of the isolation artists tend to feel, and allows for a sense of community, ultimately the artist is alone and must follow her own individual art making process.

To summarize, I have explored how artists employ various strategies in order to facilitate art making. Within the realm of the physical, this includes

setting aside time to work and establishing a consistent work routine. Examining how place plays a role in their creative process and, for many artists, moving to a geographic location that allows them to feel at home, provides the motivation to work and often inspires the artwork itself. Having a designated studio or workspace is essential to all artists. While most artists desire the ideal large airy studio, the reality is that artists work with what they can afford and learn that any space can work if it is well organized and designated for art making. Finally, fostering connections with one's peers within the art community provides a sense of professionalism, emotional support, social connections, and the opportunity for discourse with other artists, all of which allow artists to learn from each other and continue to grow both individually and within their art.

While all of these strategies are what I consider to be physical choices that can be fairly easily implemented by anyone who sets their mind to it, developing emotional strategies can be more challenging. I know plenty of artists who have set aside time, rented a studio space and have a good support network of peers, yet struggle with so many fears about making art, that they struggle to make any art at all. In the next chapter I will explore the variety of fears artists struggle with and explore some of the strategies I, and other artists, utilize to keep these fears at bay.

## **Chapter Four - Strategies for Facilitating Art Making Part Two**

### **Fears: Judgment, Uncertainty, Success and Failure**

Because artists are commonly perceived to be renegades who seem to be comfortable going against the grain, it is assumed that they are fearless about their choices and in their art making explorations. Contrary to this myth, fear is a complex and ever-present aspect of art making; indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that fear is both what drives artists to continue making art and what stops art from being made. As I have explored, the making of art happens against the backdrop of art history and art education. Within western society, it is highly unlikely that any artist (professional or amateur) can escape the influence of both of these institutions. I have also identified that place and peers play significant roles in the development of an artist and in the ability of that artist to make her work. While all of these can be profoundly helpful to the artist and her development, ironically, it is the nature of the relationship the artist has with these structures that generates and fosters various fears.

Uncertainty, judgment, success and failure are inextricably linked to fear and each other, enmeshed as they are with the insecurity that permeates the choice and process of pursuing art making. Uncertainty is always present in any art practice. Judgment has the power to encourage or discourage art making.

Success and its implications is for many artists, both desired and feared. Lastly, all artists struggle with failure and a fear of failure on an ongoing basis. It is then evident that fear rears its head in a variety of forms and in response to many different aspects of both the art establishment and social norms. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the four aspects of fear I have identified and how these fears relate to the mythology that surrounds art making.

## **February 2**

*I spent yesterday working on more drawings. Of course, none of them are as immediate as the first. That is always the way, I always feel that I am working backwards towards the one good drawing or painting and I can never again capture its freshness, its honesty. I am struggling again. Regardless of the rising panic, I recognize that one good drawing gives me something to go on; it offers a composition that will work, at least as a starting point and that is enough. My paintings are always different from the sketches I make – the painting will take on its own life no matter how meticulously I render a sketch. It has to, or it will be a lifeless reproduction. I glaze the remaining white board with pale yellows and greens. I want it to be a vortex of light.*

## **February 6**

*I tackle all four paintings with a renewed gusto. I prepare a white glaze and completely paint over one of the turquoise paintings. I wipe back a section to reveal the blue below and leave it to dry. The other turquoise painting needs something darker over it. I cover it with a dark brownish blue and then wipe off a*



*panel in the centre. They both need some tweaking but I am content with them, with the obscuring of what was there before. I continue in the same vein with the other two panels, glazing over the paintings with a light glaze to blur and soften the images. I am not sure that they are successfully emanating light, which is something I am always attempting in my work; however, I feel that they are beginning to 'behave', beginning to take on the qualities I am seeking.*

## **February 7**

*I am still pleased with yesterday's work so I spent the afternoon preparing three more wood panels before I began putting the finishing touches on the four paintings. The dark painting is easily finished. I like it, but then it reminds me very much of the work I was doing before I left. It is a departure though; it has a softness that has not been in the previous works. It is the colours that make it seem familiar. It is interesting that I feel I should move on, that I should make new work that is a complete departure from the old work. I think it is because this place is so different from my home and I feel it requires a different interpretation. It is also because I was bored with the other paintings; I needed to move on from them. I need to remember that this does not mean that I have to abandon them; after all, they are the foundation from which I am building.*

*The other paintings are giving me grief. The white painting gets another coat of white glaze but something is bugging me about it. The composition is not quite right and I do not have a clue why. The other two are also problematic. One is too yellow and needs to be toned down while the other needs another coat of light glaze because the blue pond is too prominent. I like it better after reworking*

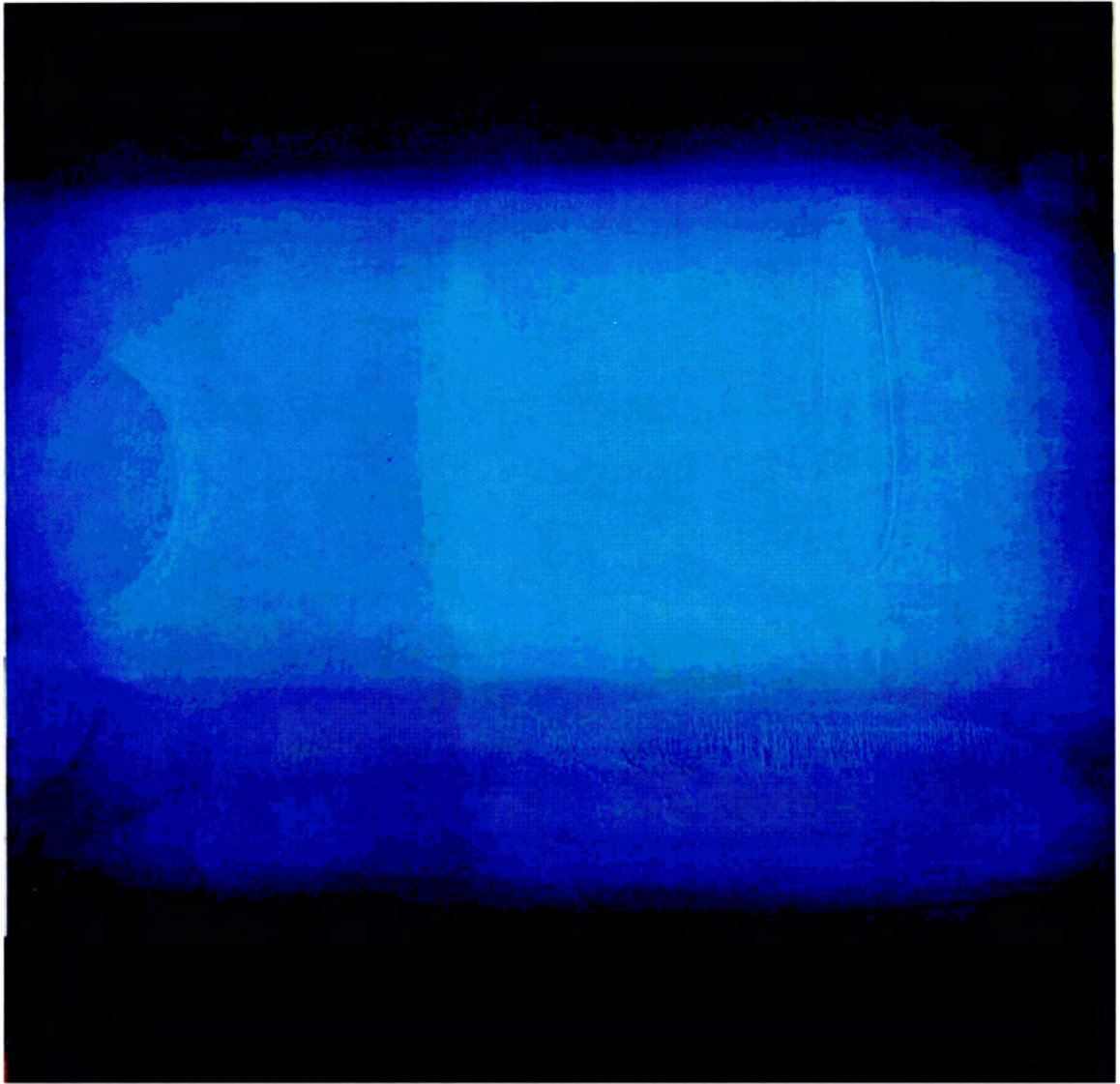
*it and sit back to take stock. It seems that I have two finished paintings, and two on their way. This is satisfying, though I would have been even happier if all four were finished.*

## **February 9**

*Rather than fuss too much with the unfinished paintings, I decide it will be better to continue on to the next three, and return to work on the last two as ideas come to me. It is common for me to have four or five paintings on the go at once. This is mostly because my technique involves thin, transparent layers of glaze and I find that each layer needs about twelve hours of drying time before I can continue painting. While one painting is drying I can work on others. I have also found that working this way has greatly improved my patience; the long drying time allows me more time to contemplate the images and tempers my impulsiveness.*

## **February 12**

*I am still fiddling, and the other two paintings remain unfinished. I played with two of the new panels. Inspired by the finished blue painting I attempt to work with the same idea in brown and gold. It was a disaster, so bad that I felt I had to gesso over it to get rid of the dark brown. I am stuck and I feel like I am lost again. I can't remember how I made the good blue painting! It seems that it will be the one, the best. The first in a series often is, the freshest, the one that will elude replication. I watch television to escape from having to work.*



*Image 7- Untitled # 5*

## **Uncertainty**

As the above journal entries illustrate, my art making process is, at times, fraught with uncertainty and the fear that uncertainty in art making breeds; fear that the paintings I am making are simply not good enough. While this can easily be interpreted as simply relating to success and failure, I have chosen to look at uncertainty in art making as a separate category since I believe it is a complicated emotional response with far-reaching implications for all artists and students of art.

The lack of financial and emotional security in art making ensures that uncertainty is the companion every artist must learn to work with. This is further compounded by the fact that making art is not formulaic. While artists can learn skills and many of the 'rules' associated with skills, contrary to popular belief, there are no fundamental and absolute rules for making art. Artists must discover their own working habits and methods if they want to make their own art. They must make up their own rules yet hold those rules loosely since they will likely have to be broken at some point in the future – what may work for one work of art may not work for the next. Looking to how other artists make art can provide budding artists with suggestions and guidelines for art making, however, ultimately each artist has to accept that making art is a solitary, individual process, and each artist must find the solutions that work for her and her alone, and to do that , she must learn how to live with uncertainty.

This issue of uncertainty is seldom addressed within institutes of art education as discussed earlier in the chapter on rules. While some artists choose to work in a manner that offers predictable and consistent results for most, or all, of their art making career, most artists choose to explore beyond the limitations that this offers. For them, the risk of moving into unknown territory is the only way they can make art that satisfies them. It is a place of both fear and opportunity as Anne Truitt (1982) observes about her own well practiced art making routine, "I am at once totally in jeopardy and totally at home" (p.28). This is the territory of an artist working in the absence of the rules of others, who acknowledges that we can never be sure about our art, never be completely at ease in its making. Uncertainty is akin to a 'coin' that has on one side despair and on the other exhilaration.

As my journal entries show, my painting process is always about moving into unknown territory and my paintings cannot be predetermined. I work abstractly because of this, each painting another chance to make my best work yet, full of unseen and unknown possibilities. It is ripe with the exhilaration of exploring something new, and the chance for spontaneous decision-making and action. While each painting starts out with an initial idea or loose concept that guides me in the early stages, as the painting progresses, many decisions must be made. How I make these decisions determines the course of the painting and since most of this process is intuitive and tacit, I can never be sure how I arrive at certain decisions. However, I have come to understand that all of the factors involved in working on a painting come into play and can influence the direction

of a work. My mood or emotional state can suggest one direction, while colour and texture can present another. Accidents are common, since I work without a formula, and these can present wonderful new techniques that open up new doors of possibility.

This paints a possibly rosy picture of my art making experience; however, this is only one aspect of it. While there is hope and promise in the initial adrenaline rush, the uneasiness of uncertainty is always lurking, and as my journal describes, it can quickly take over at the first sign of trouble. I frequently feel lost in my art making process, stymied by all the possibilities that present themselves, unsure which ones to choose. Sometimes I follow one path only to be dissatisfied and feeling regretful for not choosing another. Stuck, I can easily let uncertainty flood in, leaving me feeling depressed and insecure about the painting and about my abilities as an artist.

Learning how to keep my emotional reaction in perspective is a skill I have had to learn. This is something that all artists struggle with and have to learn how to manage if they are to continue making art. For me it has come with the maturity that begins to emerge within a sustained art practice. I have come to understand that we all feel uncertain about our skills, concepts, chosen medium, and the reactions of others, as well as fretting about whether making art is a worthwhile activity. This is as true for the art professional as it is for the art student. We must simply learn to take these feelings in our stride and accept that they are also a part of the art making process. Tricky at the best of times, this can be a challenge when external circumstances intrude.

Major events in our lives influence all areas of our lives. The death of a loved one, serious illness or the end of a relationship can wreak havoc on our emotional well-being and our ability to function. For artists this inevitably means that their art making is impacted. For some artists, a major event can stimulate art making, allowing the artist to work through the issue using the process itself as a healing tool. Others find themselves unable to work at all. The latter response is especially common among women artists, likely, because women are socially encouraged to feel and express their feelings. I have certainly found that traumatic events in my life leave me feeling depleted and unable to make art. Returning to art making after an absence can be difficult for me. Suspension of my art making routine allows uncertainty to gain a stronger foothold if I am not careful. The longer the absence, the greater the fear can become and the greater the fear the more difficult it is to return. Truitt (1986) describes the tentativeness of working again after a two-month absence from the studio:

I have been making awkward drawings on my dining room table. I tell myself that I am reluctant to spend the money to heat the studio but the truth is I am afraid to take that big a step and I need the companionship of my plants, which I have gathered around me here in the sun. I lean over the table, like a child who after a fright has retreated to her nursery and her Mother Goose. I have made drawing after drawing. Yesterday, just under the wing of twilight, I drew two lines and added seven strokes of paint: I straightened up to look, and saw one of my drawings, identifiable. But it is only one (pp.34-5).

Truitt's description of her experience speaks to the tentativeness of returning to her work after an absence. While the actual experience of other artists will differ from this one, Truitt illustrates how uncertainty can influence our level of confidence about making our work, how tenuous our work is and how

quickly we can lose our connection to it. The challenge then is to work through the uncertainty until a reconnection is made, no matter how small or insignificant it is. Anne Truitt may have been disappointed that she only had one drawing, but often that is all one needs in order to feel reconnected with one's creative process and to diminish uncertainty until it is once more a manageable size.

There are times in every artist's life when art making is suspended for an extended period. This may be due to external events or because of a crisis in confidence. It is at these times that artists are at the greatest risk of permanently stopping making art. This is especially true if that artist has not achieved a level of success they are comfortable with. I have allowed myself to be paralyzed by my fear at times. As I mentioned in chapter two, I did not make art for several years after I left Art College. The longer I stayed away from painting, the greater my insecurity about my abilities as an artist became, eventually, allowing the fear to stop me from even attempting to make art. While lack of maturity was also a contributing factor to this fear, in that I did not have a clear sense of self or of the art I might make, uncertainty was what I was most afraid of. Accepting uncertainty means learning how to be comfortable with not knowing, learning how to trust in oneself and in one's process and to explore without a safety net. Accepting uncertainty as a part of everyday life takes time and courage as well as the eventual realization that feeling uncertain is normal and can be a positive factor in one's art making process. After all, uncertainty encourages a thoroughness and thoughtfulness that certainty prevents.



## **February 16**

*I have been working away without any results to speak of. I spend more time looking at the paintings, willing them to tell me what they need. Nothing has come yet. I am relieved I will be going away to Taos for a week – it will get me away from the apartment and the dammed paintings. Because I do not have the luxury of a separate studio while I am here, I am constantly looking and puzzling over them. Even though I may be lying on the couch watching television, I am always aware of them and of their problems. There have been many evenings when I jump up to add another layer of glaze. It is both good and bad. Good because I can work whenever I feel like it, and bad because I can't get away from work. Sometimes a break can help me see the solution; which is usually very straightforward and usually something I already know! I have a tendency to stubbornly hold on to elements I like, even if they are not working in the painting. Eventually I let go, but only after I have exhausted all other possibilities. It is simply a part of the process.*

## **Judgment**

All artists experience fear around how their work will be perceived by others. We all want our work to communicate, to be understood and well received. How others respond to our work can influence how we gauge whether our art is successful or not. While the opinions of others are then assimilated into our critical awareness, it is our own sense of judgment that is often the most unforgiving.

Artists must conform to making art on demand in school and often from the ideas of the instructor rather than each artist. While this can be a beneficial process within the development of young artists, it cloaks uncertainty and runs the risk of unduly influencing students to work in prescribed ways. Disentangling oneself from all of the many viewpoints on how one should make one's art can be a long process, and as that process proceeds, the focus of uncertainty moves from what others will think of your work, to uncertainty about nearly all aspects of your work.

As I noted earlier, I stopped painting after Art College and one of the reasons for this was because I adopted rules of how to be an artist from others. I had assimilated the notion that I should work in the studio full time or not bother at all. I cannot remember where this myth originated from but I do know it is how I interpreted 'how to be an artist' from the comments of my art instructors, and it became one of the myths I struggled with for over a decade.

The uncertainty involved in how one feels one is supposed to make art then has the power to stop art making before it even begins. The anxiety in my classroom, especially at the beginning of every course, is testament to this. The most common fear I hear expressed from my students is that they do not feel they are 'doing it right'. The idea that there is a right and wrong way to make art is a pervasive and very misleading myth. Embedded in childhood for many, it is rooted in the approval or disapproval of the art they made then and carries through into the art they make now. They long for a formula to make their art by, to provide them with a structured approach that they can label 'the right way to

make art'. It is then an interesting dance for me as I attempt to alleviate the uncertainty just enough in order to facilitate art making, without superimposing too finite a structure in the process.

While, initially, children feel free to explore their creativity without censorship or fear of judgment, our education and social system is not conducive to fostering this into adulthood. Being a student of any subject means one is placing oneself in a position of vulnerability. Students of art are discovering what their art is about, experimenting with and exploring many mediums, which often results in a body of work that lacks consistency and finesse. The insecurity and uncertainty that accompanies being a student – of any age – means that the judgments of others, especially the negative ones, can have lasting impacts. I have vivid memories of negative critiques from Art College and still feel the sting and embarrassment of feeling like a failure even now over twenty years later.

Similarly, I have heard many stories about the careless teacher in elementary school who made a negative comment about a drawing or painting and, as a result, managed to silence that student's creative impulse for decades. The result is often an emotional scarring about art making and artistic expression and of sharing that art with others that can prove to be too overwhelming to overcome for some.

As a child who displayed artistic ability within the traditional art mediums, I remember being praised for my skill. I am quite sure that it was this praise, and the accompanying sense that this was something I was good at, that motivated me to become further interested in art. However, I was not free from the fear of

judgment since the praise I received was predicated on making art that pleased those who praised me. I distinctly remember my foray into abstract painting at age fifteen was greeted with a lukewarm response from my high school art teacher who remarked that he hoped I would find a middle ground where I could incorporate my traditional skills of realism. It was the beginning of a very different journey for me, one in which I could no longer count on the praise of others but had to rely on my own instincts about the art I was making.

Once an artist begins to look less to others for approval or direction, and understands that they must look primarily towards themselves for this, the relationship the artist has with uncertainty and judgment shifts. Once externally focused, uncertainty and judgment now become internal – a dialogue between the artist and her art.

As serious artists, we are constantly judging our art and ourselves, pitting our art against the work of other artists and measuring our progress against our past works, and the progress of other artists. The many myths that surround art making and the artist become convenient measures from which we find criteria against which to judge ourselves. We judge ourselves based on the rules we have internalized with respect to; how much we produce, the quality of that output, how we make our work, how others respond to it and our perceived level of success. This can be good or bad depending on how we have learned to relate to judgment and how much stock we place in it.

In my own art practice, a certain amount of judgment is very useful; indeed, I have learned to utilize judgment to help me continue to grow as an artist

and to move my art to the next level. Without a continued self-critique of my work, my work and I would stagnate. However, it is important to acknowledge that this is a particular version of judgment that is the result of the development of my own critical faculties and the individuation of them (or rather, as much as that is possible) from my perception of the external judgment of others. Of course, since it is impossible to remove my own sense of judgment from my learned sense of judgment, there are times when I let the judgments of others influence the direction of my art making practice for a time.

Exploring options suggested by another can be a very positive experience and can open the artist to explorations they had not previously considered. Indeed, many artists welcome the critiques of other artists and mentors and find this to be a valuable component of their growth. However, too much reliance on the opinions of others can be damaging to the autonomy of the artist. As I explored in the section on peers, courting approval from others, even your peers, places your power in the hands of others. Only I can truly know whether my art is successful or not, since only I can know what I want from my art, and where I am in that process.

The judgment of others can then be either a powerful motivator or detractor in the art making process depending on whether the judgment is positive or negative. It is inevitable that all artists will encounter negative judgments about the art they make or their art making process at some point along their path. Initially this comes from teachers and later from peers, the audience and self. Learning how to cope with that judgment is essential;

resolving to continue to make art regardless of the opinions of others is not easy but must be adopted. After all, self-judgment will provide the artist with her loudest critical voice. Accompanied by periodic self-doubt and uncertainty, self-judgment is a companion of all artists, be they students or seasoned veterans. Well-established painter Gerhard Richter (1995) succinctly captures the constancy of self-doubt and judgment in *The Daily Practice of Painting*,

Of course I constantly despair at my own incapacity, at the impossibility of ever knowing what such a thing ought to look like. But then I always have the hope that, if I persevere, it might one day happen. And this hope is nurtured every time something appears, a scattered, partial, initial hint of something which reminds me of what I long for, or which conveys a hint of it – although often enough I have been fooled by a momentary glimpse that then vanishes, leaving behind only the usual thing (pp.118-119).

Richter is aptly describing the feelings every artist has about their process and about the art they make. Always judging the art they make and striving for a better art, artists are engaged in a constant search for glimpses of their best art, regardless of the fact that it often remains frustratingly illusive. It is the carrot at the end of the stick for many artists; the promise of what could be that serves to keep the passion alive. Self-judgment is the companion of all artists regardless of their status, it is a part of making art, of engaging in this activity that has no formulas, no boundaries. While artists who have many years of experience making art have usually learned how to manage uncertainty and judgment, the fact that art making itself does not get any easier means that uncertainty and judgment are always lurking.

Believing in my own vision for my art, as well as the end result, is the reason I continue to paint. Others may not like or even be indifferent to my paintings but I cannot let their judgments determine whether I continue to make art or not. We all desire to be liked; to have our work responded to positively, however, the truth is that will not always happen. I have endured many critiques over the years, from the harsh to the non-committal and the ever-important support from peers, family and friends. I have had to learn how to accept all of these opinions and to examine them closely to see if there is anything in them that is useful to the growth of my art. In short, can it teach me anything? Though it is often difficult to hear, negative criticism, ironically, can be quite useful. If I am able to separate my own feelings from the criticism, and find a neutral place that is in the best interest of the art work itself, then I can objectively look closely at the art and determine whether the criticism can improve the art or not. Learning to discern this allows me to choose what to keep and what to toss and in the process it spurs me on to make better art next time, art that the critic will not be able to find fault with. Of course, this is not possible, but it is a strategy for coping that I have made work for me, and allows me to convert a negative emotional response into a positive reaction.

## **February 25**

*Upon my return to the apartment, I see what needs to happen to the white painting. The composition is not there yet. The form is too abrupt, too stark. It needs to be softened and extended. Five minutes does it. The difference is remarkable; all aspects of the composition are now in harmony, no one part of*

*the painting is jumping out more than another part. I am still not sure about the white. It seems to be too white rather than 'light'. I resolve to leave it for now rather than risk losing what I have.*

*Buoyed by this success I decide to make a dozen or so small coloured drawings to see if working quickly this way will help me find a way into the still blank three panels. I crank them out trying not to worry about whether they will be successful or not. I work on top of the paint with pencil and then a few more layers of glaze. Overall, I am happy with them; I see how I can utilize the ideas to get me started on the other panels. It does appear that the time away has had its desired effect.*

## **February 26**

*I started in on the other panels. One in particular is already working quite well with only the first layers of paint. This is rare for me; I usually have a few false starts before I get anything usable. The other two need more layers of paint – they look thin. Looking at them, I think about how I could make them more translucent while at the same time imbuing the surface with more depth. It sounds like a contradiction I know, but it is both of these qualities together that I am constantly seeking. On the way back from Taos, I had stopped in Santa Fe to go to the O'Keefe museum. Frankly, I was a little disappointed with it – I had expected to see more of her paintings and was surprised by the small size of the collection. I guess I expected something more on the scale of the VAG's Emily Carr collection. Anyway, I visited a contemporary gallery close by where I was treated to some very good contemporary paintings. I was drawn to three abstract*



*paintings that glowed with iridescence and had a very smooth surface. I asked one of the gallery employees about the work and learned that the artist mixed an iridescent material into the paint and used a squeegee on the surface. The paintings looked like they were buried under a thick waxy transparent layer, which simultaneously allowed them to emanate light, and at the same time seemed almost difficult to see, so flattened out, yet with such depth. They were so compelling to me that I had a hard time pulling myself away from them. I want to make work that has those qualities.*



*Image 8 - Untitled # 6*

## Success and Failure

In the ever-present context of uncertainty and judgment, the artist must learn to deal with the experience of both success and failure. Measuring one's success is not a simple matter. As I have already mentioned, what constitutes a 'successful' work of art is a topic that is hotly debated both within the art world and within the public realm. Further complicating this is the fact that in the making of a work of art, both success and failure are a part of the process. As my journal entries illustrate, I worry about the success of the pieces I am making as I am making them and I am very critical about their progress or lack thereof. It is simply unavoidable; where some paintings succeed many do not. I may not be able to do anything about the failed paintings of the past, but I can try not to fail with each new painting. The words of Howard Hodgkin say it best, "...like most people I've painted lots of bad pictures. I don't think they're so bad, they are just not worth looking at. But I'm much more critical about the pictures I'm painting now than when I look back because then it's too late. I can't do anything about it" (Nairne, 2002, p.42).

No one sets out to make art that fails. In order to bring a painting to life I must wrestle it through all of its various evolutionary stages, each stage complete with its own small successes and failures. It is a fraught experience, at once exhilarating and despairing, a rollercoaster of emotions that I cannot let get the better of me. Success and failure are then fluid, each needing the other, without failure how can we determine success?

Artists develop a sensibility about which of their own art works are successful and which are not. This is a sensibility that emerges from a sustained practice of art making, self-awareness, art education and exposure to art, all of which coalesce into a kind of 'knowing'. This is the same 'knowing' that influences the decision to stop, to know when the work is complete, regardless of whether it is successful. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the artist comes to know her art through making art. The more art she makes, the better she gets at making it, and the more she comes to understand it and her process, what works and what does not. The more art one makes the easier it is to accept the failed pieces, to learn to accept that this is part of the process. To engage in making art requires acceptance of the fact that not all the art you make will be good.

Of course, the professional art world has its own opinions about what art and which artists are successful, and the general public also likes to wade into the fray with their own opinions about what art is deemed successful. While the institutions of the professional art world and the art going public may not always agree, one area they do tend to agree on is that those artists who sell their work can be considered to be successful. They may not always agree on definitions of successful art, but if it sells within the art market it is generally assumed, albeit grudgingly by some, that it is accepted as art. Financial worth is frequently the bottom line and proves to be a difficult hurdle for those artists who do not, or are unable to, sell their work.

Robert Hughes (1990) observes that consumerism has infiltrated the art world. With promises of the investment potential of art, certain artists are made into stars by the industry and their work considered successful because of the excitement generated about it and its inevitable increase in value. "The art world now looks more like the fashion industry than like its former self. That is, its anxieties, which are real enough, are corporate; they tend to stem from the overriding need for a smooth flow of product" (p.401).

Contending with the commercialism of the art market is unattractive to many artists; yet, we all desire recognition and want to have our work seen. Some artists choose alternative venues and markets for their art, infiltrating the grant system and public over private galleries. Others choose small alternative galleries and artist run centres. Some simply do not show at all. While it is hard to escape the myth of a financial definition as the penultimate definition of success, artists do measure success in many more ways.

When I asked the artists I interviewed how they defined success, every one of them acknowledged that having time to work and being able to make their work was a success in itself. This was not a surprising answer; after all, they were all serious, committed artists like myself, and I know first hand how difficult it is to sustain a consistent art making practice when finances and emotional insecurity can get in the way. Regardless, those who find a way to maintain an art practice are sustained by it. Vancouver artist Scott Massey described his art practice as allowing him to have a real engagement with the world around him, providing him with "life out of life".

While making art is undoubtedly about engaging in a meaningful way, just making art is not enough for most artists. All of the artists I interviewed expressed the importance of sharing their art with others, noting that communicating and sharing ones ideas and having that acknowledged by others is an incredibly important measure of success. This is especially true for artists whose work is socially engaged or message driven, for without an audience, the message is lost and the work will fail.

Communicating to others is then important. Many of the artists talked about how satisfied they feel showing their art and especially when someone buys an artwork. Albuquerque artist Carol Sanchez acknowledged how validating it is for her when she sells work. This validation inspires her to keep going, to keep pursuing her goals. Florence Pierce enjoys hearing from people who collect and live with her art. The fact that they have an experience with her art allows her to feel that she has touched them, communicated with them. While only a few acknowledged that selling their art indicated success, I suspect that all of the artists I spoke to feel at their most successful when someone buys a piece of their art. After all, as I have explored, financial worth is the prevalent measure of success within contemporary western society and we are all susceptible to its charms.

While success, no matter how it is defined, is what all artists seek, failure is always close at hand. I may feel that a painting is successful one day, and the next see nothing but failure. Making art means failing over and over again, through each stage of the progress of the artwork. Jumping into the unknown in

order to make art ensures that failures, mistakes and accidents will happen.

Failure teaches us about what does not work and often guides us onto paths that do work. Mistakes and accidents provide wonderful opportunities for spontaneity and even surprises we can never anticipate, like new techniques. Florence Pierce's unmistakable poured resin paintings evolved from her experimenting with the medium and accidentally pouring some resin on a mirrored surface.

Success has many guises to the artist, and each artist interprets success in ways that work for them and their practice. All artists struggle with the financial definitions of success that the art institutions and the public seem to prefer. The myth of the art star is seductive; yet, the reality is that very few artists are ever admitted to this realm. Most artists are simply delighted to make their work, show it to others, sell some of it and continue working. For many, financial security will not come from art sales but usually from supplementary means. Regardless of uncertainty and judgment, it is the love of art that compels these artists to continue. In the words of Eri Ishii, "success is when you do what you love to do and have a thick enough skin to face the world to say - I'm a success".

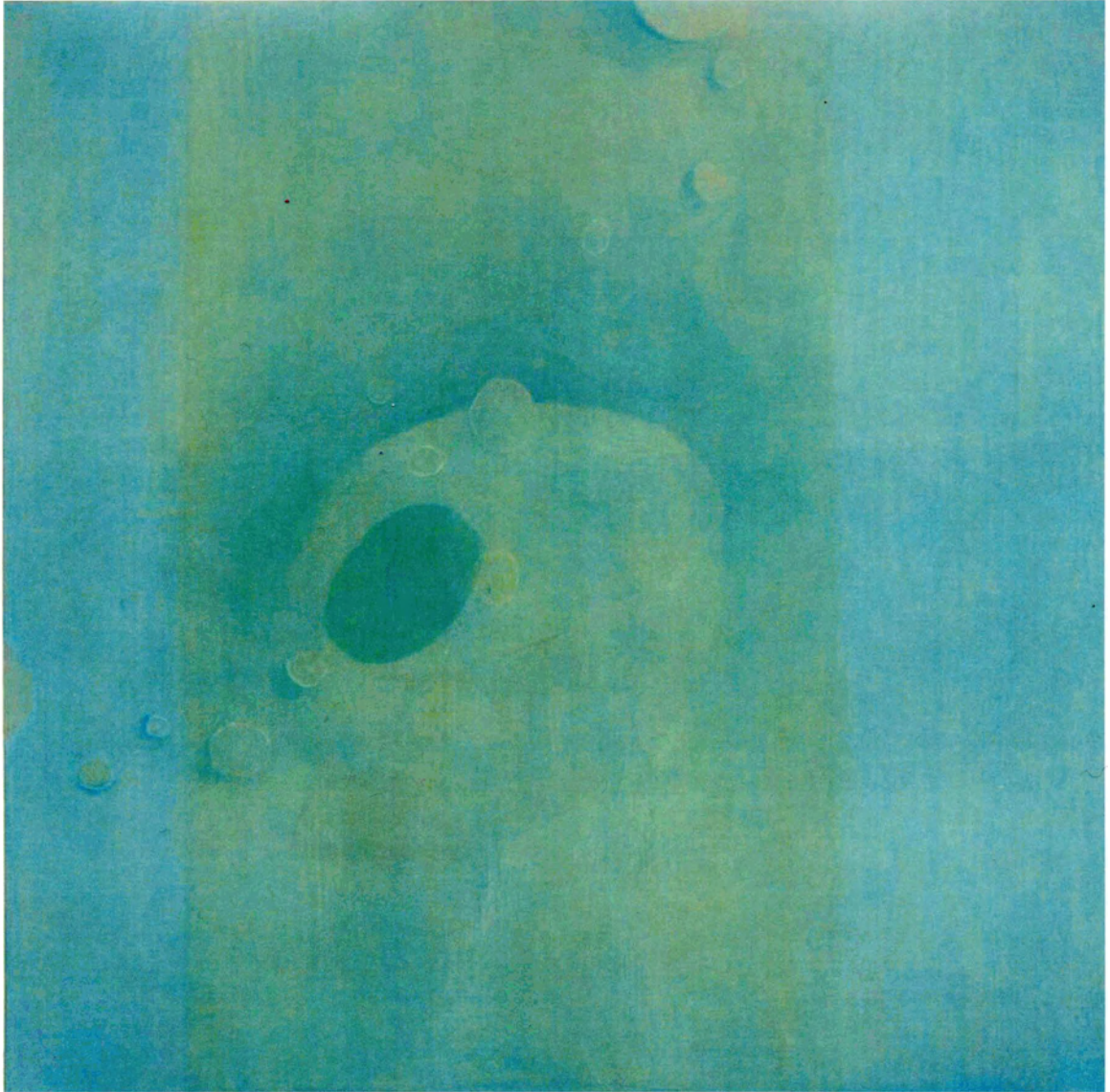
#### **March 4**

*I have been playing with the new panels and from time to time adding more layers to the yellow painting. It is growing on me, yet there is something not quite working. I like the rawness of the central oval – it has an unfinished quality that pleases me. It is very translucent, so this may be why I like it. It is not finished though, and now the white painting is starting to annoy me – it is much too white, too opaque. Three steps forward and two back, literally this time!*

## **March 7**

*I am stuck. I have bought and prepared three more panels, which means I have convinced myself to meet my quota come hell or high water! But how do I do that when no ideas are coming to me? I still don't really know what I have been trying to achieve with these paintings, and whatever it is it does not feel like I have been successful. I say 'feel' because it is all about insecurity, all about self-judgment. Yesterday I liked the direction of my work, thought some of them were even good. Now I despair of them, see them all as immature and unresolved attempts. Nothing more. In a funk I go to the mall. Shopping for bargains usually cheers me up. That and the chance it gives me to disappear into the crowd, to lose myself amidst the blankness of consumer culture. Shopping is a tremendous time waster. It means I won't have to face my failures today, not if I can find a new pair of shoes that is!*





*Image 9 - Untitled # 7*

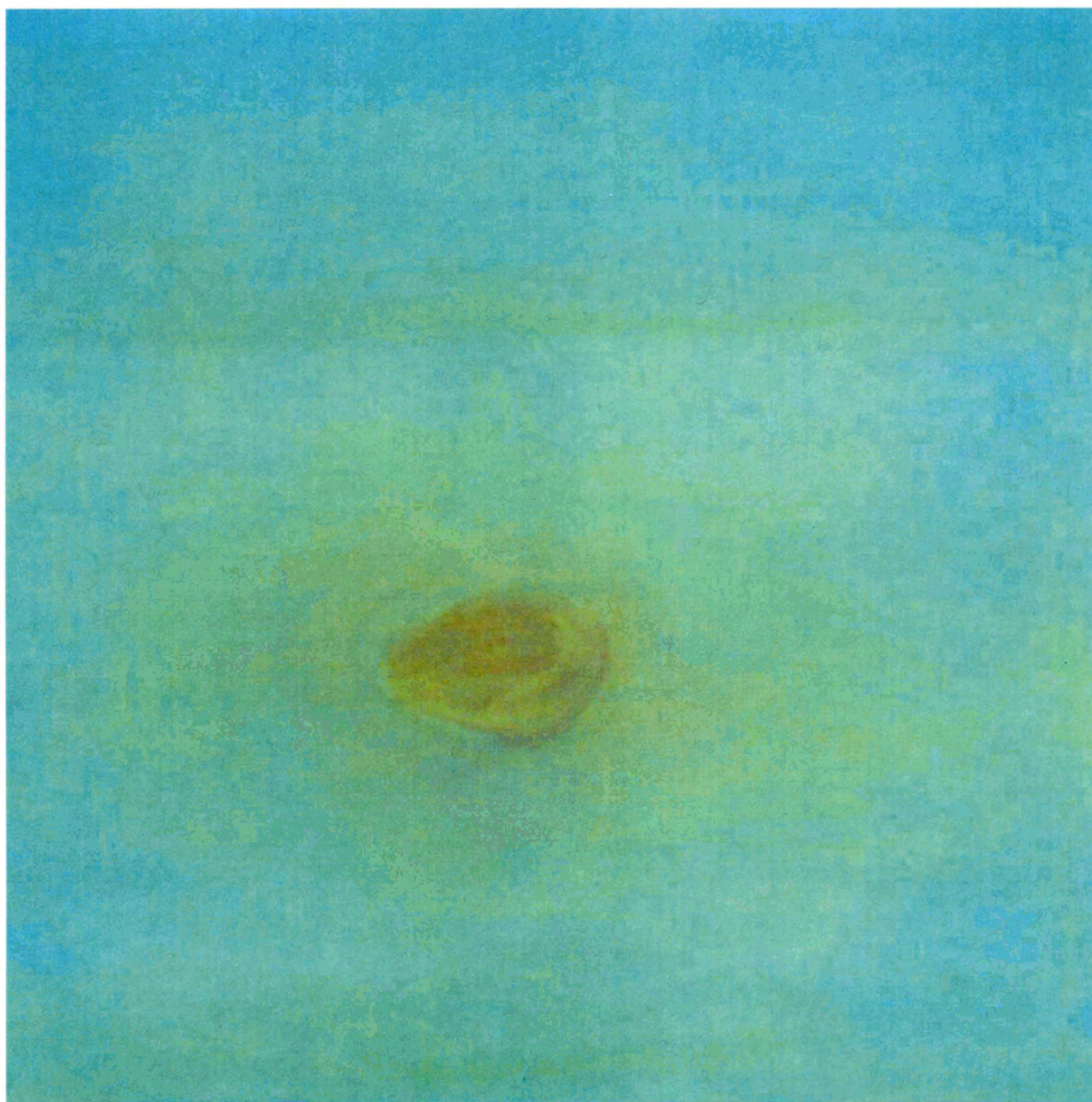
## Chapter Five – Maturity: Finding One's Own Voice

**March 10**

*One of the new panels is finished. It was very simple really but like all of my paintings, I had to take it on a few trips before I realized this. I tried this and that, wiping off everything I added before I realized, by accident, of course, that it only needed a thin layer of blue/green on the bottom. I have bought a new paint colour – a vibrant yellow orange that is wonderfully translucent. I had mixed some of it in with the blue and it is the warmth it adds that I love. The warmth is what makes it work. I have been playing with it on the other two panels also and am very pleased with the colour. It emanates light easily as long as I keep it pure. I feel that I am closer to understanding what it is I am trying to paint. It seems crazy to try to put words to it because it is its own language, but some words are useful to me, help me clarify the feelings, the hunches. I want to capture the sense of light and colour here in the New Mexico desert. That is the inspiration. They are not about here; rather they are about a unique sense of light, about seeing and not seeing, about the overwhelming largess of it, about the contradictory thinness and intensity that exists 5000-7000 feet above sea level.*

*It has evolved from my previous series of paintings; I can still see elements of them in what I am doing now. My core forms and technique are still there, just trying to say something else. I want intensely coloured paintings, paintings that vibrate. So far they have been about softness, about the harshness*

*of the light, about bleaching. Now it is time to tackle the intensity that coexists with the softness.*



*Image 10 - Untitled #8*

## **March 11**

*I consider plexi-glass as a possibility. I could sand it so it would have a frosted look to it that would blur and obscure my work and may perhaps aid in achieving the glow I am seeking. I will experiment with this idea when I get home. This idea in no way helps me with my current problem – what to do with the two ‘thin’ panels, but it has been an enjoyable sidetrack. This often happens. I am trying to resolve a current painting dilemma and instead my mind has wandered off to consider something else. It is exciting really and I know that the answer to my current dilemma will come, just not today.*

## **March 12**

*I bought some plexi from Home Depot and have been experimenting on two small panels. Of course, I am not happy with what I have painted but I am happy with the frosted look achieved from sanding the plexi. I can visualize a series of paintings using this as the final layer. I will have to figure out how to attach it but I can work on that. For now I hold the paintings in my mind. I can see them clearly – mostly pale except for one small section of intense colour where the plexi is not sanded and in it will be a tiny line drawing of something, maybe an insect, a cell, a fossil. Trapped. Like amber. I love the idea, love that I can see a room of these paintings, all the same size. Tall rectangles. I may never make them. Another idea may come along before I get to them and it may captivate me more than this one. Only time will tell if this will hold my interest, if it will actually turn out the way I envision it or fail miserably, or perhaps evolve into something*

*else. It is so easy to come up with ideas and another thing entirely to execute them.*

### **March 13**

*I have left my paintings for a week. I am spending a week in the Hemez mountain area and have decided that I will not paint while I am here. I need a break from them – they need a break from me, time to breathe, time to be and time to whisper to me.*

### **March 20**

*My stay in Ponderosa is very peaceful and relaxing. It snowed heavily for the past couple of days, so I have been housebound and I don't mind a bit. Not feeling compelled to work on paintings, because they are not here, allows me to forget about them and their problems for a while. It is interesting that I can look at a blank white surface for days without feeling the compulsion to work on it, but as soon as I have started a painting I feel this compulsion to work constantly, to erase my mistakes, to make it better. My dissatisfaction is what drives me. Perhaps this is why I hesitate before beginning a new series. Blank white surfaces are pristine, quiet and undemanding. It is when I start painting that the noise begins. I also recognize that my reluctance to commit to beginning is that it requires a commitment to one particular direction and this means that all of the other possibilities are then eliminated.*

*I immediately start painting upon my return. I didn't even unpack first. I see them with fresh eyes, wanted the older ones finished so I could move forward.*

*The white and yellow paintings that have been bothering me get a glaze using the new yellow/orange. It lends more luminescence to the white areas, provides warmth that was missing before. I move them out of my view and into the bedroom. I need to focus on the new now. I need to de-clutter. I continue with the two panels that I started before I left. They are both predominantly yellow orange. I do not want to use any white, do not want them to be pale. I feel out of my element.*

## **Maturity and Developing One's own Voice**

The belief that one can easily find one's own authentic voice quickly and without struggle is a myth. There is no simple formula for achieving this, nor is there any way to gauge how long it will take to emerge. Serious artists must simply trust that through continued art making over time, their own voice will eventually emerge in their art. This is different from artistic style, indeed, as A. Alvarez astutely identifies, "Style, as I've said, is different from voice, and sometimes the style you have laboured to achieve – your stylishness – gets in the way of what you have to say" (Alvarez 2005, p.46).

Allowing oneself to be honest within the art making process and in the evaluation of the results of that process is then essential if that artist wants to encourage the emergence of her own voice. This requires a mature understanding of the reality of engaging in art making, a stripping away of all that is unnecessary, borrowed from others, stylistically clever or mannerist and replacing it with an acceptance of what is really there.

Accepting and embracing the uncertainty that accompanies art making is evidence of the mature artist. While my journal entries attest to the fact that I continually live with a level of anxiety when I am making art, it is an anxiety that I have learned to manage over time and to set aside when I am not in the studio. While my art making process is about taking risks and pushing myself to explore further with each new painting, I have found ways to mitigate the impacts of the uncertainty that this can engender by utilizing routines that allow me to structure my working day in a manner that best facilitates my art making process.

I have learned to trust in this process, to have faith in the art itself, that it will find its own resolution be it good, bad or mediocre. I have learned to accept the mediocre and bad art I make along with the good. Without it, I would not make any good art. It is the sustained practice of my art making that has allowed me to develop this mature understanding of my own body of work. I have developed the ability to distance myself from the work, to look at it from a more neutral and objective position and allow the work itself to determine what it needs and where it needs to go. All of the skills I have learned and the explorations I have made have allowed me to refine my abilities and perceptions, as Alvarez (2005) notes,

...the arts are complex disciplines, crafts that take years to acquire. But once this long apprenticeship is over and the technical skills are so perfected that they have become instinctive, a strange transformation takes place: as the artist becomes absorbed in the practical details of his craft, his personality recedes and the work cuts itself free of its maker, acquiring a separate life of its own (p.21).

This separation Alvarez refers to is really about the acquisition of an authentic voice, the work itself has matured, no longer dependent on the influences or rules of other artists or on the control of its maker. Instead, the artist finds that her imagery begins to communicate what she wants it to, that the visual language she has been struggling to acquire seems to finally coalesce, and is sufficient to express her aliveness (pp.22-23).

Accompanying this is the understanding that the critical voice, when used objectively, can be put to good use. My critical voice, no longer utilized in ways that might stop me from making my work, is now used to see my artwork as it really is, to help me understand how to resolve some paintings and to determine which directions are worth further exploration at this time, and which are not. This is not something I could understand as an art student; I simply did not have enough experience making art at that time. Anne Truitt (1996) expresses similar sentiments.

When I had been working in art for some ten years, I began to notice that I felt as if I were doing what was “right” when I felt fractionally distanced from what I was making. I began to experience a kind of alive silence – I cannot say it more clearly – that was new to me. I was surprised. I felt there was a subtle balance that had a neutrality dissociated from the passion that I had always thought must necessarily inform art. But by then I had developed respect for my instincts (p.140).

All artists who work regularly on their art making, in whatever form this takes, experience a deepening and maturing of their art over time. A sustained practice of working allows the artist to develop strategies that work for them, to tailor them to their own unique approach to art making. A commitment to making



art, and especially to making your own art, allows for an honest art making that leaves the rules imposed by others behind. Instead, the artist opts for flexible rules and the freedom to select which techniques and methods to adopt, dependant on the requirements of each individual artwork, rather than on a general predetermined mode of art making.

Relinquishing the influences of other artists is then crucial for the development of one's own voice. Alvarez (2005) notes that writers often become obsessed with the lives and work of well-known writers they admire, "You don't want to be like him, you want to be him. In retrospect, infatuation is as embarrassing as promiscuity, but for the writer it is a necessary part of the weary process of growing up" (p.26). This is no different for visual artists. As I have explored, visual artists, like writers, learn from other artists, and often become obsessed with the lives, artwork and art practice of particular artists. Alvarez is identifying that this is a normal, and even essential, part of becoming an artist. However, with maturity, and the desire for authentic communication, the ability to release and navigate through influences and their accompanying rules emerges.

Accompanying this understanding of how to navigate through, and with, the rules of art, is an acknowledgement that the myths that surround art and artists are just that - myths. These myths are often contradictory, and include conflicting ideas about how art should be made, where it should be made, how much should be made, how long it should take, who can be an artist, how they should behave, how they should live and how to be a success.

One of the most prevalent of these myths is the idea that talent is what determines who is and who is not truly an artist. While it is true that some individuals possess more natural talent than others, the notion of the supremely talented artist who is able to create effortlessly, is mythical and almost never found within the professional art world. While some initial talent and interest in visual art are necessary building blocks, it is discipline and a dedication to continuing to make art that leads to increased proficiency and successful art works for the majority of working artists.

The mature artist understands this all too well. While talent is often the initial element that propels an artist into art making, it is commitment to art making that is more likely to lead to a sustained art practice. When time is committed to art making, and it is combined with discipline, determination and self-awareness, the artist becomes engaged in the process of developing her work and finding her own way into making authentic art. As artist Howard Hodgkin states, "I think innate talent is greatly overrated. Yes there has to be some kind of sensibility, but the sort of sensibility that enables people to do things – whether it's to sing or be a musician – that comes from a willingness to be naked in front of art" (Nairne, 2002, p.35).

This nakedness Hodgkin speaks of cannot happen if the artist is clinging to rules and myths. In order to create authentic art, art that is truly your own art, the artist must often let go of all that they have predetermined about art making and of being an artist. This means that the uncertainty and anxiety that accompany art making are allowed to emerge, be accepted as part of the

process, and recognized for the insights they can provide and the drive they can both engender. Through this one's own voice can finally emerge, free from the constraints of "second-hand stylistic devices" (Alvarez 2005, p.36). While I will never be delighted with the fact that anxiety is a constant companion of my art making, it is a simple fact of my process and I have no choice but to accept and manage it.

A dedication to finding one's own art, developing strategies for enabling the art making process, and being comfortable with one's own interpretation of who an artist is, does not guarantee that art making will be comfortable and easy. Often surprising us when it does emerge, the authentic voice may not appear, as we might want it to. As Alvarez (2005) notes,

All true art is subversive at some level or other, but it doesn't simply subvert literary clichés and social conventions: it also subverts the clichés and conventions you yourself would like to believe in. Like dreams, it talks for the parts of yourself you are not fully aware of and may not much like (p.31)

The journey may then be uncomfortable, challenging our preconceptions and taking us to places we may prefer not to go. Once the authentic voice is tapped there is no going back. What we may have previously perceived as stylistically brilliant and artful in our work we now see as mannerist and false. A paring down begins to happen as we finally begin to realize that good authentic art only requires what it needs, nothing more. For many artists, discovering what one's own art is and then trying to hold on to what that is can be a rollercoaster ride that lasts for a lifetime. As artist Gerhard Richter (1995) identifies, "What' is

the hardest thing, because it is the essence. 'How' is easy by comparison" (p.129).

Indeed, as this exploration has shown, art making is seldom easy and certainly does not get any easier with increased experience. What does happen though is a greater awareness of the process and, through this self-awareness, an understanding that the rules and myths of art we have been taught are not universal. Rather, they are personal structures implemented by others and they may or may not work for us. Accompanying a willingness to let go of rules and myths, comes self-acceptance. It is here that the artist is able to accept her own art making process, and all of the art that emerges from it.

All of the work made by an artist lies on a continuum and, as such, all of it is important to the artist's ongoing development. It is often difficult for artists to reconcile their old work with their new work. I am sometimes embarrassed when I look at my old paintings, yet I know that without them I would not be making the paintings I am now making. As Bayles and Orland (1993) note, "New work is supposed to replace old work. If it does so by making the old work inadequate, insufficient and incomplete – well, that's life" (p.99).

Judgment is inevitable in art making as I explored in the previous chapter. I cast judgment on my old paintings based on my current paintings, all the time knowing that these too will become old work, and I will come to judge them according to whatever new work I am making at that time. Not only do we judge our own work against previous artwork, we also judge our work and our progress against the work and progress of other artists.

I cannot help but compare my work to the work of other artists. It is automatic and largely unconscious, and, in the past, helped me to situate my work within the art community I work within. One of the artists I interviewed also admitted that she regularly compares her work to the work of other artists. This includes both living and dead artists, the lesser known and the well known, those who are in the art canon and those who are not. Like myself, she is aware that this is largely an automatic, unconscious reflex, and she has noticed that when she allows herself to become conscious of the comparison, she finds she can let it go and appreciate the work of other artists rather than feeling that she is constantly in competition with them.

While a feeling of competitiveness can encourage us to push further in our art practices, it can also generate feelings of insecurity and an inability to appreciate the works of other artists. Maturing as an artist involves finding a way into accepting the art we make for what it is. While we may be able to learn from other artists, and may even set goals regarding the direction and growth of our art based on the work of another artist, we will always only be able to make our own art, and that art will always be at the level it is at, regardless of how we might want that to be different.

Where we make our art can also greatly influence the direction of the art we make. While myths abound about the art communities that exist in cities that have become known as 'art centres', developing maturity means that each artist must find the place that best allows them to make their own art. Far from being purely geographical, place provides artists with a sense of belonging, a home

and an accompanying social environment and structure that is appealing to that artist. All serious artists ultimately must choose the environment that best suits or inspires the art they make. For some this may be in well known 'art centres', but for many others this is not the case.

Regardless of the place an artist chooses to work in, all serious artists recognize the importance of peers. As I have explored, artists learn from other artists, and as such, can develop 'peer-like' feelings with artists from history as well as living artists. Emotional support for the difficult process of art making and an understanding of the insecurity inherent in choosing to pursue art, make the cultivation of peers essential for artists. Even those artists who choose to work in isolation benefit from seeking out some support from peers, since it is only another like-minded artist who can truly understand what is involved in committing to a practice of art making.

While peers may provide much needed support, struggling with fears and insecurities about art making is inevitable. Artists fear how others will respond to their work, struggle with anxiety about the process and the outcome, and worry about the success or failure of their art. Those artists who do not achieve the financial or critical success, so valued within contemporary western society, often feel like they, and their art, have failed. Using this as the prevalent determinate of successful art is largely responsible for the anxiety both artists and non-artists feel about engaging in the art making process. For many, art making becomes fraught because this common perception of success is an unattainable goal. Many students of art simply stop making art, finding themselves unable to go

forward, paralyzed by the opinions, judgments and rules of others. They are unable to imagine that they can find their own voice in their own art, and the courage to determine their own success. Committed artists develop strategies for managing all of these factors, and with the maturity that a sustained art practice generates, find the confidence and courage to make their own art and determine their own success.

### **March 21**

*I prepared the last three panels so that I can work on them when I get stuck. I decide it will be safe to begin one with a light yellow glaze while I consider what I want in these panels. The orange panels are progressing but I am not comfortable with them. I suspect that they will have to change radically. I feel disappointed; I had hoped that the time away would have provided me with some solutions. Instead, I seem destined to keep painting without results I like. It is a minor frustration but I accept it. I keep hoping that my process will become easier, that paintings will resolve themselves without this struggle. However, the paintings that come easier do not stand the test of time with me. The two that I painted more quickly in the past two months have lost their novelty for me. They lack depth, a depth that I can only achieve through a more sustained struggle. It is the many, many layers of paint that gives my work the patina that I have come to expect. Without it they are thin.*

## **March 22**

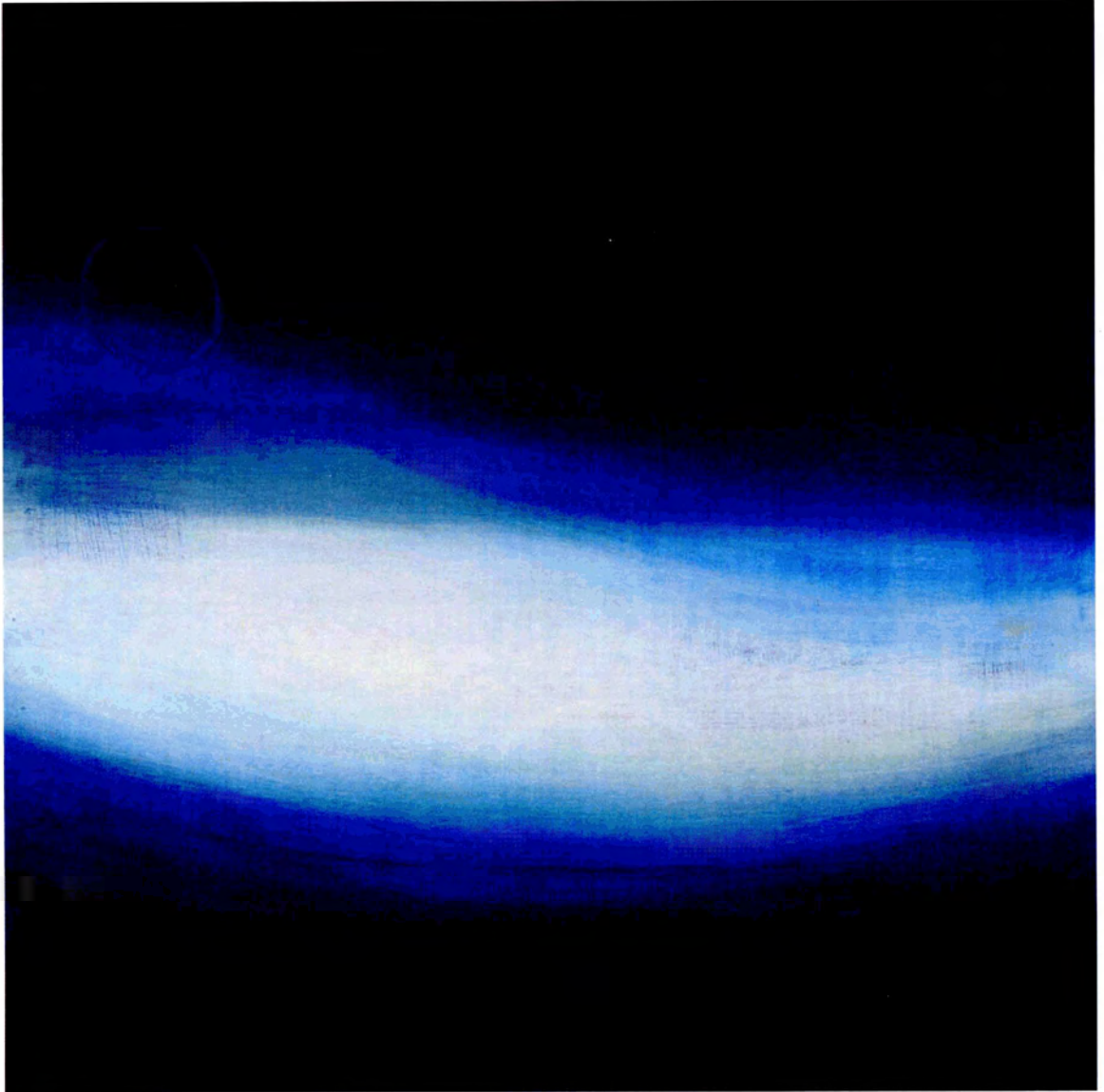
*I phoned the gallery in Santa Fe where I dropped off my portfolio a couple of weeks ago. I phoned to inquire about interviewing a couple of their artists and was very surprised when I was informed that they liked my paintings and wanted to have a conversation about them. This is huge for me. So many galleries have rejected me over the years that rejection is what I have come to expect. This is a huge boost to my confidence and an affirmation that I am on the right track. I am so excited it is hard to concentrate on work, yet, at the same time, I am now more motivated than ever. I have an idea for the three new panels and I set to work building more layers on the yellow one I started yesterday and choose initial glazes for the other two. I want to try making these ones a bit faster, partially because my time here is coming to an end, and partially because I want to see if I can make them faster.*

## **March 25**

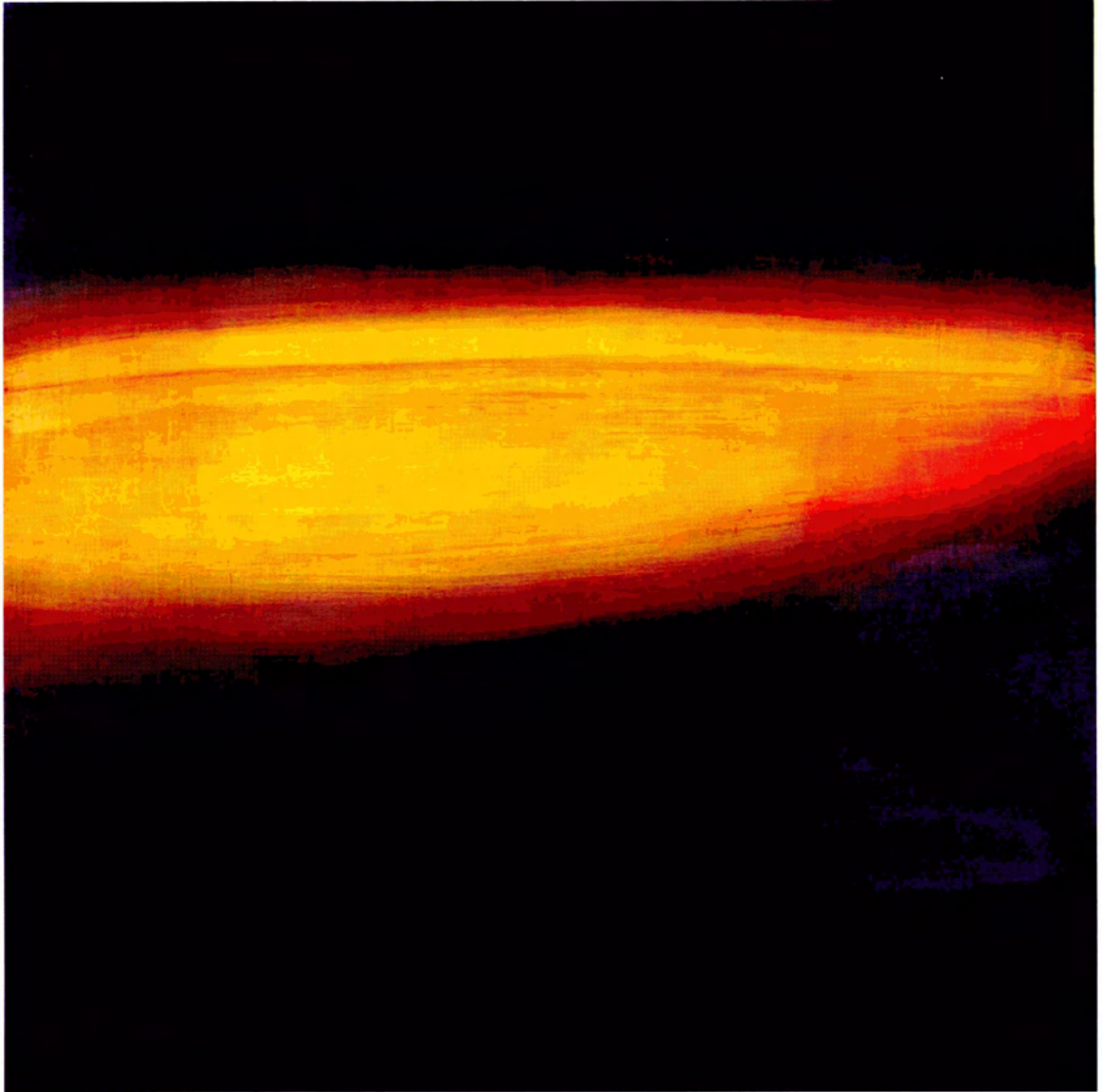
*The three are finished I think. I won't know for a couple of weeks, since that is the usual time period that I need to determine whether the paintings have longevity. I am surprised by these paintings, unsure where they have come from. They are bands of luminescent colour surrounded with darkness. I'm not sure if the dark is too dark, too oppressive. They put me in mind of solar systems, especially the blue one. It is my favourite. The two orange panels are not working at all. One is so over painted, so lacking luminosity; I have no choice but to gesso over it. The other one is salvageable, but needs a bit of work to prepare it for this*



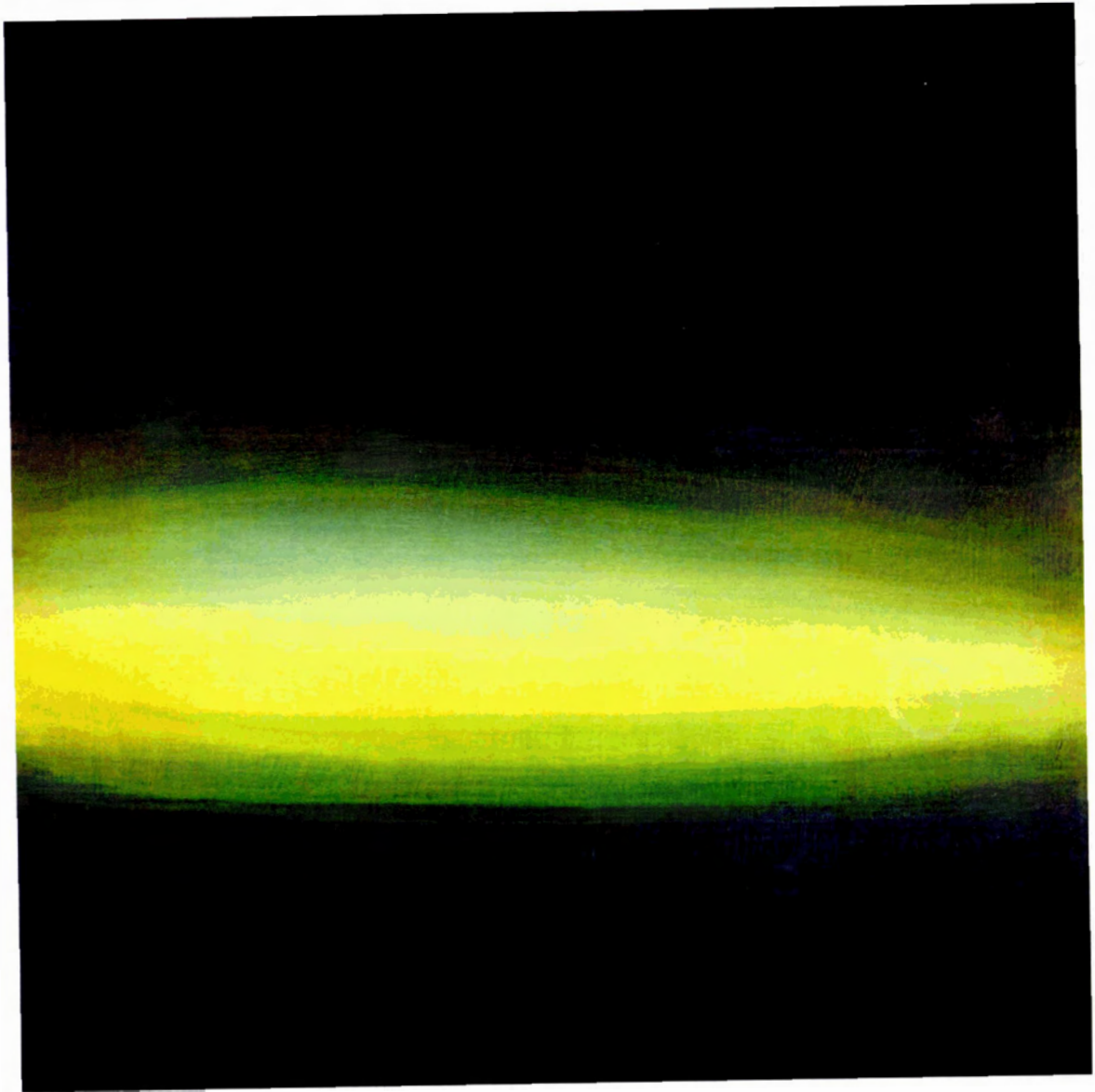
*new way of working. I am able to prepare both panels with first layers of glaze before calling it a day.*



*Image 11- Untitled # 9*



*Image 12 - Untitled # 10*



*Image 13 - Untitled # 11*

## **March 26**

*I work all day on the two panels. I am not as happy with them as I am with the previous three. Perhaps I am rushing them too much – I do feel pressured to get these finished this weekend. I need time to varnish them before I go to the gallery at the end of the week. I decide that I will leave them, as they are, that I don't have the time to take them any further. I need to stop now in order to let the varnish cure before I transport the paintings. I can always remove the varnish when I get home and rework any paintings I am unhappy with – it wouldn't be the first time I've done that!*

## **March 31**

*I had a meeting with the gallery owner and took in five of the new paintings to show him. He liked the first two best, felt that the new ones were not quite finished – something I have also been suspecting. The first two I did here are most like my previous series of paintings so really this is a validation of those paintings and of that way of working. Of course, this is purely based on what he thinks he can sell.*

*It is interesting how this experience now makes me feel about the paintings I have done here. Somehow, I felt I had to branch out in another direction in my work and I was using the experience of being in a different environment as a catalyst for this. Somehow, I believed that this was very important, that I needed to capture something new, that I needed to get away*

*from the persistence of the previous imagery. Why did I feel this way? What messages have I internalized about how art should be made?*

*Clearly, I was insecure about continuing to paint in the same manner; some niggling voice in the back of my consciousness was urging me to explore something else. Perhaps to prove that I could paint other subjects, work in other colours, was not limiting myself as an artist. Now that I have had some feedback about the previous work from this art dealer, I feel a huge sense of relief. I tend to work without much feedback from others, not seeking it out because I am afraid it will influence me too much. I wasn't sure whether the blue paintings were good, whether I should continue to push them or go in another direction. It seemed that this new place needed a new approach but I now wonder if I was forcing that to happen because I thought it should, rather than because it needed to. Maybe I was trying to explore another direction because I was unsure about the validity of the direction I was going in. Maybe I am beginning to realize that feedback is important for artists, yet, I am also aware of how dangerous it can be in the wrong hands. This has been a wonderful way to end my trip to New Mexico, I will return with renewed confidence and with new ideas that have been generated through making the new paintings. While I think I will likely revisit my previous series and pick up where I left off, my explorations here will likely be incorporated into this, will serve to expand the possibilities. And there are always so many possibilities.*

## **Chapter Six – Implications for Art Education: Promoting Consciousness and Self-Awareness**

Art historians, art theorists, philosophers and art critics have been disagreeing about the merits and aesthetics of art for centuries. They each assemble their own roster of art and artists and argue about who should be included within the elite art canon. It is this subjectivity of art, and the subsequent divergence of opinion on what art is and who the artist is, that has been a prime facilitator for the creation of the many, varied and coexisting rules and myths of art.

Since art educators themselves emerge from the existing art education system, it is then not surprising that they cannot agree on how art should be taught, or indeed, whether it can be taught at all. As my own experience in Art College illustrates, this divergence of opinion amongst artist instructors is confusing for the young art student. The uncertainty this engenders tends to encourage the student to choose a definition and set of rules about art, and about how to be an artist, rather than promoting acceptance of the inherent diversity of art. The very fact that art is indefinable leaves it vulnerable to interpretation and the search for a formula that will guarantee results.

Evident within the myriad opinions on art and art making, is the very human tendency to want to understand, define and contain, that which is unknown. We simply cannot help ourselves, yet, it is this fact that causes artists

to experience many of the conflicts and fears I have explored. Teaching art is then problematic since the art education system itself, tends to perpetuate an art making that is more interested in rules and myths, simply because they have withstood the test of time, than in encouraging the development of each student's own art.

The notion of the teacher as the 'expert' and 'authority' on art is fundamentally problematic, and yet it continues to persist. I have been informed by some postsecondary art students that they were not permitted to make art using traditional mediums because the instructors at this institution had decided that those mediums were no longer valid. This kind of thinking, and promotion of it within an education system, only serves to reinforce and institutionalize the notion of rules and generates feelings of guilt and self-doubt amongst those art students who enjoyed making art with the now forbidden mediums.

Just as a presumption of appropriate mediums is problematic, so to is the presumption of how an artwork should be interpreted. As Lyas (2000) identifies, the art teacher who tells her students what to see in an artwork is not encouraging her students to have their own honest encounters with art. This would require a different method of teaching, an approach that encourages students to come to this understanding on their own terms, thereby allowing them to understand and be honest about their own experience (p.131).

During my entire time at Art College, my experiences viewing exhibitions of conceptual art would always leave me confused about its meaning. While I was told how I should respond to this art form, in both my art history and concept



development classes, and of the political messages inherent in the practice, I found myself lacking the ability to interpret what I thought I should from the conceptual art I saw. This left me feeling inadequate, since I could not see what I thought I was supposed to see, and what I thought everyone else could see.

It was several years before it finally occurred to me that my inability to respond to these artworks was because I approached them with this predetermined view. While it is also true that some of these artworks may simply not have been successful at conveying their message, I did find that once I let go of the idea that I should respond in a certain manner, and allowed myself to explore the art itself, I began to come to my own conclusions about the art. This included; what my own experience with the art was like, what message was conveyed and whether I thought it was successful. What had once seemed like an inaccessible mystery had now been unlocked, and I no longer felt inadequate about my responses, or lack thereof.

My experience is certainly not unique. Within my teaching practice, many of my students feel that they are somehow missing the 'magic button' of understanding when it comes to certain art forms. In my explorations of this with them, it has become evident that they have difficulty because, like myself, they have at some point inferred how they are supposed to respond, yet, find themselves unable to genuinely have this response. As a result, some art remains shrouded in mystery and therefore unknowable to these students. My attempts to demystify this for my students are sometimes successful and sometimes not. Many are so attuned to the idea of rules for art that the notion

they can insert themselves into determining their own rules and relinquish the notion of 'art expert' is unfathomable for some.

Aware as I am of the problems inherent in teaching art and the pitfalls that can be incurred, I am loathe to advocate for any definitive art curriculum. However, the fact remains that I continue to teach art and, in the process, I have adopted methods and approaches that I have come to believe are less detrimental to postsecondary students than many of the methods under which I was schooled. As Stuart Richmond (2004) identifies,

I feel ambivalent about this attempt to write about art teaching. It is a worthy subject but at the same time, such a tacit, vague, and idiosyncratic business. Like art making, you just do it somehow. A common belief in the art community is that art is caught rather than taught, that much if not most is learned not from teaching, in the sense of here is how you do it, as from the teacher's manner, a certain haphazardness and openness in direction, hints, examples, modelling and suggested approaches of various kind(p.109).

It is this very illusiveness of art making and the myriad possibilities that it offers that I then try to convey. With this as a key component of my teaching approach, every skill I teach or suggestion I make to students is prefaced with the acknowledgement that they are not and should not be definitive. Frustrating as this can be for those students who want me to provide them with clear answers and formulas, the confidence and independence that it helps foster in most students over time, is evidence of the success of this approach.

I have then come to understand, that the most important place to begin is with the encouragement of individual creative exploration and with an examination of entrenched beliefs about creativity and art making. This involves

an open and ongoing discussion about the various rules and myths of art and artists, with its accompanying outcome of helping students identify what their own predetermined notions are. It is really about making the unconscious conscious, about becoming aware of what we have been taught about art and how it should be made.

While this may initially focus on various teachers and the responses of others, inevitably the discussion moves to well known artists from the art canon. As I have identified, the comparison of your own art with artists in the annals of art history can be detrimental to the individual growth of the artist, if that artist then adopts restrictive rules for making art and for being an artist. Regardless of this risk, I believe that artists can best learn from other artists, from looking at their work, from exploring their techniques, and from the details of their lives. Far from encouraging students to latch on to any one artist, or to any methods deployed by them, I encourage a broad exploration that includes discussion about art and artists that students like, dislike, find offensive, or don't understand. By so doing, students can move from passively presuming they know nothing, to accepting what they do know and claiming the process of learning for themselves.

While utilizing art history may be imperfect, it is the best way to have access to the greatest variety of artists. Exploring the imperfections of it; the dangers of using it as a yardstick, the politics of inclusion, the gender disparity, its Euro-centricity and its propensity to mythologize, then allows the student artist to recognize the complexity and imperfection of the canon. While many art

instructors leave the teaching of art history to the art historians, I argue that in the making of art, art history cannot be avoided. It is here that its influences are put into practice, and it is here that this can be best addressed.

Creating a sense of openness and an environment where free discussion is encouraged, sets the tone for art exploration. I have found that an honest examination of many of the fears we have about creativity can help alleviate creative paralysis. The resulting self-awareness, coupled with a critical understanding of individual belief systems, actively engages students with their own process by allowing them to reconnect with their own creativity. This state of openness is crucial, for it is here that individual students begin to explore their art making abilities, and it is through this exploration that they develop the desire to learn more skills and find the authentic motivation to do the work required to acquire them.

While I recognize that teaching students traditional skills may promote a strict adherence to a rules based approach to art making, I am more troubled by the idea of not providing any skills at all. As a painting and drawing instructor, I have come to understand that skills are the one aspect of art making that can be taught. As Stuart Richmond (2004) notes in teaching photographic skills, "They can be taught about composition: about balance, symmetry, rhythm, variety, unity, emphasis and qualities of form and light. They can be given projects that practice technical operations without focusing too much on originality" (p.115).

Likewise, in painting and drawing, composition, form, colour theory, classical perspective and various established techniques can all be taught to

students. Demonstrating these approaches is clearly the most effective way to impart this information, since these are the tools of a visual language, however, in doing so there is a danger that students will intuit that my approach to these skills is universal and therefore the 'correct' one. Discussing and exploring many approaches by showing examples of a wide variety of applications and outcomes, as well as how other artists have interpreted and utilized these skills, is more likely to encourage a willingness to explore the possibilities and adaptability of skills.

I have found that encouraging students to look at each other's work is a highly effective teaching tool. While students may be initially shy about others seeing their own work, with time, this often becomes an integral and much anticipated part of the learning process; students freely ask each other questions, absorbing information about many different skills and approaches and discovering firsthand that there are many possibilities to explore.

While skills and the teaching of skills are the technical meat and potatoes of art making, what students do with those skills beyond classroom exercises and repetition is where traditional teaching methods are best set aside. As Richmond (2004) recognizes, "Art teaching like art, has its vocabulary of rules and methods but the uniqueness of students, the sometimes open, indeterminate nature of content, and elements of spontaneity put teaching, at times, beyond the reach of rules"(p.116). Encouraging students to explore their own interests, and to utilize any skills they have learned and find useful, is the key to the individual development of students. How this is approached will vary depending on the

needs of each student. Those who are self-directed find it easy to bridge this gap; while those who are not often struggle to identify which direction, they want to go. Both written and visual exercises that are aimed at helping students identify their own interests, mediums, and voice, can often aid in this transition.

Once students are engaged in exploring their own process and work, ongoing support, critique and resources are necessary. Sharing information about my own process, and the process of other artists allows student artists to understand the complexities and difficulties of a sustained art practice. Encouraging a disciplined and dedicated approach, talking about the importance of setting aside time, the impact of place, the necessity for a studio, the accompanying uncertainty and judgment, and the rollercoaster ride that is success and failure, provide students with a realistic understanding of the life of an artist.

Accompanying this is the awareness that through this process students are embarking on a journey of art making, an art making that will evolve and change with time, an art making that is as often fraught with anxiety as it is with the excitement of anticipation. Developing and cultivating the emergence of one's authentic voice takes time and requires both patience and dedication if it is to emerge. Relinquishing rules that belong to others and releasing all that is unnecessary in the work allows students a glimpse of their own voice. However, it is here that the true alchemy of art reveals itself. Authenticity cannot be taught. It can be nurtured and encouraged to emerge, yet it is the specific journey that each artist takes that will determine how it will manifest itself.

Cultivating independence and self-direction amongst students is the goal of my teaching approach. Encouraging them to engage in critique of the canon, become self-aware about the rules and myths they have learned and accepted, develop new skills, and embark on finding their own authentic expression, are all aimed at providing students with the confidence to trust their own creative path and become independent artists. As Richmond (2004) notes, "All education gradually becomes self-education. Student artists move towards independence, develop their own assumptions and methods, give rein to imagination, and find ways of being an artist that satisfy them intellectually and aesthetically"(p.117).

Only those artists, who purposefully choose their own direction and learn how to make and evaluate their own work, are likely to continue with a sustained art practice. While I recognize that only a few of my students will embark on this path, for the others, it is my hope that my approach to teaching engages their curiosity and passion about art, and helps to break down some of the barriers that may have previously prevented them from feeling free to explore art making. While the serious artist engages in a lifelong practice of art making, everyone has something to gain from creative exploration and visual communication. Regardless of the ambition of each art student, fostering confidence unlocks the door to the mystery that is art, and promotes individual exploration.

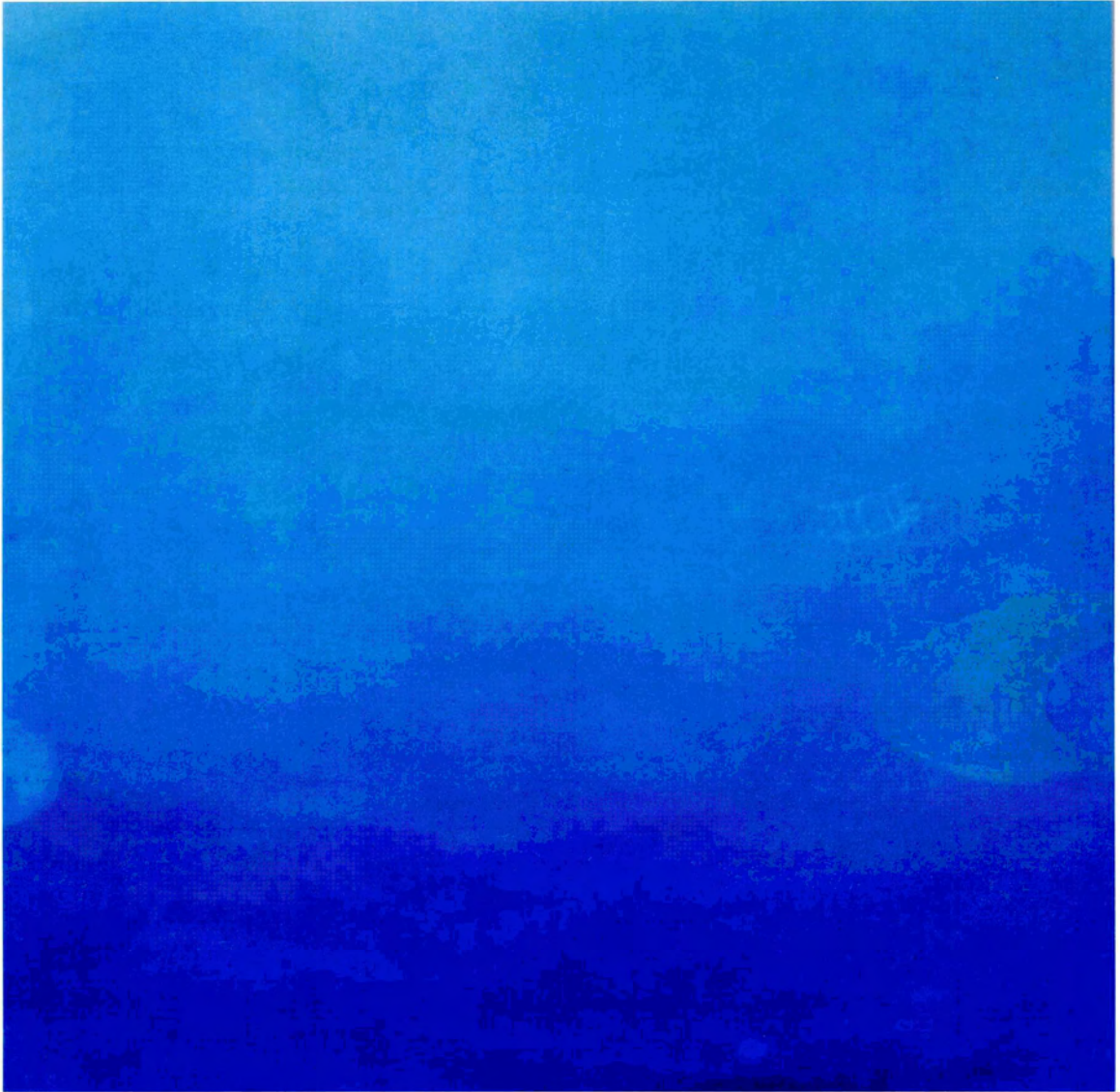
Given my own understandings of the complexities of teaching art within a system that prefers rules and definitions, I am sympathetic to the problems inherent in any teaching practice. While it is unfortunate that current art education practices tend to incur many 'art casualties', those who do survive their art

education and continue to make art have done so by learning how to navigate through their education, the influence of art history, and all of the rules and myths that have accompanied their journey. The desire to make art is a strong impulse for those artists who continue, and they learn to make art in spite of everything they have learned about art and art making. Experience and maturity helps the artist accept her own art making practice, while the accompanying self-awareness allows for an honest art making; an art making that engages the artist with her own art.

Making art is difficult and requires the artist to face her own fears and learn to trust her own judgment when it comes to the rules of art and the myths that surround the idea of who the artist is. Making authentic art requires a leap of faith, a willingness to deliberately place oneself outside one's comfort zone and the courage to then let go of all that we have previously come to rely on. As Peter London (1989) aptly describes it,

How breathtaking it is to start out on a journey into the unknown. How much easier, more comfortable, and reassuring it is to stay where we are among familiar faces and places. Even if where we presently are is not all that we would prefer, it is at least known. That in itself is somehow comforting. To start off in new directions – about to encounter who knows what, at risk of the way becoming confused at any point – takes courage. Or, to use a better word, faith (p.7).





*Image 14 - Untitled # 12*

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