

Domestic Detail

Contents

- 1. Preface**
- 2. Notes on Creativity**
- 3. Autobiographical Notes**
- 4. (Possible) Titles for Painting Series**
- 5. Notes on Creativity**
- 6. A Comment on Reproductions**
- 7. (Possible) Titles for Painting Series**
- 8. Notes on Creativity**
- 9. (Possible) Titles for Painting Series**
- 10. Notes on Creativity**
- 11. The Evolution of Insight**

1. Preface

As far as ‘writing’ is concerned, I’ll admit to being *a compulsive note-taker*—and I *obsessively* revise and edit my notes and lists to try to clarify my thinking. But I would never call myself a writer. I write like an apprentice mechanic: *enthusiastic*, but with limited skills for taking things apart and putting things back together again. This collection of ‘notes’ is intended to augment the autobiographical information posted in the *About* tab on my website. What I am presenting here is a patch-work of reminiscences about my life, supported by micro-essays about my development as a painter. My aim is to be frank and direct, not to offend. Keep in mind that this document is a continuous project altered almost daily. The first version was posted on June 1, 2025. *The latest revision was made on April 12, 2026.*

Will Buttner
Portland, Oregon
willbuttner.com

2. 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 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?

3. Autobiographical Notes

Unplanned/Inconsolable: Born in February 1951, I was conceived by accident in May 1950 by two lust-struck, small-town teenagers. I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in a working-class family in a conservative, rural community in Juneau County, Wisconsin. I am of northern European heritage: roughly 9/16 British, 6/16 German, and 1/16 Norwegian. My four grandparents and their families were farmers, laborers, homemakers, carpenters, and soldiers—their ancestors were predominantly colonists and settlers. I come from people who sat down at the table with dirt, shit, and blood on their hands.

My parents were salt-of-the-earth, working-class heroes. They lived their lives with minimal planning, and they were very good at living the unexamined life. They created six humans without thinking about the consequences. They ‘made-do’; they had no larger aspirations. They just lived day-to-day and made decisions the way their parents and grandparents had lived and made decisions. Life was ready-made for them. Free thinking was never an option. Life was lived with dogmatic certainty. They submitted and obeyed. Education meant reading, writing, and arithmetic. Culture meant jokes and gossip, fishing and hunting, Sunday Mass, and the Packers. Family meant children and grandchildren. Death meant heaven or hell.

My maternal grandparents were casual Protestants who

attended church just for special occasions; my paternal grandparents were devout Catholics. My mother, who had been raised Lutheran, converted to Catholicism when she married my father. I was raised Catholic. However, by the time I was seventeen, inspired by the open-minded and promiscuous vitality of my peers, I rejected the Church's rigid and punishing version of spirituality. Over the years, as an adult, I gradually washed superstition off my life like it was a toxic, temporary tattoo.

And considering the topic of formal education: of my two parents, and my four grandparents, only my maternal grandmother and my father graduated from high school—two of six. I attended a Catholic grade school, and a public high school. As far as I can tell from doing extensive family-history research, I am the first in my entire family tree to attend a four-year college and *graduate with a bachelor's degree*. My parents were not against higher education; they just had no precedents in their lives for people 'going off to college.' And they were just too burdened by the problems of daily life to think about the future. There was very little encouragement or financial support. So it is one of the great mysteries of my life why I broke with my working-class origins and went off to college in the 'big city' after graduating from high school in 1969. Inside my family's insular culture, this decision was a *radical* break with tradition. And it was not a 'clean break.' The decision to leave my hometown, move to Madison, and seek 'higher education' resulted in a lifetime

of awkward estrangement from my family. I made myself into an outsider by opting for an open outcome.

The 50s and 60s: While I was growing up in a blue-collar family in a small town in Wisconsin, the idea and practice of ‘art’ was never talked about. The subject wasn’t taboo or banned, it was just that no one in my family knew anything about art or had anything to do with art. Popular music—yes, but art—no. I don’t blame my parents for not knowing about art—how could I blame them for not knowing about a cultural and social phenomenon they never had any contact with? When I was in high school I might have been vaguely aware that ‘art classes’ were available to students, but I never considered for a second enrolling in any of these classes. I didn’t think they had anything to do with me. I knew that a few of my classmates participated in high school ‘plays,’ but I never attended any of the high school theater productions. I was interested in sports, rock music, and girls—very normal concerns for a heterosexual, teenage boy growing up in a blue-collar family in the rural Midwest in the 1960s.

The 70s: I came to art late. It wasn’t until 1973 when I was already 22 years old that I ‘accidentally’ discovered the art world. At the time I was living in Madison and attending the University of Wisconsin. During a trip I took with a friend to visit his sister in Chicago, I was exposed to some of the best art in the world at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was taken on a tour of the museum one afternoon in the summer of 1973, and the experience changed the course

of my life. The paintings I saw at the Art Institute of Chicago that day made a deep and lasting impression on me. Beginning in the fall of 1973 I started to visit the Elvehjem Art Museum on the campus at the UW to look at paintings on my own. And then for the winter semester of 1974, I signed up for my first art history class—Art History 101. The decision to take art history classes launched me into another major stage of my life. As I was working towards getting a bachelors degree in business administration, I took a few more art history classes and changed my ‘career’ emphasis to ‘arts administration.’ By the time I graduated in the spring of 1975, I had made up my mind that I was going to get a job working in an art museum. Another major shift occurred during the summer of 1975 when I was still living in Madison: I decided to move to Minneapolis and enroll in studio art classes at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and look for a job. Apparently, I went from wanting to work in an art museum to also wanting to make art myself—but how I came to this decision I’ll never know.

4. (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

your name here

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

5. 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.

6. A Comment on Reproductions

Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph.

—Susan Sontag

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 hanging in my home. For me, as seductive or comforting as a photo may be, the imagery always traps reality in a lie. The approximately 270 reproductions of my work that I have posted on my website are *copies-of-copies* that participate in the pop-culture practice of sharing tricked-out images for online, hygienic consumption.

7. (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

8. 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.

9. *(Possible) Titles for Painting Series*

mac'n cheese on black velvet

the dog ate my personality

non-mint copy

hamburger gravy

shop bouncy castles

a conceptual artist walks into a bar

analysis this for \$2.99

wind chimes are the clown torture of noise

content-free positivity

achieve perfect curves effortlessly

wait! just one more thing

yes, you can pet them

spiritual-celebrity-delusional complex

adult emotional support plushies

love but verify

10. 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 been 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 of paintings is a direct result of the decision to not use brushes when I paint. The outcome: I no longer feel anxiety and dread when I work. I now paint with a feeling of confidence and pleasure.

11. The Evolution of Insight

Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it.

—Albert Camus

Writing this at the age of 75 in 2026, I now have a broad perspective on my life that can be divided into two distinct periods: the first 37 years or so when I was totally unaware that I possessed an ‘inner life’ or, what is called, the ‘life of the mind’; and then the last 37 years or so—since the late 1980s—when I have lived in acute and painful awareness that life *can be* more than the fulfillment of biological needs augmented by noise and decoration. For the first half of my life I was not consciously aware of the

‘inner life’ of human desires, drives, and motives—the unconscious and the subconscious. I was totally devoid of reflexivity. I was just living on instinct like a feral animal. I have spent the entire second part of my life in an ongoing practice of self-scrutiny and critical thinking, attempting to ‘cure’ myself of small-mindedness, shallowness, and naiveté. I have used the study of art, aesthetics, critical theory and psychology, and the *process of making* visual art as vital aspects of this self-analysis. And since late 2016, I have used my personal website as part of this process of self-excavation and self-assessment.

There are people, places and things that I truly love, but I don’t ‘love’ art. I have never tried to elevate art above other aspects of life. There is *something* art does for me, but it has never been about the romantic idea of giving or receiving love. The feeling, or insight, I have at this time—after many years of rumination on the topic—is that I am viewed as a clumsy poser, as someone who does not ‘pass’ socially as an artist. I’m okay with that, because I know the ‘failure to perform’ is all on me. But I will keep making drawings and paintings—enjoying *the process of creativity as a thing-in-itself*. At this point in my life, I can honestly say, to paraphrase Karl Ove Knausgaard, *I am happy now because I am no longer an artist.* ●