

The Quest For Visual Literacy

Mark Gordon, June 2006

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Within the academic community, a department of art fulfills the vital role of promoting visual literacy, fostering creative exploration, and challenging students to question the way the world presents to them — providing a unique opportunity to explore nature and culture.

From the nearly incomprehensible Pyramids in Egypt to the monumental stone heads of Easter Island to England's mysterious Stonehenge, humankind has expended large amounts of human capital to create sculptural structures that express the way historical peoples have perceived their place in larger universe. The immensely rich and varied history of sculpture serves as a record of expressed meaning, and this history gives students a base on which to build the sculptures of the future. This historical wellspring, combined with an awareness of contemporary techniques and trends, acts as a source of inspiration to us as artists and teachers.

The challenge of creating modern 3-dimensional expressions of meaning is to effectively harness the imagination, incorporate principles of aesthetics, rely on underlying concepts of chemistry, biology, and physics, develop psychomotor coordination, engage the intellect, and tap into the vast pool of shared emotion.

“Ideally, an artist becomes a teacher because it comes naturally to share knowledge and skills.”

It is important that each student develop a visual vocabulary through solid technical grounding in tools, materials, and techniques, along with a broad exposure to existing work through slide presentations, field trips to galleries and museums, and workshops with visiting professional artists. In this way, students learn to recognize the significance of all types of artistic expression and gain insight as to how a particular process fits their own work. To cite one example, a well-rounded ceramics curriculum includes the basics of clay and glaze formulation, raw materials testing and preparation, handbuilding, wheelthrowing, mold-making, various decorative techniques, kiln construction, and firing. Students would see that clay-working artists produce work ranging from, for instance, primitive to space-age in their engagement with technology. Additionally, combined-materials artworks incorporating ceramics would be explored. Further, a curriculum would expose students to proto-ceramic artwork involving erosion, such as can be found in site-specific natural-base installations with earthen materials.

Ideally, an artist becomes a teacher because it comes naturally to share knowledge and skills. A practicing artist will bring vibrant creative enthusiasm and art-making experience to the classroom. The artist-teacher will expect his/her students to seek wide-ranging exposure to contemporary art, to broaden their thinking, and to work hard to deepen their technical abilities, in order to begin to live the life of working artists. The artist-teacher needs to be well-prepared for each class session, to be universally courteous, patient, and boundless in sharing classroom/studio energy. It is a supreme privilege to engage in art pedagogy and to help bring student-artists to a higher level of achievement.

Society needs to encourage visual literacy, the ability to perceive and express ideas in a sophisticated art language. The artist-teacher's role is to promote the skills of appreciating and making visual art. One cannot predict the ways in which goals and ideals will evolve, but one constant goal should be to become more open to alternative solutions to project assignments and to always welcome students'; questioning.

“The struggle...as an artist...as a person.”

In teaching college studio art classes, my philosophy of education has come to include a sort of critical thinking component. This includes the premise that a student needs to learn not only clay-working techniques but also a variety of problem-solving skills to be used throughout life. Therefore, every student's personal struggle, in a small way facing the individual's existential situation, is something students can constructively incorporate into the problem-solving dynamic. When a student-artist encounters a technical hurdle, it is only a roadblock on the path; an open-ended suggestion often forces him/her to confront the unknown and invent a new solution. As a spur to action, this uncertainty can force the individual student-artist to address intractable problems in a positive and resourceful manner. Over the past few years, I have come to consider it essential to help each student confront uncertainty with confidence, perseverance, and strength of character. In our educational context, that often means denying the student an easy answer or a spelled-out solution. As I sometimes tell an art student who is in the throes of grappling with a challenging project: “The struggle is good for you as an artist.” Privately, or sometimes even publicly, I also say, “The struggle is also good for you as a person.”

To foster the vigorous artistic expression that is so important, it is essential for the instructor to establish clear channels of communication within the studio workspace and to galvanize students by presenting them with challenging and varied projects. Aesthetic discoveries about a student's artwork come more clearly articulated through written and sketched journaling. Context and feedback can be provided through individual and group critiques. Additionally, when a student's interests extend outside traditional realms of art, guided cross-disciplinary research helps develop a deeper understanding of his or her creative effort, broadening its context and increasing its potential meaningfulness.

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