

Domestic Detail

Contents

- **Preface**
- **Notes for an Introduction**
 - **Notes on Creativity**
- **(Possible) Titles for Painting Series**
 - **Notes on Creativity**
 - **A Comment on Reproductions**
- **(Possible) Titles for Painting Series**
 - **Notes on Creativity**
- **(Possible) Titles for Painting Series**
 - **Notes on Creativity**
 - **Coda**

*It's so me of me to start a journal, especially
knowing nobody will read it. In theory, I hate
navel-gazing, so not writing felt justified: the
supreme negative poetics. So much for that.*
—a character in Tony Tulathimutte's novel,
Private Citizens

Because I am not silent, the poems are bad.
—George Oppen

Preface

The 'notes' included in this text are intended to augment the autobiographical information I have posted in the *About* tab on my website. Keep in mind that this document—which is presented in the form of a digital chapbook—is an ongoing project altered almost daily. The first version was posted on June 1, 2025. *The latest revision was made on July 30, 2026.*

Will Buttner
Portland, Oregon
willbuttner.com

Notes for an Introduction

If the world were clear, art would not exist.

—Albert Camus

Part 1: From the moment I first laid eyes on the spectacle called painting, I was smitten by the aesthetic style known as *expressionism*. The attraction became apparent over the years: *distortion* seemed to me to be much closer to the truth of our experience of reality than any other form of representation.

Up until the day I walked into an art museum for the first time in my life when I was 22, I wasn't aware that humans could create objects that didn't make any sounds. When I first started to look at visual art at that time, I was strongly drawn to the idea that painting didn't make noise—that it was a *silent medium*.

When I first stood in front of 'The Old Guitarist' in Chicago, I didn't see an old man, nor did I see a guitar; what I saw was *paint*; for the first time in my life I experienced the wonder of the material specificity of paint. I saw and felt an artistic *sensibility* embodied in an object that seemed to have great power in its poetic allusiveness. I later came to learn that this quality was known as the *aura* of the hand-made object. This idea that a work of art could have a special aura has now been discredited by the critical establishment. However, this hypothetical attribute of painting *powerfully*

worked on me in my naive state in 1973. I was deeply altered by just *looking* at painting for the first time. And I wondered—how could this be: how could an object that *makes no sound* be so charismatic and so unforgettable?

After looking at visual art carefully for a couple of years in the mid-1970s, I finally asked myself a life-defining question: could I create an expressive object myself that doesn't make noise?

In my creative practice today, I am always attempting to communicate *sensibility* rather than illustrate specific subject matter. Formally speaking, I utilize deceased, high-modernist techniques of distortion and dispersal to express feral, apolitical, preverbal predicates. In making a drawing or a painting, I try to confirm the positive status and continuing value of the hand-made object.

Part 2: My personal transition from boyhood to *adult consciousness* didn't occur until the late 1980s, when I was already in my late thirties. A drastic change of living conditions and a personal crisis drove me to discover *existentialism* and then the world of critical theory. I discovered Sartre and Beauvoir, then Nietzsche and, as a sidebar, Freud and Lacan. I came to realize that I liked the challenge of reading and thinking about critical theory very much. Eventually, I was led into the world of contemporary 'French theory.' And in America, no

writer has helped ‘open my mind’ more effectively than Judith Butler. I want to stress that *I could only comprehend a small portion of what I read by these writers, but what I did understand changed my life.* My adult identity began to finally form on the back of *critical thinking*. For me, reading challenging texts, taking notes, and then studying my notes has been a very effective way to gain insight about this absurd world we live in.

So I’ll admit to being an obsessive note-taker; I revise and edit my notes and my lists to try to clarify my thinking from day-to-day. To put it another way: I consider note-taking to be an essential part of my personal attempt to be creative. But I would never call myself a writer—just like I would never call myself a fine artist. If I write and paint, it’s not because I’m trying to make something desirably permanent; it’s because I am dedicated to the daily process of revising and editing myself. I *consciously* place my life on trial every day as an exercise in self-critique.

Notes On Creativity

I learned early on—when I first attempted to make paintings—that I could not explore my own sense of ‘difference’ by trying to *illustrate* reality. I discovered early that I had a very strong aversion to illusionism, especially styles of realism and hyper-realism. I am not against illusionism in general *for others*; but, as an aesthetic style, the approach seriously does not work for me. This aversion I believe has determined my entire approach to creativity, especially painting. I discovered that I was personally repulsed by trying to ‘pull-off’ the technical ‘tricks’ of pictorial realism like modeling and shading. And trying to draw a figure or a realistic scene on a flat surface ‘in perspective’ made me feel like a phony—as if I were trying to tell a story and the story was all lies. I experienced a palpable feeling of *nausea* when I tried to utilize any of the ‘tricks’ of illusionism to make an image. So I gave up this ‘style’ early on, and had to find a different approach to painting. I believe this problem started when I was a child: I have always had a gut-loathing for anything claiming to be ‘magical.’ I don’t know what this says about me. What kind of artist doesn’t like to fool people and play tricks on the audience?

(Possible) Titles for Painting Series

old shed fell down

people are funny

no one likes a barking dog

you can't get there from here

it's good we're talking again

scare quotes

what if we were both wrong

man betrayed by emotional support animal

I do not think I can be of any further help

cowboys for \$4.99

the talking cure

turpentine burn

untitled, undated, unsigned

live removal

I said no

Notes On Creativity

I failed miserably at painting when I first started making art in the late 70s. Although I was very enthusiastic about painting as a medium, I had no idea how to physically *make* a painting. I discovered that I had a very strong feeling for the *sensibility* of painting, but I had *none* of the craft skill that was required to compose and paint an image on a support. But I wanted badly to be part of the world of cultural producers who used creative skills to make works of art and received some form of appreciation for their efforts. That's where the collage process came to my rescue. Sometime in 1977 I had a personal break-through that I would describe simply as a *recognition* of an alternative technique that could be used for creating an image: *I discovered the medium of collage*. On the wall across from my desk in the business office at Walker Art Center hung six prints by Robert Motherwell from his 1973 series of lithographs called 'Summer Light Series.' The prints could be called 'hybrid' since they combined traditional lithographic printing techniques with collage elements that were 'glued' to the surface of each image. I was 'knocked out' by these prints, and was overwhelmed by a desire to make collages myself. From my experience of looking closely at these Motherwell prints, and looking at collages made by other artists, I discovered that I could use the collage aesthetic to build an image rather than illustrate subject matter.

Plus I had developed a strong affinity for using paper as a support from my experience of taking a few print-making classes at the University of Minnesota. Trying to conjure an illusionistic image on a flat surface with paint brushes seemed like an impossible task—at least for me—that required ‘magic talent. This ‘magic’ was beyond my reach in the late 1970s. I found however that I was much more comfortable with arranging and pasting pieces of paper on a support to construct an image. For over twenty years, from the late 70s to the late 90s, I leaned heavily on the the collage process.

A Comment on Reproductions

On a casual, surface level, I like a good photograph as much as the next person—but I get no *lasting* satisfaction from photography. To emphasis the point: although I have thousands of photos stored on my computer for archival purposes, I do not have a single, photo-based image displayed in my home. As seductive or comforting as a photograph may be, for me the imagery always traps reality in a lie. As Susan Sontag has stated, *Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph.* The approximately 300 images I have posted on my website are far removed from the source material: the hand-made paintings and drawings; the images are instead, mediated, digital reproductions that participate in the pop-culture practice of sharing tricked-out content for hygienic, online consumption.

(Possible) Titles for Painting Series

bad bad narrative

sorry not sorry

before and after pictures

she made me then she went away

not a talkable topic

20 first cousins

screw comes loose

repetition compulsion

green is not one color

emoji gushing & other stories

dogs at work (and other perks)

I'm not feeling like myself

the end of wholeness

play it for laughs

liar, faker

no, never

Notes on Creativity

In the mid-1990s, after trying to make paintings in utter futility for over 20 years, it finally dawned on me what the problem was: *I did not know how to draw*. It just had never occurred to me before that the *skill* of drawing might have something to do with the practice of painting. I was really *that* naive. So I set about teaching myself how to draw. I bore down on this project very enthusiastically. This was the point where I withdrew from the art world so I could reassess my identity as an artist. And drawing really changed everything for me. For several years in the late-1990s, I devoted all my art-making time to drawing. I explored as many ways of making marks on a surface as I could imagine, employing a wide variety of materials and tools. Drawing can be brutal in exposing one's faults and weaknesses as an artist. As Richard Serra said, "Drawing is a way of seeing into your own nature." In other words, drawing can be like an x-ray of one's creative drives and life forces. So, over time, inside the process of drawing, I discovered the source of my personal drive to make visual art: *I needed to express impermanence*. Before I started drawing, my work tended towards the static and the emblematic. After I immersed myself in the process of drawing, I became more and more interested in expressing gesture, flux, and the transitory. Strangely though, because of the awkwardness of my life, it took another twenty years of searching and stumbling—until the late 2010s—for me to take what I had discovered from the process of drawing and apply it to the medium of painting.

(Possible) Titles for Painting Series

mac'n cheese on black velvet

the dog ate my personality

non-mint copy

warmable stuffies

hamburger gravy

shop bouncy castles

a conceptual artist walks into a bar

do not remove this tag

wind chimes are the clown torture of noise

content-free positivity

the terrible glimpses

wait! just one more thing

yes, you can pet them

somewhatedly true

unskilled replacements

Notes on Creativity

It would seem rather quaint in our times to speak of the details of how an artist applies paint to a support. Nowadays, what viewers and critics alike are more concerned with is the *subject* not the object and its formal characteristics. We want to know: what are the *politics* of the subject matter being depicted? Is the artist expressing resistance or compliance?

In my case—for better or worse—the ongoing ‘problem’ of my practice has been the haptics of paint handling, not subject matter, not size, not the demands of presentation and promotion, not commercial viability, not political relevance. The problem has been *the physicality of the paint itself* and how best to apply it to a surface for expressive purposes.

I have never liked the way a paint brush *feels* in my hand when I apply paint to a support. Something *always* seemed wrong and it took me a very long time to *accept* what the problem was: the touch and feel of the brush was way too precious, or too refined for me personally as I tried to carry out the various impulses of my creative drive. I was never able to get my hand and the brush ‘in sync’ when it comes to painting. I believe this problem of being uncomfortable with the haptics of paint handling has been the main reason why I was not able to sustain any consistency in making paintings over the years. This is very embarrassing for me to admit, but it took me forty years of

attempting to make paintings to face the problem. *Finally* I realized I needed to make a drastic change in my approach to painting or stop working altogether. So in late 2017, I made the decision to stop using brushes, and take a more direct approach to applying paint to a surface. The ‘tools’ I use now are rags, sponges, palette knives, various types of squeegees, and my hands. The *Slabtown* series and the *Open Outcome* series both are a direct result of the decision to not use brushes when I paint. I no longer feel anxiety and dread when I work. I now paint with a feeling of confidence and pleasure.

Coda: Talking is always a sure way for me to feel like I’m getting lost fast. I *personally* find the act of speaking to be more and more difficult, and now sometimes even impossible. My verbal skills have never been that good. I do not speak well. Inside my head, my speaking voice now sounds like a garbage disposal in urgent need of repair. So when I summon the resolve and stop talking, things start to get better immediately. For that reason when I stop talking and try to write something I can at least have the illusion of some control.

I take notes and I write in an effort *to make legible and coherent* all the random and arbitrary incidents and events that take place in my life. I write in an attempt to be what we call *normal*. Then I make paintings and drawings *to undo* that normal. ●