



The Chase

At the top of this missive, I'd like to quote a parable that I think points up an interesting paradox in building a successful art career. 'You will never catch the wild ass by chasing it. However, if you do not chase the wild ass, you will never catch it.'

My first steps toward art were taken before I had thought very much about what I wanted to do or be. Art-time in grade school was just something I loved, (a rainy-day substitute for gym,) and I was good at it. For a brief moment, I was in the spotlight with classmates who otherwise had no truck with me, impressed with the picture I was making, or the dry pasta I was gluing into place, or whatever the activity of the day was. When I brought the thing home, my mother would fuss over it, and for a few days it would be out where everyone could see it. At birthday time and holidays, I got pastels and drawing pads, etc. and spent my alone time, (there was a fair amount of that,) just making whatever came into my head. Reinforcement of this as a useful thing would come when friends asked me to draw something specific for them, or when gift giving

An Artist's Notebook

time came around and I gave a card, or a picture, or a card *and* a picture. My art was like a garden; when I wanted to make some idea real, or when I was inspired by a story, or a movie, or even a song, I went out to that garden and pattered around. My idea of 'self' became linked to this persona; 'Danny the Artist.' Artists were cool and gifted, not the C-student I so often was revealed to be at report-card time. In other words, I was blissfully chasing and not catching the wild ass and living, as young people are wont to do, pretty much in the now.

The idea of choosing art as a career snuck up on me. Challenged by math, languages, and sports, I gravitated toward art classes in Jr. High, and took everything my High School had on offer, which ran the gamut from drafting to photography. Before I knew what was happening, I was a senior trying to put together a portfolio so that I could apply to a good art school, maybe Art Center in Pasadena, or Cal Arts, (where all the Disney people came from,) in Valencia. I ended up at Long Beach State which was known for its Illustration program and graduated from there. And that was when I began to think about m-o-n-e-y. I now had to go out into the world with the goal of monetizing my artwork. If I could not get work, I would be a failure. A note here; of the hundred or so folks who were in my graduating art department class, I only ever heard about a handful of them becoming successful artists. The rest disappeared into the tall grass of life, deciding to switch gears and quite possibly leading happier, more productive lives. I wish I knew more, but I don't.

Fast forward forty years, and I am still dealing with the consequences of asking my artwork to be more than a garden of fantastic ideas. At sixty years of age, I am still childishly vulnerable to get-rich ideas like entering this or that kind of show, (art fairs, pop-up galleries, and open studios spring to mind,) paying for this or that kind of advertising, or joining this or that kind of art group. I've spent years and thousands of dollars looking for the silver bullet that would finally bring me the kind of success my ego makes me prey to. My art making has become less joyful in direct proportion to these efforts, and if I am going to be completely honest, I can't even look through an art magazine without comparing myself to the talented people they feature, (and let's not even start on all the quarter-page ads!) To use the second part of our parable, I've spent my creative hours not playing in my garden, but convinced that if I did not chase the wild ass, I would never catch it.

How do we reconcile these two ideas? Is there a way to make art simply because it is what we do, and still be able to use it to make money so that we can do more of it? I know one thing; my best art always comes when I am doing it just for myself. Paradox alert: those paintings never seem to hang around for very long. Oh, the universe has a *wicked* sense of humor. My oldest sister, also an artist, is capable of moments of stunning insight. We were talking about her latest creations one day when she said, "I really don't know where all the ideas come from, they just come along and demand to be done." In other words, she doesn't question what pains she might have to take or what the ultimate fate of a piece will be, simply obeys the impulse to create and happily sets about it. Monetizing the process puts the result ahead of the need, and that

An Artist's Notebook

is not the way invention generally works. Also, big bucks for art is not just talent-based; often there is an element of timing and luck. In that analysis, I'm lucky simply to be participating. Could this be the glimmer of a solution? Perhaps we need to revise our parable to include a third choice; Maybe if I stop giving a damn, the wild ass will just mosey in through the doggy door.

-Jan '19

Beauty Hurts

In a world with so many distractions on offer, I'd like in this issue, to make the case for choosing beauty. Not because it's a comfy place to check out while reality rages, but because, as many Buddhist practitioners have found, of the deep focus it requires. Beauty is not comfort food. Experienced without filters, (or even a warning,) it becomes something altogether different. Ask the guitarist who practices that passage until his fingers are raw. Ask the writer who looks at a blinking cursor, summoning each word by force of will. Ask the painter who keeps coming back to the easel, trying to show us her truth. Beauty hurts.

To gain insight from the outside, to say something that needs to be heard, to go into the darkness and return with light, is going to scrape us, scar us, and ask us who we think we are. When we are confronted by beauty, it is the understanding that one or all of these things happened in the making of it that moves us. Beauty costs us something, but our payment is refunded in being opened, perhaps against our will. Beauty speaks in common experience; the artist tells us what happened to them and when they get it right, they've got us. We see the scrapes on their knees and elbows, but not only that; sometimes there is laughter, and joy, and wanting to hold tight to something that cannot stay. One of beauty's most bittersweet guises is brevity. Even beauty's twin, shunned and exiled, will give everything to frame it and support it. Ask ugliness if beauty hurts.

Those who trade in it often have little because beauty can bite the hand that would wield it. No one likes to be pointed; few listen, fewer look, and fewer still are willing to walk. Beauty might be the one thing we can take out of this life yet as human beings, we tend to put our stock in things. I am not the sheriff of beauty; but like some strange bird watcher I have made a life practice of looking for it and intersecting with it as often as possible. Whether it comes as a perfect thing; a piece of music, a painting, a story, or as a glancing encounter, I am left with some marvelous hole drilled into me, a circle on my list of days, a hurt I will pack when I go to where yesterday's joys have traveled.

-March '18

The Paradox

Kill Your Darlings. Less Is More. Personal Art Sells. Art-making is fraught with paradoxical chestnuts like these and we can't always remember them when it would be useful. The one I'd like to talk about now is: Leave Your Comfort Zone. To this, one might well respond, 'Leave? I'm in a groove here. I've become known for what I'm doing.' But does that mean doing the same thing forever? Sometimes change is growth. Sometimes it's just doing something new. Either way, it's not without risk. I sat on a body of new work for a year before I worked up the nerve to take it to a gallery that represents me. It turned out I needn't have worried; they were excited to see something they weren't expecting.

When I think of my artistic development, I see it kind of like the shore excursions you take on a river cruise rather than as one continuous scenic highway. One stop may have little to do with another, (other than being described by me,) and I never want to stay in one place long enough to become bored. Challenging ourselves as artists is crucial to pumping the creative sap; a mix of elixirs, starlight and quantum particles, that if not stirred regularly has a nasty tendency to harden like glue. In our efforts to prevent this, we must keep entrenched thinking at bay and never mistake anticipation for fear. A little hesitation at the start of something new is only there to let us know that we're on unfamiliar ground. After all, if our subject doesn't impress us as a test of skill, how is it going to impress anyone else?

As we prepare to Leave Our Comfort Zone, (if we do, that is,) there are a few thoughts we might bear in mind. We begin with a plan, but hold the reins loosely, lowering our expectations and staying alert to happy accidents if and when they occur. Accidents are chief influencers of quantum particles, causing them to quicken. Our eyes steal a look at the world above our trench and blink at the possibilities that abound. There are so many small things we might do just to see what happens, like flipping cool for warm, or using a new tool, or doing a collection of small things instead of another great big thing. And before we know we have actually gone somewhere the trench we left is lost in our rearview and we are, for the moment, on a journey. We realize that for the first time in far too long we have something to lose, and the feeling we can't readily identify is the sap beginning to bubble

-Dec. '17

The Distance

When I begin to make art, it is because I am inspired by an idea. There are days when the best I can manage is pushing colors around on my pallet, but I seldom work without a specific thought; something that has drawn my imagination. The application of imagination in art is essential, especially for representational artists like myself. That may sound odd, but it's true. If I set out to paint the old lighthouse, I may be able to record it in every detail, but if I do not imbue it with an overarching context, it will have nothing to say, (except perhaps as an Illustration in a calendar or a book.) The point is, it is not what we paint, but what we say about what we paint that matters. It is what makes a Wyeth painting lonely, what makes a Richter painting unnerving. But ideas are tricky things. They can slip away before we capture them. They can evaporate while we are stuck on some detail that doesn't matter. Their successful capture can turn on years of preparation; practice in color mixing, brush handling, and just looking at art that we admire. The only way to amass the skill set they require is to keep painting. As ground is gained inch by precious inch, the distance between the idea and its ultimate realization as art shortens. Paintings rich in mood and meaning begin to come together effortlessly, allowing us to do a great many more of them which in turn helps us improve. It's a long but ultimately rewarding process. I find painting ideas rather than simply recording information to be so much more artistically life affirming that these days, the work is really all that matters. I am happily swimming in my own lane, even if I'm headed over the falls. As the reader of this newsletter, I wish this for you too, in whatever work you are doing. Think about what you want to say, what you want to see, where you want to go, and then light out for the territories. I hope to find you there.

-July, 2017

Spring Cleaning

The arrival of spring comes loaded with markers both practical and spiritual. We get that extra hour of evening light where we might sit with a cold glass of something and watch the birds hop around the yard, or look inward and see that by aligning our personal stars with the rest of Nature as a new cycle of life begins, we might become the person we aspire to be. It also brings the tradition of spring cleaning, a metaphorical shedding of the skin, where we decide what can stay and what needs to go.

An Artist's Notebook

That being said, I have to disclose that I am a pack rat. I took in friend's vinyl LPs when they were marked for the dump. I am slowly building up my lending library by purchasing hardcover versions of all the books I loved on my Kindle. I buy CDs in threes and fours from the bargain rack at Barnes and Noble, (I am *not* a Pandora person.) My old Hotwheels cars are enshrined in a display case I made for them. There are other behaviors and conceits I will not go into now, but here is the thing: When it comes to my artwork there is an annual event in my studio that I refer to as, 'the purge.' Paintings that are lousy or just okay, (there are quite a few of those,) are culled out and eliminated. Doing so provides relief on a couple of different fronts. First, I never have to look at the mistakes I made again nor will any potential buyers. It's bad enough going to people's houses years after a painting was bought and having to pretend that this or that particular piece was and still is, 'state of the art.' Second, there is the matter of my estate; whether I am a something or a nothing, all my holdings will ultimately have to be sorted through after I am gone. As it is, there will be keepsakes, scribbings, photos, teaching props, slides, equipment, and Hotwheels. In good conscience, I don't see how I can presume to foist any more upon my poor wife, who is most likely to be elected defacto executor, than is necessary, when she might simply like to sell our house and start the next act of her life in Florida.

My sister just got back from San Francisco, where the Legion of Honor had on display the first Monet, done at the tender age of fourteen. I have to wonder, was it saved because it was just so good? Did Monets Pere et Mere have a barn for his things on the family grounds? When I reach a point at which I appropriate valuable storage space in our home to accommodate old or unbought things, are those things necessary to recording 'the journey of Dan,' or are they merely ego masquerading as curator? If one has to ask, then one probably already knows the answer: It is just, *...more*. The best things, the sold things, are already out in the world. Old paintings do nothing to burnish my reputation or inspire, and after all, it was the making of them, not the result, that was important. Let the shedding begin.

-April '17

Your Art Time is Precious

Art does not happen without an investment of time, and there are so many other places to spend it that are equally deserving. We want to be good parents, sons, daughters, mates, and siblings. The careers that pay for our lives, (and our art supplies,) must take priority. Being a good friend may involve getting somebody's couch up a flight of stairs. Being a member of a church might mean helping out at a food

An Artist's Notebook

bank. After all this, there is often little discretionary time left to push the paint around or even sit and stare out a window. My students have sometimes remarked that the mornings they spend in our classes represent the only free time they get all week.

As an Illustrator and then a Graphic Designer, I took this creative time for granted. Like the person who works at a spa, under its calming influence while everyone else is suffering their morning commute, meetings, etc., I seldom appreciated having chosen the road less traveled. It felt different, yes, but hardly special. While I might have occasionally savored the envious looks from those who hated their jobs, I was often fed up with the lousy pay, no benefits, and living hand to mouth. For too many years the Monthly Rent Check overshadowed my existence like natives sharing an island with a rumbling volcano.

With the lessening of those rumblings, due in no part to my being 'discovered' but to some luck and a dual income household, my creative time has taken a step off the grid. I don't ask it to produce much of anything except a record of how I felt that day or what happened when I mixed this into that. I don't demand that it make me money, (except when I do,) or get me into this or that group or show, but to reveal something to me that might be useful. Not putting a bunch of expectations on the results is an incredibly liberating place from which to work and may sometimes result in something wonderful. One only need step into MOMA to be surrounded by paintings made by artists who had not the slightest thought of blending with the herd or having their message be easily digested. By not placing the results before the process, I'm able to enjoy the precious time I spend in my studio, and more often than not luck into a surprise or two.

-December, 2017

The Blur

This last quarter, I've found myself reflecting on my journey through the art business: where thirty-five years of paddling against the current took me before I realized that the journey was the thing. This mad rush to be somewhere I was not burned up a fair amount of my magic dust and nurtured resentments I still have trouble managing. The idea machine is a tricky thing and it responds to everything, good and bad, you put into it. My goal is to stay grateful. No one has more days on this earth than they need, and wasting them is kind of a crime against the universe. I learned this just in time, because things are really traveling. 'Sometime next year,' has been replaced by what is in effect, the day after tomorrow. My daily readings mock me when I see the placement of my bookmark, always further ahead than I would have

An Artist's Notebook

guessed. It is always time to write the next bit of this journal, when I thought I had lots of time to think what I might say.

The blur is mostly pleasant, I usually go to bed looking forward to tomorrow and what I might make or do, but I wish I could slow things down. Speed creates a friction and little bits of me are suddenly gone, like rain wearing the blacktop off a road. Who foresaw a world without David Bowie or Alan Rickman or Maya Angelou? Yet I look around and see that they and many others I looked to as imaginary friends or just as ideals are suddenly and sadly gone. Art teachers I had when I was in high school and college are in their seventies and eighties now. When they pass, I will have only snippets of what they said and did, and how just being around them was a lesson on living. In the wake of their passing, I find myself in the upsetting position of having to roll model myself, mentor myself, and answer my questions myself, requiring a level of maturity that I do not yet wish to discover I own.

Going forward will become increasingly lonely, but I suppose it is more bearable when you know that you are, to some extent, all the people who left their imprint on you. Even if you never met them, you're fairly certain they would have noticed you, maybe even liked you. You are not them, but you are on the journey and that is the buy-in; the great, sad, sweet, and ultimate equalizer. To all of us who are still around, I wish us safe travels; may our luggage be sturdy, our reservations be in order, and may we be missed when we're gone.

-Sept. 2016

Floundering Toward a Breakthrough

Whoever coined the term, 'growing pains,' was really onto something. In my limited experience, I have never increased my supply of anything; knowledge, expertise, patience, or capitol, without wandering through one parched desert of enlightenment or another. Pushing my art into a new direction is no different. The fact for me is that I go along until I don't go along anymore, and then I enter a stage where nothing really satisfies; trusted colors and solutions fail to keep pace with new ideas, and what was time-tested and reliable just starts to feel pat and 'same old.'

I'm beginning to suspect that finding myself in this state is not all bad; that mopes like these exist in order to prod me down-trail. And it is possible that the worst thing I could do with no clear path forward would be to head back to the bunkhouse. The reason being that something, (my subconscious, the universe, Matisse's ghost,) is telling me that I need to leave where I am and get to someplace else. If I decide to go on this little

An Artist's Notebook

hike, the biggest irritation will be that nobody will be able to help, instruct, or advise me, except me. And it may not even end in a great, 'ah, hab,' but in a quiet, 'now I get it,' because I heard the solution before but it didn't stick until I rediscovered it for myself. Or, to take a metaphysical slant on things, it was, (like birth or death,) one of those human experience thresholds I had to cross alone.

Of one thing I'm certain and it's a comfort when things aren't going well; that I am never so close to a solution as when I admit I do not know.

-June 2016

The Artistic Voice

What is our artistic voice? Does it shout, whisper, get out of bed before ten? I'm not talking about art that speaks to a specific cause or contains text you're supposed to read; I'm talking about the kind of voice that pulls us by the chin across the floors of great museums announcing the authorship of a master work before we even look at the signature. It reminds us it is not so much what we say as how we say it, and that the voice which we 'hear' has been formed out of every experience the artist ever had; the bad, the good, the really bad. It is silent, yes, but it is a Buster Keeton kind of silence, filled with wry observation and wit and sometimes even unapologetic sentiment. It might be an advocate for beauty, or for the ugliness that is beauty's foil. It might be trained by years of practice to capture almost any image, but resistant to temptations to bedazzle and impress. It might be concerned with an altogether different set of aesthetics than it set out with, knapsack on shoulder, decades before. Or it might still be walking the same road, compass pegged on its own true north same as ever, but richer and better. Most importantly, it might say a good many things for which there are no words; things that are common to the human condition and that embody great feeling and truth. I don't think we can know the success or failure of our work while we are making it, if ever. We only know that when the voice speaks to us, we must find a way to answer.

-April 2016

Mom

When I was growing up my mother, like many women in similar positions I'm sure, adjusted her expectations of me as my development warranted. Watching her smiling son grow and then toddle out into the world wearing a soap bubble of confidence, she had to deal with its eventual popping and it couldn't have been easy for her. I was sick a lot or pretended to be, and spent much of my time on the floor in my room making strange things out of scraps of junk and glue. Reserved in her judgement, she neither signed me up for Little League nor a child psychologist, but supervised from afar that I was all right if perhaps a bit in my own world. Art eventually occupied my attentions. It was something I could do by the hour, alone, and required only occasional raids on the kitchen to grab a handful of cookies or a swig from the milk bottle. My mother was a busy woman and this may have given her comfort; knowing that while she was out of the house she could be reasonably sure I wasn't buying drugs in an alley, or selling them, but perhaps working on something that would be pretty when it was finished.

These were the thoughts that looped in my mind as my sisters and I recently began sorting through her house subsequent to her passing at age 88, after a life filled with love and friendship, many trips to see and do, and consequently, a house full of things that made it seem as though she had only stepped out for a moment and would be right back. My work hung in every room, either gifted to her when I couldn't afford anything more, or purchased by her at what she called a 'fair price,' because she couldn't bear to see a stranger make off with a part of something she envisioned as 'the artist's collection,' (which now that the pictures are coming back to me, I suppose they are.) My mother always acted like I was the real deal and my artistic journey, worthy of the fuss or not, became the basis of our relationship. "You are an artist," she would often say as if this explained why I struggled with inadequacy, jealousy, and an ever mounting tower of resentments. It wasn't just empty praise: inside of five minutes of meeting someone she would get around to telling them about me and what I did as if it placed me on an even footing with other sons who were doctors or lawyers. She never, as far back as I can recall, missed the opening of one of my art shows, and always made certain that her small clutch of lady friends and their husbands came then or on another night, sometimes even buying something. Looking back, I wonder how much these sales had to do with loving the work and how much they had to do with not drawing my mother's protective ire.

I was frequently short with her and I think some of it came from the embarrassing truth that we were more alike than I cared to admit. Like me, she was often in her own little world. And like me, that sometimes took her away from what others thought she should be doing. Such independence is rare in a mother, and became something I learned by example. But the reverse was also true; that when my mother was there, her influence could be like a small change in seasons. And I like to think that the son born to a woman who could spy a

An Artist's Notebook

pretty bird on a branch, or tear up at a passage of music, or thrill to a forgotten iris sprouting in her yard come April, has grown to be a better appreciator of the world if not just a better observer. This was my mother's unique contribution to my work. Artistically, she couldn't draw a bath of water, but she filled me up with curiosity and as best she could, encouraged my passage to a place she thought I belonged, a place where I would be welcomed and safe. She couldn't see it herself; it was as hidden from her sight as a landscape in infra-red light, but she knew *I* would be able to see it. She had known this of course, since I was a small boy. And so as we go from room to room, straitening and assessing the house my mother occupied for sixty-five years, my sisters and I reaffirm a past we helped to create, and upon opening every cupboard and drawer, remember the things she said to us. Her charge to me to follow a different path recurs, and who am I to argue this last, most important thing? I am Jo Ann LaVigne's boy, the artist. I shoulder my pack, give a final wave, and go.

-Jan. 2016

At Least Be Bold

My wife and I just returned from a great trip back east that included some wonderful gallery tours—some planned, some not. The Big Apple's Metropolitan Museum of Art was for example, a lock from the start. But stumbling upon the MOMA after nearly a day of touring was a wonderful surprise. Boston's Museum of Fine Art was probably the nicest museum I have ever been in and will always bring to mind the memory of Steve Martin standing about two feet away from me, staring up close at Homer's 'Long Branch, New Jersey,' and muttering something. (No, I did not ask what he said, but I wanted to.) Just down the block, there was the Isabelle Gardner which if you are a fan of early 19th century painting which I unabashedly am, you have died and gone to heaven. Sargent, Zorn, Benson, Hassam, and so many more. But I don't want to take you on a boring recounting of all the art I saw over the course of two weeks. What I saw is less important than what I took away from it. It's a tad hard to say, but I'd like to get it off my chest, so here goes; I, Dan LaVigne, having done my ten thousand hours and having tried for 37 years or so to elevate my craft and my taste level and my brush handling, and my b.s. meter that tells self-deluded-happy-think from truth, (at least some of the time,) have realized that despite all this, I will never be famous.

If you know me at all, then you know that while I might not go around acting like I'm headed for this distinction all the time, it doesn't mean that I haven't harbored hopes of some kind of recognition; maybe a

An Artist's Notebook

medal or a parade or something. But it's probably never going to happen, and it's liberating actually to know that. I speak only for myself of course; you on the other hand have every right to be famous and I back your play 110%. But I realized in a comfortably final kind of way, that the field is already filled up by that magic margin of painters who combined genius with fearlessness and left us with the kind of things that Mr. Martin was so impressed by. Art, in other words, made by someone in possession of a skill set superior to my own, and which has been coupled with a sensibility that runs *into* a burning building, not away from it. Genius and fearlessness. I was struck by those two words almost every time I found myself frozen before a work of art. Let's face it; those who possess both simply do not come along every day. And yet,...

The art magazines are rife with ads from galleries and collectors seeking the work of painters I have never heard of. Gone painters, yes, but damned good ones. These non-geniuses whisper quite loudly at auctions and on programs like the Antiques Roadshow, because they are very good examples of, well, of *something*. So, is there a way forward short of enjoying the kind of fame that assures our inclusion into the Genius and Fearless art collections of the world? Well, I may not be a genius, but I know one thing for certain- if I am not at least *fearless*, my obscurity is assured. *At the very least*, I will stop playing it safe. *At the very least*, I will make art that risks something, not merely art that solves every problem neatly, or smugly. I may not possess the nerve to run into a burning building, but I can risk a tetanus shot exploring places that are slightly hazardous- not quite so cushy, or pretty, or user friendly. I am sharing this with you because I have a show coming up in about ten months and I'm sitting here wondering what those paintings are going to look like. When the opening reception comes, I want my artist friends to look at what I have done and say, 'Don't take this the wrong way, but your new stuff seems a little,... hazardous, if you know what I mean. Like, a little unsafe, you know?' And I will smile and know the comfort that comes with being a solid second tier artisan, someone who can die knowing they toiled mightily and fought the good fight. And if my things occasionally languish in a dusty attic for a decade or two, it will all be worth it when someone pulls back the sheet, blows off the dust and says, 'I don't know who this guy is, but I love it.' Thanks for being there.

-Oct. 2015

Be Easy

An Artist's Notebook

When I turned 40, I decided to take up the guitar. This seemed like a nice, attainable thing to do at mid-life. I would pick it up when I was ruminating on a problem, or just jam with a friend. That was twelve years ago. Today I am not much past the beginner phase while ten-year-olds my teacher started working with are now giving concerts. It's depressing. Why, I ask myself, do I bother? The answer is because once in a while I really enjoy it. If nothing else, I can pull out the sheet music and strum,..*something*. And I *have* gotten better, not all at once, but slowly.

Painting is a bit like the guitar; you measure your improvement in terms of plateaus. We struggle along and then we learn something wonderful, painting thin over thick, for instance. Bam! Look at me, I'm painting wet into wet! But then comes the next plateau and we are struggling again. We strive, we make gains, and we dwell there until we find a way to push upward. Hopefully, we ask ourselves the question, "What have I learned and where is it taking my art?" In art making, there is always a gulf between what we imagine and what in fact happens when we try to bring that vision into reality. Further complicating the process are two voices; the first is Satisfaction and the other is Despair. Satisfaction says, "I like everything I do." Despair says, "I *hate* everything I do." If we are to continue to develop, we should keep a wary eye on the former and have a little talk with the latter. Cut yourself some slack. After all, if we get no joy from painting, no gratification at simply being on the plateau we are on, then why continue? Perhaps the best way to feel at the outset of art making is to simply to feel challenged. Challenge is a place where failure is definitely a possibility, but also where success beckons.

Say it is an overcast day and you have arrived to paint at the beach very late in the afternoon. The landscape is mostly an uninteresting limbo of grey and half-light. But this arrangement of limited values has strong design possibilities. In fact, the gloomier it gets the more useful this aspect might become. If you stick to the plan, you might just come home with a winner. But even as you scramble to get things set up the voices are whispering; I can't draw like Artist A. I can't paint like Artist B. Artist C is *so* good, I just want to go home and crawl into bed.

This is a moment of challenge. Your idea is good, so use the input from artist A,B, and C, and ask yourself what Artist D, (that's you,) would do with it. Come at it a different way. If nothing else the results will be your own. When Despair tries to whisper that one of those artists could have done it better, you can reply that you weren't trying to paint like them; you were trying to paint like you.

Using this mindset, you can both grow and enjoy the process. Friends, we must enjoy the process or we will not paint. If we don't paint, we will never reach the next plateau. Making something from nothing is the most personal, mystical, and blessed thing you can do. Challenging yourself, honing your artistic vision, lessens some of the accompanying sting of comparing your work to other's and allows you to have fun without kidding yourself. The art will change, get better, get more like *you*. Maybe not all at once, but slowly.

Flow

After struggling for the last five years or so, the art school started by the great Fred Fixler and where I happily taught oil painting, finally closed its doors this fall. The reason I bring this up is because change, that reliable old boogeyman, (or woman,) of new letterhead, business cards, and frantic restructuring, didn't really pack its usual sting. In a very organic and stress-free fashion, Studio Channel Islands Art Center extended its hospitality to me and I happily accepted. It provides not only great teaching facilities, but a lot of handy side benefits as well. It is an artistic fellowship, a gallery, and a refuge for art lovers. It's also a marketplace for news and trends. I've taught several lessons there now and I am liking it a lot. To learn more about the facility, visit their website at <http://www.studiochannelislands.org/> and click on 'Art Education,' to see my class and others. The really interesting thing about the move was a growing confirmation that my happy landing in this new spot was no accident. Rather, I am convinced that I manifested something I'll call, 'flow.' Flow, as in a state of being where you are receptive to and perhaps even actively welcoming new things that come along to replace the old. When I struggled against change, I was blind to the potential network through which my fellow artists and collectors and a lot of other people might help me move to the next phase, project, or place. At the risk of stating the obvious, you can't get what you want until you know what that is. When you know, be sensitive to the presence of flow.

-Jan. 2015

Valuing What is Real

In order to grow my business in a more organic way, I have changed my strategy. At the tail end of last year, I decided to stop trying to bring people and things from the outside in, and nurture the roots of my artistic network as they flowed out. If this sounds touchy feely, just give me a second. Prior to this change I had spent an enormous amount of time and effort trying to nail down A, B, and C, thinking that those

An Artist's Notebook

things would naturally put me where I wanted to be. A list of these dubious goals would have included prestigious art groups I thought I needed to belong with, art shows that offered cash or magazine spreads as prizes, glossy magazines that promised to bring the world to my door, and out of state galleries whose successful artists must be zillionaires. These goals all had one thing in common: they appealed to my inflated ego. And when they didn't happen I got clobbered by a tsunami of low self-esteem because I had assigned them an importance in my life they didn't deserve. I was trying to bring outside things into my life that looked shiny and fast and desirable, thinking that they would fix everything.

Now I'm putting that effort into my existing network, which is small but will grow with continued tending. By not buying into vanity projects, I plan to keep my eye on the ball and a lot of negativity out of my studio. I plan to concentrate on more immediate things like monthly paint outs with artist friends, or my teaching, or this book on painting that I'm writing. If I want an art show, I'll have an open studio event at my house. I won't be frittering away precious funds on advertising, annual dues, and entrance fees. And the money saved might go toward something cool like an airline ticket to see great art that feeds my soul- The Met, The Philadelphia Art Museum, and the Chicago Art Institute all spring to mind. When I allow my network, (Other people,) to supersede my ego, (Look! I'm in this magazine!) my integrity and word of mouth will do the lasting work of forging connections and putting me where I need to be. I don't know if this is the secret to success, but in the short term, I might feel disappointed less often. I'll keep you posted on how it works out.

-April 2014

My work is changing

My work is changing. This is not earth shattering news. Woody Allen might say that a person's artistic output, like a relationship, must constantly be swimming to somewhere, sharklike, or else it dies. I welcome these new developments and frankly have come to think of them as Foreign Exchange Students, here for the summer to mess up my lackadaisical routine. Suddenly, there are areas of color from some other painting or reality, searching to fulfill a destiny only colors can understand. There is brushwork which asks not if anyone understands what it is trying to describe, but responds to questions with a roll of its eyes and a muttered, 'you just don't get it.' (I don't dare ask what this means for fear of not looking cool.) There are whole negative areas which run quiet, perhaps pondering the number pi as they balance other

An Artist's Notebook

sections which hum with activity like hornet's nests. And occasionally an idea strolls in and at brush point, orders me to obliterate something I spent hours on. As the one who lets all of this behavior go unpunished, I guess I have to say that I am fine with it. As long as no one gets hurt, they can take the car and go wherever they like. I just smile and try to look like I remember inviting them, and then I realize that I did. They and other forces like them are but the natural outgrowth of a deepening personal perspective. The fact that they show up with a back pack covered in Euro-branding and smell funny tells me that I am getting closer to where I want to be, which is to say, further from where I've already been. The art I want to make is the kind of art that is an extension of who I am and what I like. Ideally, it will be less concerned with making a picture of something so much as making a picture about how I feel about something. This gets back to a drum that I have been beating for the last three years or so, that effective art is more idea than anything else. If everyone had to be able to paint like Hans Holbein to be successful, where would David Hockney, arguably the greatest practicing painter alive today, be? Love him or hate him, his work is intensely personal and inseparable from the spirit that created it. Okay, if this were a Monte Python skit I would probably be eaten now by that shark I mentioned earlier, but I just wanted to make the point that things in my studio are kinda jumpin'. I hope the same for you.

-July 2014

Art Communicates

I once had an instructor for a graduate class in Art Theory who asked us to finish the following sentence; Art _____. Our responses were as different as we were from each other. As an Illustrator, I think I said, "Art describes," which didn't take a lot of thought. At the end of the discussion the consensus, distilled from multiple disciplines and applications was something I took as a truth. "Art communicates." It tells a story, makes a point, joins together oblique concepts or plays off of them, makes us laugh, (which is really significant given that no one really knows what makes something funny.) But in its unique way, successful art reaches into the psyche and touches memory, dream, or common experience to communicate something.

An Artist's Notebook

We feel successful art on a cellular level we can never really be prepared for. I don't think that when Claude Monet was doing his oversized lily pad paintings near the end of his life he planned on sending me to a bench in the Tuileries afterward coping with an emotional moment. I'm not the stoic type to begin with, but those giant images struck me as being about his own impending death and the triumph he had found in it. It was as if he had said, "This is everything I know, Dan, so listen." Art Communicates. Monet was no more talking about water lilies than Wayne Thiebaud was talking about a bakery case full of desserts. A barn was just a barn until Andrew Wyeth came along and turned it into an essay on loneliness.

One thing that might be said about these artists is that their work communicates something universal; a truth, a good, an obsession, or an original thought. What are we as artists trying to communicate with our art? I would like to suggest that even if we don't have a ready response for this question, the answer will out if we put enough of ourselves into what we are doing. Inspiration alone can take us a fair distance, but it will not sustain the longer journey. The greater joy is in articulating a broad visual vocabulary; not just about what our subject *is*, but what it *says*.

The Secret

Events in life which take us out of our comfort zone and show us the way forward are rare. As a card-carrying homebody, a map of my world would probably indicate my house, the driveway, and then a great open area marked, "beyond here be dragons." I am not agoraphobic, yet simply stated, I have not been known to travel far for my art. That is why the week I just spent in Monterey, California at the Annual Weekend with the Masters workshop was such a big deal. Sponsored by *American Artist Magazine*, it brings together some of the biggest names in representational painting today to teach workshops and participate in lectures and generally gives parched searchers like myself a drink from the artistic well. I'd like to take this space to tell you what I learned.

For openers, going up to Monterey without my wife or a buddy forced me to come out of myself. Everyone was a potential new friend or contact. This was not the time for shyness- I figured that if nothing else, making a good effort might get me noticed. Eating alone was not a problem, I never had to if I didn't want to; there was always someone at hand who shared my circumstances, and artists are, by and large, reasonably pleasant people. Then there was the environment itself: I was in a great hotel with first rate accommodations. I had the

An Artist's Notebook

chance to have successful artists not only share complex tips about making art, but hopefully reveal something of what their lives were like. That was what I most hoped to learn; how they had become so elegant and self-aware, how they had risen above adversity, how they had brought to earth this dream job they appeared to be doing with ease and grace. After all, consider for a moment how hectic the life of a successful artist must be: On the go *all the time*, delivering work, doing workshops, jurying shows, being involved with groups, writing for publications, making and returning calls, maintaining and updating web sites, not to mention painting. And when not doing those things, there are family lives and the responsibilities of home. What was their secret?

While I never heard it directly, a composite began to emerge over the course of four days that hinted at the answer. They all mentioned at one time or another one of the following three things either together or individually:

A deep and abiding regard for the science and beauty of nature,

The love of family and friends,

A relationship with a source of spirituality.

In other words; something greater than themselves. This idea has the ring of truth. When our art serves a higher purpose than our own gratification or the vagaries of commerce, it is not simply powered, it is *propelled*. For surely when we take in more joy, wonder, and love, we have more to bring out in our work and our lives. It seemed self-evident to me that these artists had learned how to transmute the spiritual into the physical, reaping the benefit of higher-powered art.

We will all need a pure form of energy to meet the challenges that come with success; a source of grace to handle our interactions with the world at large and thus the people who sell our work and the people who buy it and who are taking a piece of us, a story, a smile, a memory, along with it. We will have to journey out of our comfort zone, and yes, there will be dragons. How nice it would be to feel that we are not alone in that process, that something greater lights our path as we go forward.