

# ESSAYS

by

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*“The understanding that we live in a multidimensional universe is the great new frontier for art and science this century. To access and move into this awareness will change everything.”*

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## THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE VISUAL ARTS

The twentieth century is over. Modernism is over. An era has ended. It's time to take stock, to re-evaluate, to move on. Perceptions and values formulated a century ago have become frozen. What was new, vital and original a hundred years ago has become tired orthodoxy. The old modernism is now the new academy that has replaced its nineteenth century counterpart. The circle is complete. It is time to break it and forge a new path into a new century. Early modernists felt the urgent necessity to free themselves from a tradition that placed primacy of subject matter above purely plastic values. Now at the beginning of the twenty-first century young artists must free themselves from the primacy of purely plastic values, or as it is called, "pure art". This ideology has taken on the authority of a secular religion. This leads me to what I call the geography of visual art. Like our planet it has two poles. One is design, the other is illustration. When Picasso and colleagues formulated cubism with its emphasis on the purely formal aspects of picture making, they inaugurated what would become the dominant direction, tone and belief system of twentieth century art. With a near obliteration of pictorial themes, plasticity henceforth would become arts new and "pure" subject matter. This was largely a reaction to the nineteenth century salon tradition with its heavy emphasis on subject matter, religious, mythological, historical, social, etc., art's illustration pole. In the new century the design pole would come

to be seen as the sole legitimate direction for "true" art. Just as in the early twentieth century academic artists saw the new emerging pole as nonsense and non-art, so after a century of modernism do contemporary artists and art professionals view new art that moves toward the illustration pole as non-art. The very word illustration has come to mean non-art. At this point in art history both extreme views should be seen as an outdated and unproductive way of assessing art. Both poles exist, will always exist and artists will always shuttle between them. A point about illustration. Before the early twentieth century the radical distinction between illustration and fine art was far more permeable. Daumier, Dore, Beardsley, the posters of Lautrec and Muncha were appreciated as true art. This is not to mention such literature-dependant schools as the Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists. In other traditions Japanese woodblock print-makers, Persian miniaturists, and medieval illuminated manuscript artists were and are regarded as some of history's greatest artists. By contemporary values this is all illustration, yet contemporary art is okay with all this because its historical. However, should a present day artist move in this direction it is seen as backsliding non-art. What is important to keep in mind is that this only reflects the bias and prejudice of modernism, itself already an historical movement. It in no way reflects a universal ultimate truth about art. No movement, past present, or

future can make such a claim. All that can be said of succeeding periods is that they express their unique truth and power. Surely, it is now overdue to jettison such prejudiced perceptions. It is my belief that artists and art professionals who can free themselves from such antique intimidation and who can forge a synthesis between the poles will be able to lay a foundation for art in our century. Such art will have the liberty to utilize all arts options, sprung from ideological constraint. From this new freedom a truly new art will emerge.

## CRITERIA & THE VISUAL ARTS

In the sixties, during my years in New York, it became very gauche to ask “but is it art?” this was considered not only naïve but dismally uninformed. If you had to ask such a question you exposed yourself as a know-nothing.

This seeming absence of criteria grew over the years to the point where anybody who fancied themselves an artist could claim anything as art. Artists were in a great hurry to throw overboard any classical criteria for art making. There was a new criteria, however, and it was to get as far away from anything that looked like traditional art as fast as possible and as completely as possible. Painting had to be freed from frames and sculpture from pedestals and that was just the beginning.

When I first went to New York, I had been working on a series of paintings called “Waitresses”. My father had an older sister who was the family black sheep. As a young woman she had gone to New York and had spent her life as a waitress. I was very close to my aunt and had a natural empathy for her and her hard life. In those days I would take night walks through the city and would often stop in all-night coffee shops. There I would see those black and white uniformed women in fluorescent environments and they would put me in mind of my aunt. I used the waitress motif as a metaphor for loneliness and alienation. Not very original but sincere.

When I completed this series I invited a friend over who was one of the early conceptual artists. He looked at the work with obvious boredom and then he said, “if you’re going to use traditional materials why not use them in a new way?” I inquired as to what he meant and he continued, “Why not buy a dozen cheap easels, mount identical sized canvases on them with only the drawing complete. Then in the easel troughs place the required number of tubes of color and brushes all neatly laid out and exhibit all the easels with their canvases in a row.”

“Why would I do that?”

He continued, “What you are doing is not only creating an installation but expressing an idea. And the idea is that a collector can either leave the picture unfinished or paint it in with the paint and brushes provided. In this way a buyer is not simply a passive viewer but is invited to become a participant, an artist himself. That is an example of a conceptual work of art.”

This was a whole new way of thinking. As I walked the city streets that night I felt my mind was going up in a mushroom cloud. What excitement, an entirely new way of approaching art. One idea and installation after another exploded in my head, what freedom!

Then I suddenly stood still. A reverse process had started. Wait a minute just wait a minute. Maybe the waitresses were not particularly good or original works but they meant something to me. They emerged from empathy and caring. They reflected years of feeling and association. Isn't that what art is all about?

But here was a totally different approach based on the mere putting forth of disembodied ideas illustrated with appropriate props. Anybody could do it, it took only a clever idea and some ability for organizing objects. Surely such an approach was hardly more than a manipulation of raw materials, mental and physical. Art had been truly democratized. New criteria had emerged and those criteria made it possible to be an artist with only a bare minimum of traditional skills.

I still believe there is a place for such work. But surely no more than as an adjunct to art that emerges from a classical distillation of the life experience supported by true art skills.

Most of this work is really a kind of display mentality illustrating some simple and obvious idea or perhaps some obscure one. The problem is that this direction has been promulgated for over forty years so that generations of art students have been educated to approach art in this way. It has allowed the generally untalented to hold the illusion they are creating cutting edge art while inspiring a contempt and condescension toward classically created art. This has resulted in a great impoverishment of culture and has inspired acres of emptiness and decades of vacancy.

In a very real way art has been gutted. The baby was thrown out with the bath water. If in football the goal posts were eliminated, if in baseball the bases were done away with, then those games as we know them would cease to exist. In a similar way art was altered and has morphed into a kind of confused enigma.

So, there have been criteria all through these years, its just that they have been stood on their heads. As I have already stated, there is room for this kind of conceptual installation work. It has become a new category in the inventory of art just as photography and video have.

However, what must be restored to art is that universal criteria that is its very heart. Art is the reflection, the distillation, the core of an artist's life experience. This reduction of the years must function on all the human levels of emotion, mind and spirit. Such art is true, solid and timeless.

# ILLUSION, ARTS ESSENTIAL MAGIC

Whether art is expressed through theater, literature, music or any other medium its essence is illusion. When we watch a movie we don't see it as light playing on a flat screen, we are transported. Transport, illusion, that is the core of the art experience. Art is the art of making connections, an artist with his themes, an artist with his audience.

Since Paleolithic times when cave artists painted bison and other animals they did so to establish contact with those animals. Their art was a shamanic communion with those forms. In their case it was to ask permission, to express gratitude, and to apologize to the animal for taking its life in order to give life to the human community.

At its core art has continued this process down through the millennia. To paint a portrait, a still life, a landscape was to connect to and preserve what the artist and the community felt mattered, what was loved, cherished and appreciated. All religious art from whatever tradition produced images to preserve and pass down to unborn generations what it held as sacred true and beautiful. It was all a communion.

As a painter, I'm always aware of the magic of expressing a three dimensional world on a two dimensional surface, it's enchantment. I'm also aware of the psychic dimension of this process. If an artist genuinely and deeply feels his themes he not only connects to the subject but literally pulls an aspect of its energy into the work of art. When people say a work of art is genuine that is what they really mean, the

subject and its artistic reflection are identical. The essence has been connected to, caught and preserved.

With painting or sculpture that is abstract the process is different. In some cases oblique references to the outer and inner world are preserved but in most instances the art becomes self-referential. This approach is unique to the twentieth century and must be considered the great experiment and innovation of that period. But to all things there is a price. By isolating a work of art and making it self-contained, stressing only its formal esthetics reduces it to object status.

All figurative art also has an object aspect. Paintings and sculptures are undoubtedly esthetic objects. But the object aspect also has that larger reflective dimension that transports us out of our immediate reality. When an art work becomes self-referential it loses the connectedness that is art's core.

I've always felt that there is a different function that separates art from craft. Craft creates utilitarian objects that if they are truly successful are also beautiful and transformative to our environments. Art is essentially about transport and illusion, craft about object making. This in no way means one is superior to the other, their functions, however, are different and in some rare cases they may even overlap.

During the twentieth century there was a strong movement to reduce art to its formal plastic elements and to make those elements

the new subject matter. This resulted in many memorable images and gave art an enhanced physically imposing presence and power. This was an inevitable step in art's unfoldment, but at the same time it sacrificed art's power of illusion, its potent magic.

Now at the beginning of the twenty-first century I think it entirely possible to extract from modernist abstraction all its lessons, innovations and power and fuse these with the reflective connectedness that has been art's great gift and glory since the stone age.

I believe such a synthesis will be the ultimate flowering of all those new possibilities discovered in the last century. To wed an enhanced sense of physical presence and power to the magic power of transport and illusion is to create a new hybrid of extraordinary creative potentiality.

## HEART, ART'S SPIRITUALITY

In the last sixty years art has become remarkably depersonalized. When I lived in New York during the sixties I would often hear artist talking about how they felt the pressure to do something that had never been done before. That always meant stretching our views of art by pushing its form to unlikely configurations. It meant making art that didn't look like art. It meant innovation for innovations sake. And it always meant just changing the formal plastic elements of art making. It was in fact, an inside out approach.

Art is, and always has been, an expression of the artists life experience. This involves memory, impressions, feelings and associations. It is an internal vision that is the result of a lifetime. An inner world that reflects the outer world of experience and the inner one of thought and feeling. This was and is essentially art's direction, working from the inside, from the center out. This results in highly meaningful personal expression.

What I heard and saw many artists doing from the sixties onward was just the opposite. They were working only on the outside. In my own work I abandoned this approach after the mid-sixties. Life was far too rich for such impoverished experimentation. I also came to believe that truly innovative art is the by-product of the search for inner personal expression. All that should really involve an artist is that expression. If it turns out to be

formally innovative then so much the better. Such art will function on the emotional, intellectual and spiritual planes simultaneously. This will inevitably give birth to new looking art without that forced desire to innovate.

And such art will have heart. Heart is something that hasn't had much of a place in recent art and understandably so for such real emotion (versus a shallow and artificial sentimentality) can only issue from the deepest inner expression, the distillation of a lifetime's experience.

It is my hope that young artists coming along will rediscover this timeless source of creativity. That formal innovation for itself will recede as an artistic priority and that the magic fusion of the outer and inner world of the artist's experience will once again become the wellspring for important art.

After all, the definition of spirituality as communion with that deepest and most profound part of ourselves is also the very definition of art itself.



## AFTER THOUGHT

For the last half-century art has been wedded, and I might say, imprisoned by Philosophical Materialism. This doctrine says in effect that we are only our physical bodies and our mind is only our physical brain. This reductiveness has had an immense influence on the visual arts and our culture in general. To make a start, a breakout from this constricting viewpoint is why I've written these pieces.

In this group of essays I make no claim to originality, the new or the innovative. What thoughts I've presented are meant only as a clarification of arts essential nature and function after a century of explosive change and experimentation. This has thrown a lot of dust into the atmosphere and only time will tell what was and wasn't of value as the era of modernism settles. In the meantime it is my purpose to isolate the simple criterion for art-making.

It is my hope that expressing ideas I've held for a very long time will help emerging artists to find a fresh (and timeless) direction and a freedom from the constraints of a modernism that, while originally liberating, has for several decades been hardening into a fixed ideology.

We stand at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the new century must have its new art.

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