

William Stoehr

In 1964 I was 16 years old and I thought I wanted to be an artist. Willem de Kooning was my art hero. But I became an engineer instead. The Vietnam War might have affected my thinking but more likely than not I just didn't know what I wanted to do. 40 years later in 2004, I retired from the best job I ever had to become a full-time artist at age 56. I could afford to define success in my own way. It took a few years to find my voice – you know that which differentiates my work and specifies a moral foundation and vision.

I read this great quote by Gauguin – “Learn to paint from your imagination, then you will find your soul and avoid the scrutiny of the amateur”. So for me finding my soul is like finding my voice. This of course applies to all that we do but for me as a painter, I choose to interpret it as referring to what I stand for, my goals and how I accomplish them.

I believe that success is a moving target that in my heart I will never attain. I am comfortable with that. Yes, I like many of my paintings and I am pleased to show my work. A check in the mail is good but let me tell you what really drives me and it begins with a question.

What is the larger conversation; the wider dialog that I want to be part of? How can I affect viewers and what are the skills I need to do that? For me this painted dialog is one of the characteristics that define a successful work of art along with virtuoso skill, and the ability to provoke an emotional response or cause someone to act or react.

Today I have more than 300,000 followers on social media. Many are from war torn areas like Syria and Iraq. They write to me. One day a woman from a Syrian refugee camp wrote to tell me that she knew I understood her and that she wanted to die. The next morning, she looked at the same painting and saw hope in the woman's eyes. She said she knew then that she too could have hope. She told me that I saved her life. This is why I paint.

For me the essence of art is the exploration of fundamental issues of our time. I explore intolerance, discrimination, addiction and violence with its victims, witnesses and survivors.

My large portraits start with an ambiguous expression, shared gaze and uncertain context calculated to provoke you into creating the narrative. I begin with a live model and then work from reference photographs. I suggest certain features and realistically detail others. I use a limited pallet of acrylic paint along with metallic and iridescent colors that produce changing patterns with changes in lighting and view angle.

Working freely, I drip, brush, pour, scrub and scrape paint while applying a variety of lines, dots and other adjustments. I often paint multi-views or facial features slightly out of alignment. I frequently paint vaguely different expressions for each side of the face. These variations might make my images appear more real as time, half remembered memories, and prior experiences affect your perception.

I look to cause changes in visual perception and emotional response. Do these changes serve to make your experience more real? The original Cubists thought so and called this essential reality. They also believed that time, the fourth dimension, could be somehow incorporated in their work so as to cause the viewer to process and perceive their cubist work as more real. They said they painted successive appearances in to a single image reconstituted in time. I see Cubism as a way of perceiving reality.

Perception

I realize that I lose control of the painting the minute I quit work on it and it is seen, experienced and interpreted by others. It fascinates me to see how viewers react in ways I never intended or foresaw. Meaning, as it relates to art, is subjective and never fixed.

We are captive to our own experience, perspective and anxieties. They influence our perception of meaning, reality and truth. But our perception is fraught with ambiguity and so I think we adapt and respond by looking inward to past experiences and our common sense for resolution. Half remembered memories, after images and prior non-linear experiences all can affect our perception.

I want you to have new and different experiences, over time; each time you re-create my portraits with your own mental image, narrative and emotions. Can I entice you to perceive and experience a more essential reality of your own making?

Key Influences

Willem de Kooning
Pablo Picasso
Oswaldo Guayasamin
Marlene Dumas
Francis Bacon
Egon Schiele

Ambiguity and Reality

The reality I am after is your reality. If I create ambiguity along with a few naturalistic cues then maybe you create reality. That is because you complete the image, you create the narrative and you project your own emotions. You will do a better job with your own perfect mental image than I can.

We seem to like ambiguity. Ambiguity means that there are alternative interpretations, alternate realities and alternate states of certainty.

Some of my methods include the use of inconsistent line and shading cues, e.g., lines for one expression and shading for another and I frequently paint different expressions from one side of the face to the other.

Shared Gaze

I try to exploit the effects of a shared gaze. We are drawn to eyes. I want you to feel like my subjects are staring into your soul. There is a difference between a person in the painting simply looking at you versus engaging with you. The gaze can work both ways in that you might crawl behind the eyes of the person in the picture staring out at you.

If I engage you with eyes then I can also start to do other things peripherally with line and color. I can color outside of the lines and your mind will resolve it. Vague and scribbled outlines and graphic vectors become part of a recognizable whole.

Lines on Faces

I really like to draw lines. I create lines from life. Can I capture essence with a line such that the line no longer looks like a person but has that person's qualities? Of course the lines make their way into my portraits. These lines have elements of caricature and abstraction. Practically speaking they allow me to simply break up a facial plane and have a little fun. On a large face there is a great deal of space between facial features. I like to fill them in with mini abstracts that may or may not follow the human contours.

I think that the lines are part of an assortment of cues that collectively cause you to see a person. In other words, the paintings are composites of cues that your brain assembles. This is a very cubist notion.

Big Faces

We are attracted to faces – it is our nature. If I fill the canvas with a big face then there is little room for external leading context. I think this along with the large size and closely cropped face creates an elevated sense of intimacy.

Visual Effects

I am interested in the effect of central and peripheral vision - how our brains process line, color and shading. For instance, from a distance the face might appear realistic and, in some cases, almost photo-real but upon close inspection is a succession of abstractions that cause the viewer to reprocess the image.

I frequently give each side of the face a slightly different expression. I also use iridescent paints that change with lighting and point of view causing shifting

patterns of light. Witnessing these small changes might make these images appear more real.

Improvisation

I allow accidents to direct/influence me as I create a portrait. I treat the areas between facial features as if they were separate abstract paintings. In other words, I allow the image to emerge from the random application of paint and I also attempt to create interest by treating large facial planes as separate abstracts.

I typically mix a metallic color with a very watered down black fluid acrylic and then I pour it on the canvas. Sometimes I let it run and sometimes I let it form a puddle. I lay paper towels over the paint and soak it up. I do this at varying paint-drying stages to get different effects. I spray it with clear acrylic and then do it all over again. I might have ten layers of metallic paint layers before I am done.

I experiment with the amount and type of information required to evoke an image and to find those characteristics that cause the viewer to emotionally respond to the portrait.

I have parlayed problems and experiments into major elements of my style. I work in a free manner that results in a lot of unplanned effects that I observe, evaluate, and may attempt to replicate or morph into something else. These experiments, accidents and exploitations drive what I do.

It's the practice of making and creating in the moment as a response to something - a stimulus - an idea - a challenge - maybe a drip of paint. That drip of paint running down my canvas may be a random occurrence but my reaction to it is not. What matters most to me is recognizing which accident or experiment might be useful and then how to exploit it now and decide if I want to replicate it later.

Never Finished

My paintings tend to be layers of fresh starts. I believe I might have a finished face one day but soon I brush, flow or spill paint all over the surface, leaving traces - a template to guide the next iteration. I suspect that my mental image and expectation of the painting keeps evolving as I work on it.

And in the End

My job as an artist is to get you to think and to ask questions. The meaning of life and the human condition are the themes I wish to explore. This is the larger conversation; the wider dialog that I want to be part of. In the end we must ask how we are to respond. Simply being affected is not enough.