

Space For Rant

Words from the Mountain Top, an "Elitist" Speaks Out

—by *Martin Stein*

In my first year at the Emily Carr Institute, I remember endless discussions about what constitutes art and who can be considered an artist.

The popular argument was that we are all artists and that, therefore, anything anyone does is art. I thought it was suspect then, I disagreed even more after four years of formal study and I won't even debate it now, after seven years of professional work and struggle. While everyone may or may not be creative, not everyone is an artist.

According to Michelle Binkley (see "Space For Rant," Volume I No. II), a parent making Kraft dinner is not an artist but add a dash of parsley and, voila! A Picasso of culinary delight!

What Binkley fails to see is the wide gulf of difference separating creativity and skill. I can replace a washer on a leaky faucet but I don't go around calling myself a plumber. A plumber is a specialized tradesman who has combined innate abilities with years of study as an apprentice. He's then faced with the challenge of making a living with his knowledge and skill. Should artists be held to any lower standard?

A legitimate artist has to possess certain qualities. Raw talent is one. If talent isn't present, the highest level a person can hope to achieve is mediocrity and they would probably be happier in a different profession. Discipline is another. An artist is her own boss. No one is overhead cracking the whip, no one cares if you take a few days off or if you don't show up to work at all.

Ambition is equally important. An artist has to constantly be reassessing their work, correcting and polishing based on their instincts as well as

training. Except for the rare exceptions, ignoramuses have never produced great art. Ambition includes a thirst for acknowledgment. If a writer is afraid of rejection and would rather let his novel languish in the bottom drawer, unseen by human eyes, he should just toss in the pen.

But, to Binkley, none of the above matters: "We need not think in terms of colour, texture and form, but in terms of emotion, feeling and sensitivity." In other words, don't think in terms of concrete values, only in ethereal ones. The problem is that colours are absolutes while emotions are not. Paint doesn't care how the artist feels about it. Hating blue won't change it to green. But, if emotion is more important, we can't call a painting ugly, our only concern is how the "artist" felt creating it. I challenge her to hire her next plumber based on his sensitivity towards the pipes and eat her next meal from a chef who cooks without regard to physical qualities. The nausea from dinner will be accented by a flooded home.

This is not to say everyone with talent, discipline and drive will be successful. But, without them they are guaranteed failure. Many will say this is all old-fashioned, elitist thinking. They're right. They say we are all artists, that Monet was just lucky with a few brush strokes and your five-year-old could do better. What they really mean is no one is special, no one is better than anyone else and anyone who is a success got there with some sort of trickery.

I'm an elitist and I disagree. We are all special and have skills that raise us above others. Only some will become noted artists, others, the best plumbers in the city. We aren't all artists, just as we aren't all doctors because we apply Band-Aids, nor

lawyers because we argue, nor chefs because we embellish Kraft dinner with parsley.

The elitist approach means toil, dedication and rising on merit, ideas which also seem to be out of fashion. The world where anyone who creates is an artist may be an easy one to exist in, but no one there will be alive. ☹

Martin Stein is a freelance writer living in Vancouver.

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