

THE SOCIETY PAGE

The Society Page features news and information from *The Colored Pencil Society of America (CPSA)*, and the *UK Coloured Pencil Society (UKCPS)*. These groups are focused on bringing colored pencil artists together and on bringing colored pencil art to the world. This month: *CPSA*.



Failing Isn't Failure

BY BERNARD POULIN
VICE PRESIDENT EMERITUS, CPSA

“Nothing is a mistake. There’s no win and no fail. There’s only make.”

— *Corita Kent (1918–1986), American Roman Catholic religious sister, pop artist, and educator*

Failing should be part of our daily routine, not because it will happen, but because it is simply there waiting to happen whenever we are engaged in doing, making, or creating something which is truly of us. The only time failing or failure takes a break is when we are doing nothing. Achieving anything of value is impossible without taking this premise into account.

At its loftiest, creative achievement requires curiosity, analysis and the testing of an end product which one day must stand on its own to validate its existence. Whether it be a concept, a reflection, an assertion, a drawing, a painting, a composition, a sculpture, or whatever, our work will be looked upon, scrutinized, and questioned. We have no power to stop that unless our goal is to hoard everything we create and keep it away from the prying eyes of those dastardly others.

We too often believe that if we do our best (whatever that is), our work will be perfect. But perfect never cuts it. First, because it is impossible to achieve and, secondly, because its distant cousin, excellence, is a more amenable fellow.

Excellence more easily accepts our penchant for being flawed, and has the common decency to encourage us to be the best we can be today whilst reminding us that tomorrow we will have the opportunity of bettering even that best.

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Failing is not a matter of negative thinking, but rather the manner in which we assimilate the possibility that our first tries may not be our best and our second or third or 3,000th just might be. As such, failing is a goal post marker. It is what goads us onto higher planes in a search to be the best we can be. And so, it stands to reason that never having failed is a sign that we have never accomplished more than what is ordinary or safe. And that last word is probably the most horribly dangerous word we can associate with artwork creation.

Does everyone fail in the arts? Absolutely.

But fear not. We live in great times regarding failure. It is much easier to hide our failings since a lot of sketching and composition exercises can now be done on a computer.

In the studio, my computers are my sketch pads. That means trying and trying and trying can be done anonymously and without failings being recognized as such.

I can go from a closeup to panorama to tonal variations to full-color representations with only a few clicks on the keyboard. But none of this digital trial and error prevents me from failing. As well it should not. It simply makes it easier to get rid of the evidence. That said, digitization does not define the work we end up with any more than the many preliminary sketches we might make may resemble a finished drawing or painting.

As a creative person, what I want is not necessarily what I get until after several attempts. And this process must be accepted as okay since very few things invented or created ever come about without failed executions, i.e., evidence of multiple learning experiences. The idea of failing is an enhancer of our thought and consideration processes. It revolves around the discovery of both what not to do and, possibly, what to do. In the end, *not* repeating the same errors we started out with is a byproduct of learning from that having failed experience.

A story of how to avoid anxiety and discouragement occurred when I was once not accepted (gasp!) for a CPSA show. My impulse to think about it as failure was inaccurate. It was not me who was being rejected but rather my work. To treat the whole event as a personal attack would be ridiculous. I am

not my work. I'm just the laborer who creates something that (hopefully) says something to others. But in the end, there is enormous difference between the two of us, me and the work I do.

So on that occasion, I laughed while feeling the sympathy of so many. The only reaction I could muster was to buy a white polo shirt. On the front I drew a toddler on the floor in the throes of a serious tantrum — screaming, kicking his feet, and banging his fists. Around the rendering I wrote in bold letters, "**I survived the 1994 Rejection.**" I then wore that shirt proudly at our next CPSA convention.

Everyone thought it was funny. It was! That's what a reaction to failing should be: (1) laughing it off and (2) wondering about what we can do to improve our chances of not failing again. But then, failing happens, no matter what, and is very important since it automatically becomes a teaching moment. It is a learning experience where another viewpoint is of utmost importance. Sadly, we don't often laugh at failing or listen to its cues. We should — otherwise, we will ultimately succumb to the power it has to destroy our drawing selves.

And so I end my long diatribe with the following: If we have never failed, we will have to admit to not having worked very hard. And if playing it safe and not testing our limits is what we call creativity, then shame on us.



AFTER THE RIDE, 23" x 19"



GREGG GREENE, 22" x 28"



Bernard Poulin demonstrated that rejection is survivable, that it was his *work* that was rejected for the 1994 CPSA International Exhibition — not *him*.



Artist Bernard Aimé Poulin, who resides in Ottawa, Canada, creates official, corporate, and private portraits internationally. His subjects range from celebrities within political, royal, corporate, artistic, sport, and religious circles to private family and child portraits. For his many contributions as vice president of the Colored Pencil Society of America (CPSA) from 2000 to 2004, Bernard received a CPSA lifetime membership and executive vice president emeritus status. He has given presentations at conferences and workshops from San Diego to Bermuda and written numerous books including *The Complete Colored Pencil Book*, first published in 1992 and re-released in 2011. His most recent book, *On Life, Death and Nude Painting*, was published in 2015. In honor of his 50 years as a professional painter, a 238-page biography and fine art book, *Bernard Aimé Poulin — a portrait* by Benoît Cazabon, was published in 2019. View more of Bernard's work at www.bernardpoulin.com.