

Why I Paint

Since the coming of photographs and movies, there's an unspoken agreement in the world that goes like this: "painting is dead." It would seem painting is going the same road as poetry, novels, ballet, symphony, newspapers, printed books, wool carding, witch hunting, and other artistic pursuits of early humans. Painting seems a relic times when you couldn't snap someone's photo and make a small movie about them from your phone. Actually, there were no phones when painting was at its height. Soon enough the camera will be in your eye, on a contact lens, and you'll be able to make the movie with a thought. In fact, your thought will simply be the movie.

So why paint? Once my grandmother said to me "sometimes I wonder why you don't just take a photograph." That was a rather disappointing day for me. Well, basically, painting is a human act, and as long as we're humans, we will have the urge to draw and paint. It's quite possible that we stand on the dawn of a new age of artificial intelligence, where we can live on forever in a non-human form—something without a body. If you don't have a body and you don't have emotions and you don't have hands, then you probably won't feel the urge to draw or paint. Probably you won't feel the urge to sing or dance either. The upside is probably you won't be killing anybody either. These are human issues: mobility, senses, stability, home, happiness, being alive. Painting is about all these things.

For example, you probably won't be painting if you're in a war torn country, living in a refugee camp, with no bed, no food and no latrine. On the other hand, you could be so frustrated that you draw anyway to dispel your despair. Maybe, like the woman who wrote a best selling novel while living on the streets of São Paulo, you have nothing else to give you dignity except what you feel and how you can fight back by expressing it. Drawing is like cheap sport, like soccer, where all you need is the ball. All you need to draw is charcoal and piece of paper. You can do it without electricity or wifi. You can do it without a studio. You can do it in a cave under France and it will last a long damn time. Longer than the pyramids, for example. Longer than the arc of the covenant or longer than the CD that you broke this morning when you stepped on it.

Painting, on the other hand, is not a cheap sport. Painting is expensive and requires time and space. Someone wrote something about a room of one's own. You need that for painting. Painting is one of the most wonderful combinations of body and mind that you can achieve.

It's like yoga, except you get something other than a hot, flexible body at the end. You see, painting requires you to do many things. For one, you have to observe color, light, shape, weight, height, depth, and shadow. You have to do this with your eyes while your hand is simultaneously moving across the canvas, doing something of its own. You have to practice for years before your hand knows what to do. You have to train your eyes to not think in 3D, but in 2D so that you can simulate things like water, air, clouds and fire.

Maybe you say, no, modern painters don't have to do that. They just put big blobs of color on the canvas. They don't even have to draw. Well, it turns out, that's difficult too. The most difficult thing about being an abstract painter is having the balls to put a big blob of paint on a huge-ass canvas and say "that's done." The whole world is watching you and you put up a black stripe on a giant white canvas. Try doing that yourself and see if you have the nerve to do it. Then try making a big blob that communicates emotion. Name your painting "ecstasy" and see if it can live up to that title. Chances are, you will find this near impossible to do. You will wonder, "how do they do that?"



Once I was in an art therapy class and I couldn't believe how people tortured themselves over making art. People were pre-beaten down, from years ago. Maybe someone criticized their drawing when they were a child. "I can't do art," they would say, when asked to make a collage or a drawing. Or else, they'd make a great drawing and say "I'm no good." Their drawings would say so much about who they were—maybe a few big red hearts on a page

with a black mark in the middle. “What’s the black mark?” the teacher would ask. “Oh that’s my depression,” would come the answer. Right. Painting lets you reach deep into the mind where you could normally not go with a stranger. There are so many ways to not know someone—we spend all our lives not knowing people. Yet a drawing will reveal something about them in 30 minutes.

Painting, like writing, choreography, and music composition, is a struggle to reveal the image in your mind to other people. In my case, I often try to paint a landscape or urban scene because of something I like about it when I’m there physically. One of my favorite streets in Oakland is kind of downtrodden, but I like it because it’s usually sunny there and it reminds me of some of the streets in Memphis, Tennessee. Like, essentially, not much is happening and not much is going to happen on this street. Some of the billboards are from three years ago. It’s hard



to convey sunshine and lackadaisical ho-hum-drum in a canvas. But that’s what I’m trying to convey. Maybe all I will succeed at is conveying “apartment building.” Maybe I will get “sunshine” but not “rundown.” Maybe I will be able to show “rundown” but not any convincing reason to paint it. In my mind, I was capturing something essential about Oakland. In my mind, I am happy whenever I am on that street, whereas, for many blocks before, I don’t even notice where I am. How can you know this? Only if I’m a really good painter.

Once in an art show I saw a painting of an artist’s studio in New York. There were big lead glass windows that opened over some rooftops in the middle of the city. It was a rainy day. I knew instantly that the artist loved his

studio and loved the view especially. I could feel that cold air coming in from the open window and I liked the neat table with the paints lying out on it, ready to use. I was thinking I would like to buy this painting so I asked how much it was. \$10,000 was the answer. So, other people could see what I saw too. It wasn’t just “room” or “view” or “rain” or “NYC” or “favorite place,” it was all of those things together. That’s what makes a master.

There’s another thing painter’s don’t always tell other people about, but it may be one of the main reasons that a person keeps painting, years after they realize they’re not even very good. Yes, people do know they’re not Michelangelo, but it doesn’t matter. The main thing, is the trance that you get into when you’re painting. You go in, put on your apron, pull out your paints, get all your mediums in order, set up your canvas, and sometime during all that, you lose track of time and location. You’re totally into the painting. Hours go by while you concentrate on an eye or a lip. Maybe you’re trying to get the clouds behind the mountains. You could paint it forever—it’s so pleasant to have the brush in hand, the soft paint, and the pliant support. Your eyes and hands become one unit, much like an athlete throwing a ball, until hopefully the golden moment comes when you forget your petty thoughts, your struggling hand, and your tricky eye, and just paint loosely and naturally. This magic output may only happen once a year, but it does happen. Later you might look at that painting and think “how did I do that?”

A lot of painters are also designers. They are naturally good at moving shapes and values around on paper. Working with composition is a crucial aspect of painting. Composition is comparable to the plot in a novel or the refrain in a song. It has to be engaging or the whole thing falls apart. Some people are just good at this. They may suck at many parts of their life, like computers, jobs, money, relationships and even being alive, but they’re good at putting a pencil mark in the right place. Many artist statements should just say “I like drawing shit on paper and coloring it, so shut up and stop asking me why I paint.”

One thing I’ve noticed is that most painters are crazy in some way. Mental illness is accepted in this group, even expected. This is another reason I paint. An art studio is an environment where people are allowed to be nuts. On the extreme side, one of the painters I first met at my studio was decapitated in a car wreck where the driver was an angry schizophrenic artist. Another painter painted with so much damar varnish that he passed out and knocked his head against the cement floor of the studio. People wear pajamas and funky earrings and paint with asphalt and jello. Other people are just a little crazy, like spending all their money on art supplies and living on ramen noodles. One friend told me he wanted to find out what it was

like to not paint baked, but that he didn't really want to, actually. He's a good painter, so why find out? One friend used to walk around in the parking lot smoking clove cigarettes while he took a break from painting an eight foot painting of the statue of David in roller skates. Another guy used to live in his truck and microwave a giant plate of steak cubes in the studio every night to survive. People will do anything to keep painting. They will clean the bathrooms and trade paintings for food. They will paint over and over on the same canvas if it's all they can afford. They are desperate to express themselves. Sometimes the only thing giving you succor is the act of art-making, when everything else in your life is messed up.

Speaking of messed up, artists are notoriously messed up at technology. True, close-to-the-machine programming in assembly language is the antithesis of abstract expressionism. It's true that artists will embrace any technology that's colorful and fun, like an iPhone or a record player, but they shun the inelegant and inhuman. It's like a litmus test to find out if a technology is on the left brain or right brain. Are artists using it? Right brain. The struggle of the typical right-brained artist to adapt to new, demanding, undocumented, essential technologies—like, for example, gallery management software on a Windows PC—is emblematic of a larger clash between the linear and the intuitive members of the human race. The linear members have brought us cars, airplanes, computers and x-ray machines, but what have the intuitives brought, you ask? A day in the studio playing with green paint. Is that a worthy contribution? Do we need the statue of David or the Sistine Chapel or a watercolor of Mount Fuji, or are they all extraneous? Are artists stupid for preferring to spend their time seeing if a sparkly glue will stick to metal instead of building a light bulb so that humanity can see in the dark? A starving child doesn't really need the Mona Lisa, but maybe she needs a drawing of her pain in order to heal later. This is a reason I paint: to access the non-linear part of my mind and find what is there. I cannot do that in Microsoft Excel, baby.

Some other reasons that I'll get to writing about eventually: Status. Famous people. Money. Magic. Performance Review. Critiques—the thrill.

In closing, let me relate a recent day in my life as a painter. I hadn't been to the studio for a couple weeks due to various conflicts and because I wanted to work on my writing. Writing involves sitting in front of a computer for long periods of time and trying not to google whatever musician is playing on the stereo. It's so easy to get distracted while writing. There's the New York Times online and there's text messages and emails and kids getting out

of bed to ask for water for the eighth time. There's nobody else in the room to chat with. So this day that I'm talking about, I had to pick up a painting at the studio for a show. I drove up



to park and another artist was just leaving. We drove our cars up to each other and said "Hey, how's it going?". So some human interaction—take that writing. Then I parked, went into the studio and smelled the wonderful smell of turpentine and oil paint drying. There were new paintings, good paintings, bad paintings—the whole spectrum of art. I went over to my cart which is filled with great stuff. Immediately I wanted to jump in. I wanted a fresh white canvas to draw on. I wanted to feel the brush in my hand. I wanted my eyes to tell me which colors go together. I never google anything when I'm painting. I don't think about what time it is or whether I can stand to do this activity for another hour.

On Sunday afternoon, I can hang out at the studio and talk to the artists and eat brownies and cheese and cold chicken. I can walk over to Peet's coffee and listen to the musicians playing out front. When I walk to the art store in my paint clothes, I get that special nod of recognition from the employees. Sometimes people come up to me in the studio and tell me they love my work. They say I inspire them. They say I'm a role model. I don't usually get that in the rest of my life. Basically, on certain days at certain moments being a painter is the greatest. That's why I paint.

Sherrod Blankner, May 2011