Introduction

If the world were clear, art would not exist.
—Albert Camus

The first time I looked at a painting I was already 22 years old. Before that day—in the summer of 1973—I didn't know art existed. And from the very moment I laid eyes on the spectacle known as painting, I was totally smitten. This new experience of *looking* and being *moved* by the materiality of the paint was a shock to me—the experience changed my life. I was particularly taken by the aesthetic style know as expressionism. I was struck by the idea that distortion seemed more real to me—truer about life—than realism.

I learned early on—when I first attempted to make paintings in the late 1970s—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?

Notes On Creativity

On Collage: 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. 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.

On Drawing: 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 time 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 every- thing 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 express- ing 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 consistently to the medium of painting. ***Coda:*** *The majority of the hundreds of drawings I've made since the mid-1990s are figurative works; I like to draw expressionistic figures in space, and emblematic faces and heads. But: I have always had an on-going, love-hate relationship with these images. Since I am not too happy with my 'humans' at this time, none of these 'figures' are reproduced on my website; I have posted only a handful of 'abstract' drawings.*

Notes on Chance and Improvisation

For the field is not just the field of music . . . it is the field of human awareness, and the acceptance ultimately is of oneself as present mysteriously, impermanently, on this limitless occasion.
—John Cage

The origin of the word improvisation is from the Latin *improvisus*, which literally means *unforeseen*.

The prototype for improvisation in visual art is *psychic automatism,* the Surrealist technique that was used by poets and writers and was also used by painters like Hans Arp, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and André Masson.

Over the years I have used (that is, appropriated and mimicked) the following improvisational techniques that are part of the history of high-modernism:

the drips and spatters of action painting — Jackson Pollock, Willem DeKooning, and Franz Kline

erasing and smudging — Willem DeKooning

chance operations — John Cage and Merce Cunningham

soak-stain and pouring — Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis

flung ink and paint— Robert Motherwell, Pat Steir, and Jean Dubuffet

clotting and smearing — Joan Mitchel and Cy Twombly

squeegee painting — Gerhard Richter

freehand meandering — Louise Bourgeoise and Joseph Beuys

And, although not strictly techniques of improvisation, there are two other tropes of modern painting that have been very important to my practice:

the fuzzy zone — Mark Rothko and Howard Hodgkin

white overpainting — this is a method of painting a white or light pigment over the top of other marks or images that were previously applied to a surface; the art historical reference for this 'look' is called pentimento, in which the earlier thoughts and activities of a maker are visible *under* the white and variously transparent overpainting; three artists who have inspired me in this regard are Brice Marden, Robert Ryan, and Richard Diebenkorn.

All of these techniques, which are still being used by artists all over the world today, are nevertheless, in our times, *dead*. Some commentators and artists have taken to calling them 'zombie' techniques—as in dead but still walking and squawking; my personal term of endearment would be *deceased*—as in *always already dead*, but lingering in the mind like valued ancestors that can still be used as memes for creativity. I have a very mordant sense of humor that enables me to see both the triumphalism *and* the masochism of continuing to paint and draw using these deceased creative techniques.

Complete self-expression is achieved by means of free association . . . To associate freely means an endeavor . . .to express without reserve, and in any sequence in which it emerges, everything that comes into [the] mind, regardless of whether it is or appears trivial, off the point, incoherent, irrational, indiscreet, tactless, embarrassing, humiliating . . . Free Association differs from our customary way of thinking or talking not only in its frankness and unreservedness, but also in its apparent lack of direction . . . In free association there is an effort to express everything that passes through the mind, regardless of where it may lead.
—Karen Horney, *Self-Analysis*

Notes on Creativity

On Painting: 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 *subject matter*, not the object and its formal characteristics. We want to know: what are the *politics* of the subject 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 applying paint was way too precious, 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 brush' 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 this 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 to 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. Now I no longer feel anxiety and dread when I work. I now paint with a feeling of confidence and pleasure.

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