

ART APPRECIATION: Looking at Paintings
Making friends for life
Interview by Birgit Moenke

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PLAN TO LOOK AT ART REGULARLY

You have to make looking at art a part of your regular routine. Visit galleries, your local museum, etc. Don't be afraid to seek out art beyond the gallery walls – it's out there. There's no shortcut or substitute for this practice when it comes to developing an appreciation for art. You can read all the art history books you want, but it won't be enough. You really need that one-on-one contact with paintings. Appreciating art is about what you bring to the experience of pondering a painting and what you take away from it. It's like any other relationship. It's not going to be fulfilling or teach you anything unless you spend time on it.

TRAIN YOURSELF TO VIEW ART IN A CERTAIN WAY

It's helpful to begin by looking at traditional media, such as painting. Historically, the painter's studio used to be the sole engine for producing new visual images, sometimes growing into huge operations, employing hundreds of assistants working under the Master, in order to feed demand. Painting, as the dominant art form, has been supplanted in the modern world by cinema, TV, video and new mass media. Hollywood and large media conglomerates have become the new image-making factories. As a result, I think that contemporary culture is awash in visual imagery – we are constantly being bombarded by imagery at something like 50,000 mega pixels per second. That's what much of modern cinema is all about. The kind of culture we live in today has, in some unfortunate ways, desensitized us to the power of visual imagery, in ways that hinder our ability to really see paintings and appreciate their emotional impact. It's a question of purpose and pace.

Most of the imagery that we deal with or that gets flashed by us is commercial in nature, and this has inevitable consequences in the way we respond to visual messages. It has everything to do with business, marketing and persuasion. We've become very savvy at evaluating and decoding these kinds of embedded messages and subliminal material, but it now affects the way we see painting and fine art in general.

Unfortunately, a good deal of contemporary art has adopted the tools of mass marketing to "sell" an idea. A lot of modern painters go for the easy kill, producing arresting imagery that is digestible in ten seconds and does not demand too much of the viewer. There is a superficial element to the way visuals are arranged and a preoccupation with instant gratification. It's hard to compete with the constant bombardment of visual imagery and, after all, who has time to devote two hours to studying a painting? As a result, a lot of contemporary art has become very shallow. Perhaps it has lost the ability to produce a deeper resonance. Our attention spans have decreased to mere seconds in length, as opposed to minutes or hours.

Traditionally, artistic skill has implied not just craft but an ability to produce visual imagery that communicates on a very deep level. In terms of looking at paintings, it takes time to engage with the artist and try to appreciate the statement they are making through their art. Paintings are different than most other kinds of media we're exposed to, for a few reasons. Most obviously, they're silent, yet they have a physical presence – qualities that encourage quiet contemplation. Consequently, as the British painter, David Hockney puts it, you bring your own time to paintings. Paintings are unique in this respect, because they require investing your own time, yet offer an open-ended experience. In film and television, for example, we insert ourselves into the time frame of that media – a movie is two hours long, and that is the time required to experience it. With paintings, the viewer enters them on his or her own time and sets his or her own set of parameters. The experience of looking at them takes the form of what the viewer brings to it – not just the amount of time but the quality of it.

I would also argue that paintings also have a kind of iconic presence and significance that can't be divorced from their physical nature or reproduced, despite the sophisticated technology that we possess today. Even the most superb high-quality digital reproductions will reproduce only a fraction of the qualities of a painting. Anyone who has had the experience of looking at an oft-reproduced painting for the first time will recognize this. There's nothing that can substitute for standing in front of the original work of art.

Observing and studying abstract paintings certainly requires time and effort, perhaps more than other forms of painting. It's sometimes helpful to compare the process of "reading" those works to other, more familiar art forms. The most direct comparison involves literature; for example, the novel.

Each recognizable genre of literature speaks its own language and has its own style, whether it is romance or drama, a novel or a poem. Paintings are the same way. Although not always a narrative art form, there is something depicted or unfolding in each painting for the viewer to see. Every painting tells a story of some kind. Often, it's something external to the painting itself: a narrative that might be anything – literary, historical, sentimental, social, mythological or political. At the other end of the scale, the painting becomes its own *raison d'être* without any need for external allusions. The story might essentially only be about the painting's creation, and you're meant to look at it and appreciate just the performance aspect of its own creations. Abstract paintings often fall into this category, in which the painting expresses its own reality, not an external one.

Abstract painting is difficult, because you can't just lock into a recognizable image from the real world, you have to find another window into the work, and often these new ways of looking come from unexpected sources. For example, for many years I had difficulty looking at Jean-Paul Riopelle's work. A famous Canadian abstract painter, Riopelle's dense linear networks and tangle skeins of paint were absolutely impenetrable to me – like a jungle – preventing any interpretation of the work and stopping me short, right on the surface of the painting.

An experienced collector once told me something that became a key for me to approaching Riopelle's work. He casually mentioned that Riopelle was an avid hunter and suggested that I try to look at these pieces like a hunter would look at the landscape. That one phrase just absolutely altered my perception of his work, because I began to look at them as landscapes. The paintings suddenly became three dimensional in depth. I could see forests and landscapes, and I moved through them in a spiralling kind of way. It completely and forever altered the way I looked at a piece of work. Sometimes when you can't understand a painting from head on, but consider it from an oblique angle, that painting will suddenly come alive to you.

Looking at a painting as if it were something else – another kind of object – often works. Sometime there is a musicality to a painting, and if you imagined looking into a symphony, you could find your way in. Imagine standing in front of a window or listening to an opera when you're looking at a painting, and you may find your deeper connection to the work.

Fight most of the impulses that modern culture uses in its imagery, and you'll be on your way. Ignore a lot of the cues and signals that our commercial culture builds into the imagery we are bombarded with. Look for something deeper – some kind of emotional essence, or perhaps a direct invitation from the creator of the work. Paintings will reward you for the work that you put into them.

DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH A WORK OF ART

I like to prepare to view a work of art by emptying my mind completely. It's like entering a meditative state. You want to be free of any preconceptions or expectations about what the work might be, yet at the same time, approach it with a kind of expectant quality. It's analogous to cracking open a novel you've been waiting to get at. You really have to breathe out and find some kind of calm centre in order to get to plunge into what this world is going to be. I like to approach the experience of a painting in a similar way. It's a discipline. It doesn't come easy, and it requires patience. Engage in some kind of direct and visceral kind of way with the piece, and don't worry about whether or not the artist is any good at what they're doing. All of the judgments about stylistic niceties: composition, colour, form etc. are all secondary considerations.

There's a message imbedded in every kind of artwork that's had any kind of emotion or thought put into it, and it's your job as the observer to try and retrieve whatever the artist put into that work. It's a discipline as much as being an artist is. You should be able to extract out of it as much thought, emotion and character as went into the work, if the visual artist is doing his or her job.

I don't think too much about what the artist was intending to do; rather, I think about what I can get out of what they've left me. They've left me an artifact to figure out. Doing the work really tells you more about yourself and the way you look at the work than it will ever tell you about the artist.

Art requires your respect. It's not just something you hang up on the wall and ignore. If artists have the ability to express themselves well in the piece, and they've done their job, you will be able to plug into that ability, over and over. You'll be able to see something new in the piece and take something a little different or richer out of it each time. Real artists have the ability to allow you to enter into their work in a way that allows you to constantly re-experience it and learn something new every time you go back to it. It's like a well that never runs dry. Paintings hold up to prolonged contemplation over the years. There's a spiritual aspect to them, and it should be there, otherwise, it's just a graphic design or some bastardized version of an image that sells. It saddens me as a dealer when clients purchase art for investment purposes and then just lock it away in a storage facility. Paintings are meant to live, once they leave the artist's studio. I have paintings that I see every day. One painting I have is the first thing I see every morning, and the last thing I see before going to bed. It's become a friend, and I've had it for years and years. I have a really good relationship going with this painting, and it gives me a lot of pleasure, a lot of joy and even, occasionally, perplexity. There are still a lot of things I haven't figured out about it, but it continues to engage me.

As a dealer, what I live for, is the knowledge that these paintings in the gallery will be purchased, engaged with and be incorporated into the fabric of people's lives. Someone lavished care on these expressions, and they deserve to be looked after with equal considerations. If people don't engage with these pieces and make them an inescapable part of what they're about, the paintings don't live. They aren't performing their function or doing what they're supposed to be doing, which is to come alive in our world each time they're looked at.

FIND WHAT IS GENUINE IN THE PIECE

I really try to reserve any kind of judgment on a piece of work. I give it as much time as I can to communicate with me, and I grab what I can out of it. Judgements about quality come later and are largely dependant on personal tastes. I could list the importance of balance and composition, use of line, form, and colour – all the usual building blocks artists work with. Some artists are really adept at using these tools, other age not, but it doesn't really matter. Any work of art has to be judged and appreciated first on genuineness of expression, and frankly, that's the most important part about any aesthetic experience. When you enter into a work of art, either as the producer or viewer, there has to be some genuine expression of emotion. It comes first and most directly to you, and everything else is just intellectual fine-tuning.

There is always a combination of emotion and the intellect at work when making a painting. There has to be some intellectual element to the exercise as far as the choices an artist makes, but a lot of artists actually disavow that and say you have to throw intellect right out the window and work with a childlike simplicity that's very intuitive, relying only on emotion. Many artists try to winnow out any vestige of intellect in their work so that it's all raw emotion unmediated by thought, to get some kind of direct expression that is genuine. A lot of artists try to aspire to that, but usually there's a mixture of both

involved. Some rely heavily on emotion, whereas others are more cerebral. It all depends on the artist's personality – how they create and what they want to put into their artwork.

Every year I come around to concluding that emotion is the thing that's really important. You have to put all judgments aside, and try to connect with the soul of the piece, first and foremost. That's what makes it real. There has to be some kind of genuine expression in the painting.

Paintings engage the viewer in something that's a little more rewarding on an emotional level and on an intellectual plane. An encounter with a painting is much more than a casual and brief fling that you get from 10,000 mega pixels coming your way per second. Time goes into a work with emotional and spiritual resonance. If you can't get some spiritual sustenance from looking at a work of art, there's really no point to owning it.

When you look at artwork, try to find that humanity in the piece so that you can link with it. Whether you agree or disagree with what the artist is saying is not important. Make the journey to meet them halfway. If you make the effort to draw out some kind of spiritual dialogue with the creator of the piece, you will be rewarded. Perhaps you will discover something you hadn't thought about before, or something you didn't know before. That doesn't mean that art has to have a gentle, beckoning, 'show me something beautiful' quality to it. Sometimes it's confrontational and abusive of the viewer. It provokes and challenges us on a number of different levels. Often it's not meant for easy consumption; a lot of art deals with ugliness on many levels. But there is a message in there that you're meant to decipher.

If you've looked at art for a long time, you can usually tell whether an artist is faking it, or whether they really mean what they're saying. It shouldn't be an expression of just a technical process. Some works just speak directly in a very genuine way with real expression that is direct. It's not over intellectualized, it's just real.

Eventually, you'll be able to tell whether a piece of art was created by a journeyman – someone creating because they have to supply their dealer for an exhibition, or for whatever other reason that exists – or by a true artist. You can tell whether or not they've been able to plug into some kind of energy as a creator. Really fine art should aspire to something a little more universal, spiritual and humanist – a connection that isn't just superficial.

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Heather Horton is a young painter from Burlington. She does figurative pieces in more of a traditional genre.

This figure (in the work by Heather Horton titled, 'February 2005') is in a fetal position with her arms almost enclosing her. There's almost a newborn sense of nakedness to it. You notice that there is, unusually, red drapery in folds on the floor. It's a motif that

demands some thought. The symbolic meaning is, for me, pretty straightforward: it's meant to represent a sea of grief. It's a very deliberate, sad image.

A work is genuine when an artist isn't afraid to draw upon his or her immediate circumstances. This artist uses herself as a model and a close circle of friends. An artist has to be telling you something about his or her real life. Artists who live in New York lofts and paint Italian cityscapes have nothing to say. You have to use the raw material of your own life and incorporate it into the work to produce anything that's genuine.

Sometimes artists have to be tested by life to see what kind of artist they really are. It's been my experience that all genuine creative spirits have this amazing ability, when confronted by some crisis in their lives, to not freeze up artistically. They actually take that fear, energy and pain and use it as fuel. It gets incorporated into their art, and in my opinion, this ability is what distinguishes real artists from the hordes of posers. They also have the ability to draw upon some deep, deep truth that they're aware of when they're going through this process. I know that this painting was created in response to a highly emotion, unexpected situation in the artist's life. This is a painting fuelled by fear, and the fact that the artist isn't afraid to bear (sic.) her soul says a lot to me about what she's like as an artist. This proves something about the painter that I already knew. She has produced a work of art with an amazing kind of emotional intensity to it, yet with very simple, minimal and honest means to achieve it. A painter should be able to say something finely and not be all over the landscape with his or her tools. It should be a focused expression. This work was painted rapidly with a great deal of confidence. This painting wasn't over intellectualized. The artist relied on her instincts to produce a work like this, and it's a fabulous painting. There's something about it that's honest, very direct and very pure. She accomplishes an incredible kind of psychological punch with minimal means, and that to me is a big thing. Not only is it successful as an expression of emotion, but it's a sublimely spiritual work as well. These are qualities that make it a really good painting and give it the added dimension of having the potential to become a friend for life.