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A Sentimental Education: The Professional Artist at the Turn of the Century

In this text, I would like to introduce you to the work I have been producing as an artist for the past 10 years and more. While the work represents my own individual artistic development, it is also a product of a typical visual arts education at the end of the 20th century. The aim of this educational programme has been to produce “professional artists” --a professional artist being defined as an individual who creates works of visual art and who has been trained to do so. This training has invariably focused on developing the aspiring artist’s technical competency (an ability to exploit a specific medium or range of media), visual competency (an understanding of formal aesthetics) and institutional competency (a familiarity with the “history of art” and the contemporary “art world”). As part of this training, I was expected to ask questions and make judgements in these three areas of competency, but I was not expected to ask questions or make judgements as to why my scope of operation as a professional artist should be defined and limited to these areas. Here, along with an overview of my work, I would like to offer you some questions and judgements as to the field(s) of operation of the artist in the 21st century.

Back in the 1950s, Ben Shahn wrote an essay about art becoming an academic discipline. He was worried that when art entered the institution, it would become institutional art. In other words, art as “a discipline” would become “disciplined art”. I think he meant this both in the sense that art would be under pressure to conform to certain accepted standards of what art was, which would mean that it could no longer push borders aesthetically or artistically, and also, probably more to the point for Shahn, that it would be basically emasculated and unable to perform any kind of social critique.

Taking you 20 years back, I would like to start at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri --because there was a very definite “aesthetic” to my education. There was a perceived limitation as to what painting should be--preferably oil painting, preferably figurative, preferably post-impressionistic. This limitation was what made me switch to the printmaking department, where things were less limiting: art was art.

So what was permissible? Mixed media was acceptable; subject matter was open. There were only three of us in the department. John was making etchings of teddy bears with leather and studs, Sharon was doing narrative prints that detailed her erotic dreams of sadistic dwarfs, and I was painting on prints that showed bar and party scenes of the “in crowd” in St. Louis. (If we would come in late to the studio, Sharon would explain that I had been out the night before doing research and she had been helping...) Still, the emphasis was on the visual and on creating a coherent body of work. Our professor’s slogan was “make it big, do it in color, and have 100 by Friday”.

I think my experience was pretty typical of what an art education was in the United States in the 70s and 80s and probably today and in other countries too. This is significant, because it is in the university, or art school, that a young person who wants to be an artist is told what that means --what art means and how it should be judged, and what it means to be an artist and how an artist should be judged.

My conclusion was that art was something to be looked at, and being a professional artist meant making art, making a consistent body of work, making it in an artist’s studio, exhibiting in art galleries, getting reviewed in art magazines, getting grants, supporting yourself with an art job, etc. The preferred art job was a teaching position at a university --most definitely not at some public school, because that would mean you were really a teacher, not just an artist who needed to have a job, and you’d just be teaching kids who maybe enjoyed making art but weren’t (especially at the age of 11) thinking about it in terms of “Art” with a capital “A”.

So you see, there was a value scale to all this: University professor was better than school teacher, canvas was better than paper, figurative was better than abstract (or vice versa, depending on what school you were at).

But there was no value scale for meaning – one message was as good as another.

So then I went to graduate school (I had to, if I was going to get that university teaching job). I was using my acquired technical and institutional competence to do these sort of abstract landscape paintings. One of the visiting artists who came to our studio described what I was doing as “making perfect paintings.” This was not very satisfying. On the value scale of meaning it was about a zero. But everything I had learned so far was enabling me – or forcing me – to do this.

So I dumped everything. I stopped using paint so I couldn't rely on color and composition until I figured out what I wanted to do in terms of content. I ended up working with a lot of different materials – tiles, gold leaf, plaster – with the idea that there is meaning inherent in materials, not just in images. Also, with the idea still in my mind of making perfect paintings, I began to wonder if I could make a “perfect painting” about a definitely imperfect subject. So I did a series of pieces that had images of homeless people and their surroundings, but with incredible lushly painted Renaissance-like surfaces and borders in gold-leafed tile.

I started doing installation work for two reasons. One, I wanted to do work outside a gallery to make what I was doing more accessible to people who don't go to art galleries, and also to take away the “art-world context” where things are supposed to be looked at aesthetically. Two, I wanted to engage in more socially relevant issues in a social setting.

The process of what I was doing started to become more important than the final work. For example, I did a piece that had a gold-leafed urn placed in the centre of a large circle of dirt. Along the outer edge of the circle, on one side I placed gold-leaf pebbles that spelled out my name, and on the other I placed flowers that I “collected” from people's gardens on the way to the gallery each day. I found myself really enjoying - really being affected by - going out and “collecting” those flowers, and placing them on the piece, but I really didn't care too much for the piece. This sort of fit in with my theory that making art is always a more significant act than looking at art. The doing is more important than the seeing. The piece also became a good psychological experiment on how people react to art. Because you couldn't see inside the urn from outside the edge of the circle, people had to walk on the dirt to get a look, even though they knew that “you're not supposed to walk on the art”. Interestingly, every morning I would find footprints on the side with my name, but none on the side with the flowers. I have no idea why people were willing to walk over my name but not over the flowers, but it was interesting still.

I also did a series of pieces that had images of bombs being dropped on Baghdad during the Gulf War. They were showing pictures on the tv news at the time, and I remember being totally mesmerised with the bombs being dropped – they looked so beautiful, just like fireworks – and thinking how perverse it was that I could be looking at these images aesthetically and forgetting that they actually meant people were being killed.

Later, I took the shapes that I had used as symbols of dropping bombs to see if I could change their meaning by changing their context. For example, I did four pieces – Earth, Air, Fire and Water – where the same “bomb” shape became bugs (Earth), rain (air), flames (Fire) and fish (Water). It was interesting to me that the meaning could be so easily changed. Also, more interestingly, was the meaning that people put on the symbols themselves. The responses indicated just how much received meaning is both individual and cultural. For example, an African-American artist friend immediately read the “bomb” shape as cowrie shells, which are very prevalent in African art, and a Japanese-American friend immediately read the same shape as grains of rice.

I also did a series of “dead babies” where I used the same lush, varnished surfaces on panels cut in the shapes of starving children in Southeast Asia that I had clipped from newspapers. I think I had a little fascination with death going, because I also started doing pieces with skeletons. At the time I was living in California, and had a Mexican-American boyfriend, so I know the pieces also come from the “calaveras” (skeletons) of Mexican art. I also started doing hands, which keep popping up in my work. When I was doing them in California they were read as “la mano poderosa” (hand of power, ie, hand of god); in Turkey, they're read as the hand of Fatima (which is pretty much the same thing, I guess). I also think of the hand as “the hand of the artist” – “man (or woman) the maker”.

This is a piece called Kelp. I was going to the beach and collecting beach glass and driftwood to use in pieces, along with a lot of beads. I really enjoyed the process of collecting stuff on the beach. Also the physicality, I like to be able to make things that people want to touch, rather than just making things to look at. I'm also very interested in craft, because it places importance on “making things”, and like to work with materials that are associated with fine arts and with handicrafts to sort of take away the border between fine arts and craft that has always privileged fine arts.

In Turkey, I got a job working in a carpet shop. My job was just to talk to the tourists in English so that they wouldn't leave the shop. My “excuse” for being there was that I was studying the patterns of the carpets. While I was there, I was making these objects, sort of doll-like things, that I ended up using in an installation called “Disappearing Village Carpet”. Also at the shop were a bunch of women who would sit at looms and weave so the tourists could watch. They were very interested in what I was doing – curious is probably a better word – with my box of beads and sticks and scraps of old kilims. I remember one day going out for a few hours to draw

a landscape and when I got back to the shop one of the women was in my bead box, making a doll. They were all quite fascinated. They were fascinated when these things were objects made out of things – once they became part of the installation they had no interest at all. This I think was very interesting, because the objects hadn't changed at all. They were exactly the same. What had changed was that they had become "art", and that was something they had no interest in.

After a little detour into a social critique of tourism, I got to making pieces that juxtaposed different materials to see what would happen when their different "meanings" came into contact with one another. I was using materials associated with Turkish handcrafts – beads, felt, etc. – along with drawings and paintings. I had an exhibit in the Women's Library in Istanbul, which was very exciting, getting to exhibit in this great historical building that had this great texture of old stone walls. I did have a little problem, where one of the kids who came to the exhibit managed to pull off the toy soldiers that I had collaged in a piece. I do like the idea of people wanting to touch things, but this can be a problem, especially when they want to take them home with them. (I did like the idea that this kid wanted them bad enough to take them, but I don't know how to solve the problem of having a ready supply of replacement parts...)

The context of the Women's Library exhibition got me thinking about installations again, and I decided I wanted to make a tent. I thought of placing it outside somewhere in Cappadocia – as a useful shelter, outside of an art context, a contrast between art/nature; it never happened, but I did do an installation of hanging pieces for SANART as well as an exhibit at the State Painting and Sculpture Museum in Ankara. That was interesting, because apparently, the military had just decided that new recruits needed cultural educating, so a whole group of them had an excursion to my exhibit. Most of them just marched in and marched out, literally, but a few were genuinely interested enough to get into a conversation with about what I was doing, since it didn't look like any kind of painting they had seen before – but they liked it, and seemed to honestly want it explained to them.

I found it easier to get the exhibit at the museum (embarrassingly, to me, since I am still naive about the art world, it only took one phone call from "the right person") than to do an installation in a public space, which was what I was really interested in. I ended up doing an exhibit at the British Council's art gallery after approaching them about using their entrance space and getting turned down. It seemed the director didn't think it appropriate to the image of the Council to have art cluttering their entrance way, and I wasn't about to turn down an exhibition opportunity, so I agreed to exhibit in the gallery. I did an installation called *Nu/Nar* (Nude/Pomegranate), based on the myth of Persephone, made up of two-sided pieces that hung from the ceiling and spun at the slightest movement.

After that I did another hanging installation based on the story of *myniopsis leydi*, a jelly fish that is native to the Chesapeake Bay that accidentally found its way to the Black Sea and has disrupted the ecological balance of the sea. The story appealed to me because the jelly fish and I were both foreigners who came from Baltimore to Turkey. Also, I thought I could use the occasion of the exhibition, put on by Hacettepe University at the Contemporary Arts Centre in Ankara, as a forum for environmental awareness. I had an interesting time explaining to environmental organisations that I was interested in helping raise public awareness about pollution through an art exhibition, but in the end, the "Blue Flag" people, who work on cleaning up beaches, agreed that it would be a good idea, and they provided me with information about their organisation and general tips on non-polluting behavior that I made available to people visiting the gallery.

Since then, I've done a bunch of smaller relief pieces that combine either oil paintings or computer-generated drawings and beadwork, and an installation that involved hanging about 500 computer-generated drawings on a tree to look like leaves. That was interesting, because I ended up having a lot of people become involved in hanging up the "leaves". Originally, someone had suggested that I do that as a "performance", but I wasn't interested in it. But I was interested in having people hang up the "leaves" because it got them involved. It was really the same action, just a different attitude. If it were a "performance", it would have been very artificial. Instead, people got involved because they felt like it – not because it was "art". I'd like to work on some pieces that involve more collaboration with "non-artists", but I'm not sure how that will go.

I just finished reading a very interesting book called "Mapping the Terrain", edited by Suzanne Lacy, which talks about "new genre public art" – art that engages – not just visually, but in terms of process, with an aim that is not aesthetic, but one of social change. How far new genre public artists are concerned with "aesthetics" varies. Lacy feels there is a need to develop a new kind of critique for this work that is not based on traditional aesthetics. The idea is that artists have created a new paradigm for art, and that critics, in order to address this, need to create a new paradigm for criticism. Lacy, as others, refers to this as a new "aesthetics" (although I think she uses the term less for any actual appropriateness and more out of habit, since aesthetics has been designated

the area of operation for art, and out of necessity, since doing away with the term entirely would mean questioning and deligitimising to an extent the institutional structure that has sprung up around it).

One aspect of this “new paradigm” is a shifting of value from the finished art work to the process of creating it, with an emphasis on collaboration. Like I said, this is an area I’m particularly interested in, but haven’t really gotten very involved in. Because of this, I think a lot of people who find “new genre public art” the “way to go” would say to me, “if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem”. The problem is that I like making things. I like making things that are pretty. I believe that looking at an “aesthetic” object can have an emotional effect on the viewer. I believe that this can effect that person’s outlook on life, and I believe that things can change as a result of this. Also, I like making things. I like touching them, I like taking matter and transforming it, and I believe that I can be transformed as a result of this, and that things can change. Rather than thinking of myself as “part of the problem”, I prefer to think that I am “just casting my pebble in the water.”

The last time I heard that expression was from a British poet, Mario Petrucci, who creates “sited poetry” in varying contexts including Britain’s Imperial War Museum, where he is “Poet in Residence”. Petrucci has coined the term “poeclectics” to describe his work and other poets who have a similar aim of “engagement”. Petrucci explains: “Poeclectics is not a wholesale movement as such; more a discernible trend and willingness among poets to utilise more freely, and in a conspicuous manner, a variety of texts, styles, voices, registers and forms, usually resulting in a recognisable shift in imaginative range, freshness or flamboyance. Poeclectics thus combines a sense of “making” (Greek: *poiesis*) with a desire and facility to work inventively with a variety of sources and processes.” (“eclectics”: from the Greek *eklegein*, to choose out, select). Poeclectics occurs wherever poets adopt a particular position, style, method or voice – or invent one – to suit the purpose at hand, rather than being concerned primarily about any unifying principle of “voice”, or perhaps even of intention, across the body of work...)

So, I’d like to propose an “arteclectics” – where artists can switch back and forth in what they are doing and how they are doing it. They can do a project like dominique gw mazeud’s cleaning up the Rio Grande, or they can do a public installation for no purpose other than taking traditional art out of the gallery and into the public space to reach more people or they can make an oil painting and hang it on the wall in a gallery where most likely only privileged people will come and look at it. I have no problem with that. I have no problem with any of it. Because like I said, I think as far as making change, making art is more important than looking at it. As they say in the Nike ad, JUST DO IT!