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Criteria for a Juror: “Response to the Artwork”

Mark Gordon, April 2006

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In three decades of making objects and teaching art, I have developed a number of strategies and philosophical principles for evaluating objects. These principles form a theory-based framework: in order to judge artwork responsibly, I believe it is necessary to form a professional opinion based on consistent and verifiable criteria.

In this report I seek to outline those criteria as they form my current judging mindset. Keep in mind that these criteria are not immutable nor stagnant. My views change as the result of my ongoing viewing and study of new art and historical artifacts, readings of contemporary critical writing on art, and personal growth through creative production as an artist. I am sure that my ideas about critically evaluating artwork will continue to change in an ongoing process of growth and development.

Any college introductory design course will include a discussion of the “Art Elements” common to nearly every artistic creation: line, value (lightness, darkness, shadow), color, shape, space, texture, and time. I see these as the basic components or “ingredients” comprising any work of art.

In looking at a work for the first time I decide whether the piece shows that the artist has thoughtfully managed or manipulated the basic principles of design which include emphasis, balance, variety, repetition, rhythm, proportion, and movement.

Most artworks deemed powerful and moving make use of these principles to achieve “unity” and the harmonious integration of the chosen materials into an effective whole. I see these design principles as “mixing instructions” for an artwork. I attempt to discern the artist’s level of skill in manipulating materials as diverse as aluminum, brass, bronze, clay, charcoal, paint, pencil, plaster, plastic, stone, string, wood, and wool. Specific materials can be formed or manipulated by a variety of techniques, and a conscious and skillful use of these methods is also part of a juror’s evaluative criteria.

A dozen years ago I wrote the following, which formed part of my artist’s statement for a solo exhibition of my artwork.

From the Pyramids of Egypt to the mysterious stone heads of Easter Island to the trilithons of Stonehenge, humankind has expended large amounts of human creative capital to construct sculptural architecture that say something about how we perceive our place in the world. The challenge of creating modern sculptural archetypes harnesses the use of imagination, aesthetics, chemistry coordination, and intellect. Our immensely rich and varied history of sculpture serves as a record of human existence, and this window into history and prehistory gives sculptors a base on which to build 3-dimensional art of the future. This historical wellspring, combined with an awareness of contemporary techniques and movements, acts as a source of inspiration to me, both as artist and teacher.

...“an extra layer of challenge comes to the artist who deals with themes of pop culture or appropriation of images”

The study of art history, coupled with wide exposure to contemporary artwork, can be a spur to an artist to explore creative options. However, the spark of inspiration must necessarily come from another place—

from within the artist. This impulse to make something new may come from a direct personal involvement with materials, and may be flavored by exposure to the art of others throughout history. When I evaluate artwork submitted for jurying it is interesting to see historical and neo-historical (contemporary) influences on style, to draw connections with art worldwide, and to see the impact of the art “scene.” These similarities are not always a negative, but the entrant must be aware of a few drawbacks to making “similar” work. First, there is the possibility that the viewer will recognize a direct connection, make a comparison, and thus note a possible lack of originality. Second, it would be a good guess that the “original source” artwork was created as the result of many years’ exploration, experimentation, and inspiration; if so, the “influenced” artwork may not compare well in terms of depth, impact, and quality. Third, in many instances—for example, with the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock—being the first artist to discover or develop a new technique--and its resulting aesthetic innovation--may be a big part of the societal significance of the artwork itself.

In some instances of expressive visual art exploration I look for artistic struggle and personal growth. This aspect of creative endeavor indicates whether the artist is striving to create an artwork that deeply moves the viewer. I often look for an emotional “punch” in works that include that type of dynamically-charged message. Without that authenticity and the resulting impact, the message can be stuck in the realm of *cuteness*, even veering into kitsch. There are, of course, artworks that can transcend this category of kitsch: for example, look at the monumental everyday objects fabricated and thrust into public spaces by Claes Oldenburg, the groundbreaking pop-culture work of Roy Lichtenstein, or the controversial high-impact work of Jeff Koons. Nevertheless, an extra layer of challenge comes to the artist who deals with themes of pop culture or appropriation of images.

“...jurying is a responsibility not to be taken lightly.”

My main field of creative endeavor is sculpture and ceramics. Specifically in jurying 3-dimensional artwork, I seek a compelling engagement with the work, an involvement with the viewer—the result of a strong and confident occupying of space by the piece. Typically, artworks with bas (low) relief or high relief are designed to be viewed from the front, and that self-framing gives the viewer a specific reference point. In contrast, sculptural creations conceived, fabricated, and presented with the goal of full 3-dimensionality need to contain an impact, to hold viewer interest, from any vantage point. In jurying 3-dimensional work, it is always helpful to see multiple views, shown from different angles. This gives a more accurate picture of the in-the-round qualities of the artwork. If an in-the-round creation is not handled by the artist in a way that encourages viewing from all directions, it will potentially be lacking in visual impact. This need to “succeed” from all viewpoints brings with it a special challenge for sculptural artworks. This does not imply that simple radial symmetry is always to be desired: variety is always an important factor in visual interest. Rather, the viewer—or evaluator—is likely to spot the angle or side that is weakest visually. This will invariably influence the viewer’s overall determination of relative impact and the effect of perceived (--or not perceived) formal unity in the piece.

What can be said about the professional responsibility of the art juror? Years ago I was sole juror for a community college student exhibition in Washington State. In choosing the awards—of which there were many, a good situation for both the juror and the entrants—I was careful to not read labels with names. I strove to choose a wide variety of media, styles, and creative directions for the award-winning artwork. It turned out that one student won four awards of the 20-total awards of various types. One of the community college instructors later told me that my selection of this student’s work had brought with it an important consequence: the student’s family, who had not been particularly supportive to date, was helped to “transform” their attitude as a result of this recognition. In sum, jurying is a responsibility not to be taken lightly.

Editor’s note- Mark Gordon is Associate Professor of Art at Barton College, Wilson, North Carolina. He is past Chair of the Advisory Committee of the Fulbright Commission, former member of the Fulbright Grant Review Committee, and a grant recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York. He is a member of the Board of Distinguished Jurists of the American Juried Art Salon.

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