

“MW Capacity: One Useful Thing”

MW Capacity is an artblog active since 2007. My co-editor Sam King tagged it “A Painter Blog for No Coasters”, and it exists as a forum for artists living outside of places like New York and Los Angeles to discuss ideas, to challenge, inspire, bond with, and tease one another. Sometimes we invite artists to do interviews. The interview process is simple. We email the artist a list of 20 questions and she or he sends back responses whatever few seem relevant. Some questions are specific to that artist’s work, and some we send out over and over again. “*What is the hard part of painting? What is the fun part?*” is a pair of questions that almost every artist seems ready and able to answer.

These boilerplate questions seek to define painting from the bottom up. We are asking about the everyday experiences of artists making work in a culturally loaded and frequently misunderstood medium at the beginning of the 21st century. We ask about the doubts or insecurities he or she has, and the choices he or she makes. We are asking, in effect, about an artist’s standards and values, and those are going to have implications far beyond a particular easel or studio.

Responding to the questions mentioned above, many artists’ answers speak to themes like embracing risk, adapting to change, learning to be present and to work in a state of cooperation with, rather than mastery of, their tools. Values that these artists can seek to embody in their work. Values that it turns out are shared by a community. It might be possible to crowdsource the aims and ambitions of contemporary American painting through consensus, using firsthand accounts of artists’ day-to-day experiences.

Unfortunately, we don’t very often get to compare and contrast these different responses. Usually the answers are contained within the individual interviews, read only in relationship to this or that artist’s other words. It’s time, I think, to isolate just one question and look at the answers collectively.

That question is also part of a set. We ask artist to “*Please tell us one useful thing you were taught or told,*” and then “*Please tell us one useful thing you learned for yourself.*”

Answers to the first question tend to be very similar, and attest to the lasting impact teachers have on young artists. It’s worth sharing a couple of the unusual responses, if only for a sense of the wit and exuberance that can happen in these interviews. Julie Farstad--herself a professor of painting at the Kansas City Art Institute--wrote, “*My painting professor Doug Kinsey from Notre Dame taught me that every painting needs a little bit of shit in it.*” The painter Linnea Spransy didn’t name the person who told her, “*Work hard to avoid ‘normal’ work.*” but it’s great advice.

Responses to the other question tend to be more wide ranging, and reflective of long hours spent both in the studio working and outside of it thinking about one’s work. It’s best therefore to abstain from an overly tidy takeaway and to simply allow the reader to read the artists’ words. Presented here are the responses of several artists. I will encourage readers to learn more about each, and maybe even seek out the rest of these interviews on MW Capacity.

“*Please tell us one useful thing you learned for yourself.*”

Julie Farstad (Kansas City, MO)

The failure of each painting is actually a gift. It is the reason to make the next painting, not a reason to be filled with anxiety.

Caleb Weintraub (Bloomington, IN)

Better to be great and risk failing than accept mediocrity. The worst kinds of paintings are forgettable paintings.

Kay Knight (Milwaukee, WI)

That artists need to be patient and not compromise their need to be creative. To take chances and not worry about the failures because failures are so important to growth and self-acceptance.

Kathy Liao (St. Joseph, MO)

Nothing is that precious, whether it's the materials, the idea, the plan, the painting, drawing, a mark on the canvas. Don't be afraid to make the next big change or the next big move – things might not get better right away, but if you allow it to do its thing, it will take you further, it will show you directions and give you new perspective.

Emily Sall (Kansas City, MO)

I think one of the most important things that I have learned over the years is to, you know, let things go. If your work becomes too precious, you are really letting that get in the way of any risk taking or chances in your work. So far all of my installations have been temporary, I put a lot of time and energy and material into these works and in the end they are destroyed and I have to be okay with that.

Tom Berding (East Lansing, MI)

All artists who do anything really interesting teeter on the edge of not knowing. To be a studio artist is to embrace that condition or at least acknowledge that as a fundamental position. The studio is a grand experiment and rarely a place to confirm or depict what is already known-but rather it is a place to speculate and propagate new awareness, albeit from a base of knowledge, insight, or what we inherit. The most important thing is to collect and notate things of interest (work, experiences, images, and color etc..) and use this as a jumping off point. Then, one must understand how these things work their way through the filter that is painting.

Melissa Oresky (Chicago, IL)

I've learned that my paintings are particular and specific, and the ideas around them are broad. I am continually trying to resist a compulsion to explain everything I possibly can verbally. It is such a contradiction! I spend all this time to try to get at something that happens outside of language and then feel I am supposed to apply analytic language in this heavy-handed way. So I am trying to learn to attach language to the work that can serve as an entry point or placemaker, language that can give some context to the work and afford the viewer the same kinds of discoveries I have in the studio. I think the recent Rock Garden paintings let me do this because the spaces the work makes are so little like conventional landscapes, though they have space, volume, materiality, atmosphere, light, etc. and were made with that content and subject in mind.

Joey Borovicka (Springfield, MO)

It's important to work thoughts out on the canvas rather than in my head. When I'm stuck on a painting, it's usually because I'm trying to figure out what the final product should look like. I've wasted lots of time staring at paintings attempting to finish them with my mind, but when I remind myself the process is what's important, the work starts flowing again. Even if I have doubts about what I'm doing, I've learned to work anyway because doing something is usually better than doing nothing. I don't rework areas as

much any more, if I don't like something I just figure I'll probably paint over it with something else later, so I'm always moving forward. Giacometti's words help me get over any hesitation: I'm indifferent to whether or not something is a success. A successful painting, a failed painting, it's all the same to me. A successful painting, a failed painting, a successful drawing, a failed drawing, these things don't mean anything. The failed one interests me as much as the successful one.

Tom Gregg (Kansas City, MO)

Right out of undergraduate school I was a bit lost and working for a landscape company. The boss was John Crispino, an Italian immigrant who, when you did something well, would yell, "beeyufitul". It was the hardest I had ever worked; you had to be at work at 7:00 am sharp and we would work until 6:00 or 7:00 pm. Tough, physical labor all day, with almost no breaks; things like breaking up boulders with jackhammers, digging up and moving trees, and pouring sidewalks. And all for minimum wage, which at the time was \$3.30. I worked mostly with a guy a bit younger than me named Tony. He had been working this job for years. For some reason, pride or simple stubbornness, I felt competitive with him and was determined to be good at the job, and was killing myself in the process. And then one day, Tony, who didn't talk much, let me know that his dream was to some day be a landscaper and to have his own company. He was doing what he wanted to do with his life, right then and there; it was simple in his way of thinking. He was a bit puzzled with me and as to why I was working there, when I wanted to be an artist. Inclement weather interrupted the job, and when they called me to come back, I said no. From that point on I accepted more fully what I really wanted to do and refocused my time and energy towards getting there.