

# Art or Artwork?

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Self-portrait by Bernard Poulin

Artists create things—yet have we ever asked ourselves what it is that viewers like about our work? Is it the lines we create, the shapes, the familiarity, the oddball? Is it the intensity or the translucence of colors we use? Or is it simply that they react to what our modern times say an artist is?

What is it that makes art as opposed to just artwork? Is it the technique or material we use or what we've "said" visually? If so, what did we do to make viewers react that way? Why are certain artworks more easily taken in—heard, smelled and tasted by viewers—while others get comments like: "It's really colored pencil, eh?" and "Wow! Just like a photo!"

Naturally, we all start out making artwork and wishing to create art. We want so desperately for our pencil strokes to swirl, kick, laugh, spit, caress, strangle, swoon, embrace, and even PUNCH! But that means giving ourselves the freedom to say something. And when and if we can allow ourselves to do that, how do we get viewers to really feel what's been said? In essence, they have to see and feel the story more than react to the tools we've used. Then and only then will our work take one step closer to being "art."

Most of our life is an ongoing step towards something. It begins with the skill set acquisition and assimilation phase—a time to learn this language we wish to speak. But art creation, as elusive as it is, can only happen when we transcend the knowledge and skills we've acquired—making the results of our efforts no longer academic but rather poetic,

whimsical, thundering, mystical, sensual.

To be van Gogh-ish, Rembrandt-ish, John Singer Sargent-ish, Rothko-ish, we must learn our skills to the point of assimilation. They must become so much a part of who we are that we no longer have to think about them when we use them.

We must also assimilate the concept of touching and being touched, of moving and being moved, of taking what is an ordinary part of our lives and making it extraordinary. Creating art is often nothing more than discovering how to harness the incredible power of things wondrously simple—a flower petal, a memory, a shanty, a smile, the abstract shape of a tree branch against a milky sky—and being able to render each with such impact that they reach out and unquestionably move the soul of another.

But to so touch another demands we take the time to understand what we wish to share. And that phase often takes even more time than the actual rendering phase. Why? Because we are not used to taking the time to "feel" what we want others to "feel" in our work. Sometimes we're just too eager to put it down. When that happens, we end up sharing the physicality rather than the sensuality of a subject. And art, to be art, must be sensual, not physical.

Does that mean copying photos exactly is out? Well, working from photos almost always imposes a "perfection strategy" on us. It curses us into putting down every detail which, ironically, eliminates from our work anything that is us. If that is what we want out of our visual art experience, then that is what we'll get. On the other hand, excellence of achievement will be out of the question—and with that the possibility of creating "art." And that is where perfection and excellence collide—where copying what is recognizable and creating unique expressions of sensuality often form two sides of a great divide.

What we often fail to grasp is that perfection is an imposed expectation. Born from without, it has nothing in common with art. Excellence, on the

other hand, comes from within. It feeds a self nurturing concept—one which promotes the idea of being the best we can be today, while encouraging us to better ourselves tomorrow. Where perfection is rigid and final, excellence is fluid—a never-ending becoming.

In the end, whether we eventually become artists or not, whether our efforts are called artwork or art is irrelevant. What counts is the attitude which drives the never-ending process which defines most clearly where we are going (whether we see it or not) and what the outcome is likely to be (whether we know it or not).

All we actually do need to know (frustratingly at times) is that artwork answers our questions, where art is always asking just one more.

Artist Bernard Aimé Poulin specializes internationally in corporate and private portraiture. He served as vice president on the CPSA national governing board from 2000 to 2004, and was awarded with a lifetime membership and executive vice president emeritus status for his many contributions to CPSA. He has given presentations at conferences and workshops from San Diego to Bermuda and is the author of 11 books. His "The Complete Colored Pencil Book" was published in 1992 and re-released in 2011. View more of his work at [www.bernardpoulin.com](http://www.bernardpoulin.com)



"Macy and Abigail" by Bernard Poulin