

DOMOBAAL

Dear

Thank you for setting me this curious task. This is actually my second attempt to write something and it has been much more complex than I first imagined so this time I am writing to you in person, not just because it is more personal, but because if I have you in mind as an audience it might well stop me making sweeping generalisations and pretentious assertions about the nature of Art.

The problem that was snagging me in my first attempt was this. When I wrote about imagery, my own imagery that is, I was actually thinking about two images simultaneously. The image that I have in my mind's eye at the outset of the painting and the image that ends up on the canvas. All my paintings acknowledge this distance and all pay homage to it in some way.

The thing about the images in my mind's eye is that however lucid they are, and on occasion they are blazingly lucid (these are rare and happy events), they are still incredibly generalised, far too generalised to be of use to anyone, let alone myself as an artist. Let me give you an example: say I decide to paint a head with the eyes popping out of the ears. This strikes me as being at once ludicrous and poignant, the head is under such pressure that the eyes have burst out, not out of the eye sockets, which would be one thing, but out of the ears - a preposterous wrong turning and one that suggests that the head is incapable of doing anything correctly. Now I have an image that appeals to me, but many new questions are raised at this point. What sort of expression should be on the face? How far have the eyes popped out? Is the head attached to the neck? What sort of space is the head in? And all these questions even before I begin to question the technical stuff: brush size, linearity, colour, paint depth and so on and on. It seems to me that the image in my imagination that starts the process needs to be refined and clarified by being worked through in paint.

It might be worth asking at this point where the images come from. This, too, is not simple. There are those moments where images do seem to appear to me ex nihilo and fully formed (though I know this is a lie, nothing comes out of nowhere). There are moments where a thought or a phrase strikes me as being translatable into painting. There are things I see that I know will make good paintings. But more than this there is a sensibility, a kind of subject that draws me to it, and this is really what the images are about. Each image slots into an overarching concern, a meta-narrative of which they are a part. This is a meta-narrative that I glimpse only vaguely. I sometimes imagine it as a movie that I haven't seen but of which I find the discarded outtakes (the images) on the editing room floor. There is obviously a lot of my personal history in that narrative but I would never say that my paintings are autobiographical, my personal history is more like something to negotiate around. I love the idea of the artist touched by god, a conduit for divine inspiration, tapping into some common pool of shared profound human experience. That sounds wonderfully easy and absolves one of responsibility too, but I think more prosaic qualities, sensitivity to nuance, attention to detail, passion for ones materials, combine to give a personal landscape in which ideas and images can take root.

Now to return to my main point, which is the mediation of the imagined image by the way it is painted. Looking again at my bemused head with eyeballs I remember deciding to start painting it in outline with a stubby brush, an intractable and ungiving bristly brush that was just slightly too large to comfortably make the marks I needed to make. I was painting it with inappropriate tools because this gave the head a quality of striving to express something against the odds. Now,

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how does that impact on the meaning of the image? It creates a crucial inflection in the meaning and even though it is probably not something the viewer is consciously aware of it is still something that can be sensed. And added to this kind of decision making, the decisions of process, there are a whole series of decisions that I make without conscious thought myself, somatically as it were. Decisions to do with touch, for instance, which are perceived, I think, by the viewer in exactly the same way, through the recognition of shared physical experience. So at some points I am adding a layer of interpretation to the image by consciously and artistically being aware of the possibilities of my medium, and at other points I am adding layers of meaning by "feel", without consciously being aware of what exactly it is I am adding.

Although I work to clarify the image I also want the image to outgrow me as its author and to do that I have to find the point of intersection of the mental image and the means of its making and at that point, if I am lucky, I can sometimes get a peculiar kind of resonance which is the coming together of a myriad decisions and moments and layers of meaning which I recognise as "rightness", even though I'd be hard pressed to tell you what that rightness is. I like what Delacroix said in recognition of this complex moment: "It takes a heart of steel to finish a painting".

Ansel
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