**“Art & Fear”**

Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking

By David Bayles & Ted Orland

Assumptions

Artmaking involves skills that can be learned.

Art is made by ordinary people

Making art and viewing art are different at their core

Artmaking has been around longer than the art establishment.

Artists quit when they convince themselves that their next effort is already doomed to fail. Virtually all artists encounter such moments. Fear that your next work will fail is a normal, recurring and generally healthy part of the artmaking cycle.

Quitting means not starting again—and art is all about starting again.

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Vision and Execution (14)

Fears arise when you look back, and they arise when you look ahead. If you’re prone to disaster fantasies you may even find yourself caught in the middle, staring at your half-finished canvas and fearing both that you lack the ability to finish it, and that no one will understand it if you do.

Consider the story of the young student—well, David Bayles, to be exact—who began piano studies with a Master. After a few month’s practice, David lamented to his teacher, “But I can hear the music so much better in my head than I can get out of my fingers.” To which the Master replied, “What makes you think that ever changes?”

Imagination (15)

It’s the same for all media: the first few brushstrokes to the blank canvas satisfy the requirements of many possible paintings, while the last few fit only *that* painting—they could go nowhere else. The development of an imagined piece into an actual piece is a progression of decreasing possibilities, as each step in execution reduces future options by converting one—and only one—possibility into a reality. Finally, at some point or another, the piece could not be other than it is, and it is done.

Uncertainty (19)

Art is like beginning a sentence before you know it’s ending. The risks are obvious: you may never get to the end of the sentence at all—or having gotten there, you may not have said anything. This is probably not a good idea in public speaking, but it’s an excellent idea in making art.

Simply put, making art is chancy—it doesn’t mix well with predictability.

Talent (26)

Talent, in common parlance, is “what comes easily”. So sooner or later, inevitable, you reach a point where the work doesn’t come easily, and – *Aha!,* its just as you feared!

Wrong. By definition, *whatever* you have is exactly what you need to produce your best work. There is probably no clearer waste of psychic energy than worrying about how much talent you have—and probably no worry more common. This is true even among artists of considerable accomplishment.

Talent, if it is anything, is a gift, and nothing of the artist’s own making… for ever artist who has developed a mature vision with grace and speed, countless others have laboriously nurtured their art through fertile periods and dry spells, through false starts and breakaway bursts, through successive and significant changes of direction, medium, and subject matter. Talent may get someone off the starting blocks faster, but without a sense of direction or a goal to strive for, it won’t count for much.

Even at best talent remains a constant, and those who rely upon that gift alone, without developing further, peak quickly and soon fade to obscurity. Examples of genius only accentuate that truth. Newspapers love to print stories about five-year-old musical prodigies giving solo recitals, but you rarely read about one going on to become a Mozart. The point here is that whatever his initial gift, Mozart was also an artist who learned to work on his work, and thereby improved. In that respect he shares common ground with the rest of us. Artists get better by sharpening their skills or by acquiring new ones; they get better by learning to work, and by learning *from* their work. They commit themselves to the work of their heart, and act upon that commitment. So when you ask, “Then why doesn’t it come easily for me?”, the answer is probably, “Because making art is hard!” What you end up caring about is what you *do*, not whether the doing came hard or easy.

Perfection (29)

The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the *quantity* of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its *quality.* His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the “quantity” group: fifty pound of pots rated an “A”, forty pounds a “B”, and so on. Those being graded on the “quality”, however, needed to produce only one pot—albeit a perfect on—to get an “A”. Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged: the works of the highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the “quantity” group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes—the “quality” group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.

If you think good work is somehow synonymous with perfect work, you are headed for big trouble. Art is human; error is human; ergo, art is error. Inevitably, your work will be flawed. Why? Because you’re a human being, and only human beings, warts and all, make art.

… to require perfection is to invite paralysis. The pattern is predictable: as you see error in what you have done, you steer your work toward what you imagine you can do perfectly. You cling ever more tightly to what you already know you can do- away from risk and exploration, and the possibly further from the work of your heart. You find reasons to procrastinate, since to *not* work is to not make mistakes.

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When my daughter was about seven years old, she asked me one day what I did at work. I told her I worked at the college—that my job was to teach people how to draw.

She stared back at me, incredulous, and said “*You mean they* forget?”

--- Howard Ikemoto

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The answers you get depend upon the questions you ask. – Thomas Kuhn

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Sometimes (and probably far more often than we realize), the really important questions roll around in our minds for a long time before we act upon them.

We have a language that reflects how we learn to paint, but not how we learn to paint *our* paintings.

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To make art is to sing with the human voice. To do this you must first learn that the only voice you need is the voice you already have. Art work is ordinary work, but it takes courage to embrace that work, and wisdom to meditate the interplay of art and fear. Sometimes to see your work’s rightful place you have to walk to the edge of the precipice and search the deep chasms.

It won’t help you to know exactly what Van Gogh needed to gain or lose in order to get on with his work. What *is* worth recognizing is that Van Gogh needed to gain or lose at all, that his work was no more or less inevitable than yours, and that he--- like you--- had only himself to fall back on.

In the end it all comes down to this: you have a choice (or more accurately a rolling tangle of choices) between giving your work your best shot and risking that it will not make you happy, or not giving it your best shot—and thereby *guaranteeing* that it will not make you happy. It becomes a choice between certainty and uncertainty. And curiously, uncertainty is the comforting choice.