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Café 541

## **WHY WRITE?**

*“Those that can’t paint...write about it. The art should speak for itself...”*

Starting out as a young painter and over the ensuing years, I’ve heard variations on the above statement from my artist colleagues—as if writing about the work created and its underlying ideas might steal some of its special sauce and diminish its intangible power, its mojo, to express that which...blah, blah, blah. Make no mistake—it’s not that artists don’t like to talk about their work. In my experience, it’s difficult to shift the topic once they get started. Full disclosure—I include myself in that category of blah, blahers and have served up my share of verbal mush over the years with my sincerest apologies.

So, here’s a question...if it’s not the case that artists don’t like to use words in referencing their and other’s work, what’s this aversion to writing all about? Perhaps one reason is that it’s hard work. Here are two more—it takes time and a certain amount of critical distance. Did I just say that artists are lazy? No, I did not. Some of the most-hard working people I’ve ever met are artists—they’re “on” 24/7 and often juggle day job(s), family *and* the studio like a Cirque du Soleil act. It takes hella’ work and no small amount of personal courage to approach a blank canvas, digital monitor or any other raw material or format. I fully understand why, on top of everything else an artist has to do, there’s a resistance to adding one more task to an already overburdened profession—writing about it.

For the contemporary artist who desires to present their work in a professional context and receive serious consideration for their efforts, writing is an essential and beneficial part of a creative

practice. For me, it's a both a tool and another media for me craft and work with as I develop increased depth and ask questions of and in the work. It's a skill that I use and value, and—to be crystal clear—writing about one's art is not “navel gazing” or self-indulgent. I've zero tolerance for even my own navel lint, no less someone else's Eeww.

Another approach that equally annoys me and that I regard as a full-blown display of intellectual elitism, is the carefully designed absence of all pertinent information on an artist's website or gallery exhibit and that offers no insight or information about the work or practice presented. It's like walking into a high-end shop where there are no prices listed, the assumption being that if you have to ask how much it costs, obviously you can't afford it. Obviously, if you would like information about what the artwork means, what it's made out of, etc., you are not prepared—through education or perhaps a secret handshake you're not aware of—to appreciate the nuanced intersections of said artwork. Again—eeww.

The City of Eugene and Eugene Contemporary Arts sponsored an arts writing workshop this past summer taught by Vicki Krohn Amorose. The workshop culminated in the participants writing about work from the Mayor's, Salon de Refuse' and Bridge exhibitions with the written compositions informing and complementing the visual ones. Check out the workshop writings using the ECA link below and if you're interested in honing your critical and writing skills do consider taking the workshop the next time it's offered.

The contemporary South African artist, Marlene Dumas wrote in 1991, “I might not be the only authority, nor the best authority, but I want to participate in the writing of my own history.” This is a woman who fully embraced her personal agency as a creative professional. Nearly thirty years on, Dumas' honesty and straightforward approach to her practice signals to me the boundless parameters of a creative practice. My practice. Can I make things? Sure. Can I make and write? You're reading me right now.

Marlene Dumas:

<https://www.marlenedumas.nl/why-do-i-write-about-art/>

Vicki Krohn Amorose, "Write About Visual Art – Critical MAS"

<http://www.eugenecontemporaryart.com/category/critical-mas-essays/>