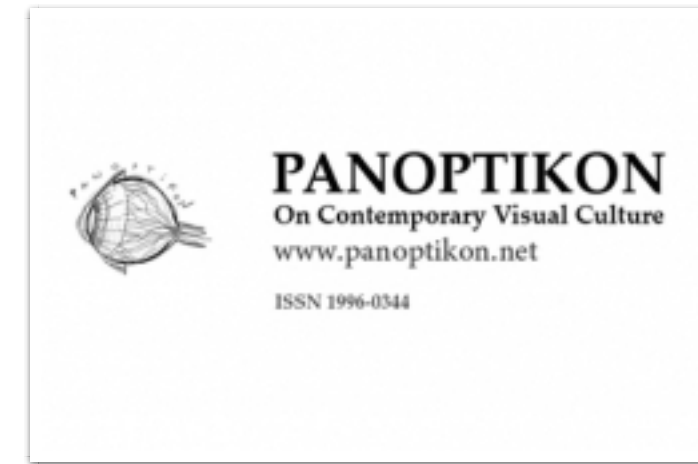


## Real Artistic Style is How One Behaves in a Crisis

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*"There is no syntax in painting. Anything can happen on the canvas and you can't foresee it. Paul Valery used to say that if the idea of poetry hadn't existed forever, poetry could not be written now. The whole culture is against it because language is always being worn down and debased. But painting is always a fresh language because we don't use it for anything else. It has no other uses. It isn't mass persuasive." (Frank Auerbach)*



At the very least, perhaps we can understand this statement. And this alone might give us hope – after all, if a mediocre painter (myself, for instance) at least understands a great painter than perhaps the mediocre painter might have greatness buried within, no? Somewhere?

I had an art teacher back at the Boston Museum School named Flip (name changed to protect the deranged!). He was a Southie, racist son-of-a-gun, but he knew drawing. One day, I was scrabbling over a page when he came over; I looked up with desperation and said, "I don't know what I'm doing." "Good," he replied, "Do a drawing that you don't understand. Then you might at least be getting somewhere."

Artistic success does indeed begin in the hopeless, blind search, the incomprehensible visual response? The question is irrelevant – it need only have meaning to the artist him or herself. But the sincere visual response will always be the same: it will be unfathomable to the artist him or herself, a hidden meaning that flows from the passionate, desperate artistic quest.

"That's what real artistic style is," says Frank Auerbach. "It's not donning a mantle or having a program; it's how one behaves in a crisis." But the odd thing is that most of us visual artists won't allow ourselves to even get into this necessary crisis; we are "afraid." And this is what separates the great from the competent: this willingness to fall off of the cliff, and not "save" oneself (artistically speaking), so much as simply flailing around in the desolate abyss of the unknowable.

Most of us artists are indeed felled by the fear. One could argue that the vast majority of commercially successful "high art" painters working today have fallen prey to this all-too-human response to the unknowable: run to a place that others understand, and salve the wounds of desperation in their company – and the mediocre. Mediocrity sells, after all!

But you know what? Honestly? It is just this fear of the unknown, as it plays itself out in the act of creation, which I have never understood. After all, when I stand before a piece of paper or a stretched canvas, objectively speaking, nothing is truly at risk. At the very worst, I can throw away the piece of paper or paint over the canvas.

Yet something stops me from visually leaping off of the cliff. Why? Is it because I am afraid that no one will "understand" me if I don't understand myself? After all, right now no one particularly cares about me (artistically speaking); whether there is an audience that "understands" me isn't even an issue.

Or is there something more basic, primal to this fear. After all, if I am to do a "great" work of art, one that I myself can't consciously understand, it will mean that I have within myself something completely incomprehensible; and the incomprehensible always terrifies us, even if it is benign, even if it is God Itself. This is the exact fear that underlies the human conundrum of existence, and represents the answer to the moaning, desperate plea, "Why me?" and "Why at all?" It is the response to "How popular culture?" and "Why do mystics always end up in mental hospitals, these days?" It is the basic fear of the unknown – especially when we find it within ourselves – that explains everything from Reality TV shows to Thomas Kinkade ("Painter of Light").

Fear, expressed in a thousand different ways, explains all of this – and more.

After all, it is the ultimate human fear of being (Kierkegaard's "despair"), brought to the surface through the creative act, which is succumbed to by the vast majority of creative artists. This is the wall that one must scale if one wants to be a great artist – and it is a type of success that has no meaning within the context of the contemporary cultural milieu. After all, being a great and fearless artist does not ensure commercial success; in fact, it makes it harder. If one is incomprehensibly great, then the vast majority of people just see a work of art that is incomprehensible. The "why's" aren't relevant; we are busy and only have a good few seconds to devote to understanding; if we can't "get it" immediately, or nearly so, then we move on to the next, easier thing – and too bad if something is "great" in the timeless sense. Let history worry about that!

And the fear, both in terms of the creator and the audience, also touches on the debasement of culture. After all, the audience is searching for the escape; the average "entertainment consumer" looks to the popular arts for a deadening of the pain, not something that will make the horror of existence explicit, and therefore worse. As Irving Howe said, "Art gives pleasure through disturbance" – but most people are terrified by this disturbance, as it would call into question all of their preconceived notions of what reality is, and of who they are. So they, both artist and public alike, turn their backs on the truly challenging and creative, and scurry back to the latest sports program, or Jeff Koons inflated bunny.

The artist is not immune to the existential crisis that drives people to television, the latest action movie, the narcosis of belief in the Sunday talk programs and an hysterical fealty to the lies they read on the front page of the Times. After all, even artists are "only human;" the abyss stalks us no less than it does other people.

To understand the fear that makes creating a painting so difficult, that the artist, him or herself, doesn't understand, we must only look a bit deeper into what it truly means to be human; how our conscious experience defines only the slimmest sliver of who we truly are – and how this uneasy, semi-conscious awareness of how little we know about ourselves and the world terrifies us.

"The mind as a whole – including the unconscious, the place of dreams and phantasms and the source of awe – is like an ocean, of which the ego remains mostly ignorant. But a psychotic is in touch with it, he is swimming (one might say drowning) in it." ("Saints and Madmen," Russell Shorto)

It is to just this "psychosis" that a true, creative and fearless art is testament.

And this terrifies both the artist and viewer, making it not only very difficult for the artist, but also desperately so for the viewer, to create and appreciate a truly great work of art, as they are trying to keep the small, balsa wood boat of consciousness afloat upon the roiling sea of a "psychotic" reality. . .