

'Who needs to be king?'

Dear Editor,

In response to the question: 'What does the world define as an artist?' and in keeping with the theme of your excellent editorial and Terrence O'Connor's most interesting letter, I submit the following:

I am a painter. I have worked in the art world for the past 42 years - 32 of those full-time.

If it's any consolation to Mr. O'Connor, I have no degree in the visual arts. When I applied to art schools in the 60s, learning anatomy and portraiture was my goal. To my dismay, anatomy was no longer being offered. I was advised that I should take up canvas and brush and simply express myself.

No one seemed able to tell me in what language I was supposed to do this expressing. Nonetheless, through this disappointment, I gained a huge wall sized library of books. And from this ever-growing studio collection I honed my skills - studying and copying over and over again. Eventually I learned my craft.

A diploma does not a painter, sculptor or any other visual artist make.

Two positive things came from this experience : I can proudly attest to being recognized by peers and collectors internationally as having achieved a high level of success in my field and I have been more financially successful in my career than most of my compatriots in the art world. Having said this, these successes were attained by doing it my way and not taking the grant or standard gallery route and by accepting that between now and beyond my death none of the various levels which constitute the official art intelligentsia will ever recognize me as one of theirs. Why? Well, I don't paint in the 'officialism' of the day and I make a good living selling what I paint. Do I feel slighted in being ignored by my so-called peers? Not in the least. I haven't the time to worry about whether I have the appropriate muse or whether I fit in or not. I am too busy working - as Chuck Close so aptly put it.

My world also has little time for aspiring to be anything. Saying something as best I can with my artwork is more my forte. I determine whether I am successful at what I do by looking at the latest piece I have completed and deciding whether it is better than the one before. If it is not, I tear it up or cover it with a coat of paint and begin anew. That I have the freedom to do this is, to me, being a successful painter. In the beginning of my visual art career I determined that the other success (financial) was also an important consideration. It allowed me to not starve or live

homeless.

I always recommend to any and all painters, sculptors, sketchers who visit my studio to take the reins regarding their careers. Controlling the directions we take gives us a better understanding of what surviving as a visual artist entails - whether we depend on grants or straight selling. As for the gallery system, a few points must be noted: Galleries are stores, not cathedrals. Their existence relies on an ability to sell the products they display from the creators they represent.

Galleries vary - from the excellent to the ludicrous. Some gallery owners are knowledgeable about artwork and the marketplace. Many are not. Nonetheless, there are at least one thousand painters needing representation for every gallery selling. This makes my product a liability if it is not a regular seller for the gallery. Gallery owners are not fools. They know what they can or can't sell and their survival depends on this. They have rent or mortgages to pay on top of other expenses.

Most painters and sculptors, therefore, don't even make it through the door. But if we are lucky enough to be given a chance the artworks had better sell or the basement holding tank will be the best representation a visual artist can get.

But does this mean that a painter or sculptor who can't find representation is not a real artist?

In my case, promoting and selling artwork has been a cottage industry for our family for most of the years I have been painting. Paying between 30 and 70% of the value of my work to a gallery has always seemed a poor business practice and so I have refused to pay such high commissions. No other business charges that much to sell a product. So rather than pay someone a commission of that size my wife and kids have been involved in helping to promote, distribute and sell my artwork for years. As they grew into their own areas of expertise, I took over most of the details and parsed them out to several selected agents worldwide who work on commission. In other words I haven't had time to wonder or worry over whether I was being considered an artist or not. The mortgage needed to be paid.

But being in business brings up another important issue: If selling is a visual artist's goal then a definition of territory must be established. In the space we might call a studio, artwork is just that: artwork. It is the result of moods, emotions, thoughts and temperaments expressed through the skill sets we have gained. But once that artwork is completed and it leaves the studio it must leave behind its esoteric position. Outside the studio it becomes a sellable product. Once we accept to

look at our work in this way it becomes less difficult to part with the piece and move on to the next. It is also important to recognize that once we leave the studio with our artwork we too change - we become promoters and sellers of a product. And if we are not good at this game, we must be astute enough to find someone who is.

Personally, I call myself a painter, not an artist, so the wanting to be called an artist, or the wanting to fit into a category defined by art world interest groups really hasn't been an issue over the years.

If it had been, I would probably be upset like so many others are. Regardless, I can't deny that the title artist has always been coveted. It has always meant a cut above - a level of productivity and creative acumen which singles a person out as awesomely creative - a person whose mind and heart and soul is extra-ordinary. So why wouldn't a person want the title? I can't deny that when someone calls me an artist I am thrilled. Having the title bestowed upon you is a wondrous thing. In past centuries, when skill acquisition meant survival over mediocrity, being called an artist (in any field) was the ultimate goal, an achievement of greatness within an evolving society. But then, it was also an earned title - a crown bestowed rather than absconded with.

Today, we are no longer in need of survival skills, or so we think. Life should not be as demanding as it was in the past - or so we think. . . We prefer to determine our own comfort levels and choose what does or does not suit us as traditions and old values fall by the wayside. With whatever becoming the contemporary byword. . . every Tom,

Dick and Harriet picking and choosing titles as they wish shouldn't be a surprise. And, sadly, the arts mean very little to the world today. Therefore a title such as artist, though elegant in and of itself, doesn't really mean what it used to back in the old days.

Now, if the title artist did have importance in society, appropriating it without proper credentials would be considered illegal. Try calling yourself Doctor, Judge or Electrical Engineer.

Not a week would go by before you would be summarily thrown in jail. These titles are important in our society. You can't simply crown yourself with one of them. Once, the title artist, too, meant something. It was rarely bestowed and then only to those who had a unique capacity to move us - not only visually, musically, orally or in written form but most especially - viscerally, emotionally, sensually.

In essence the word artist has lost its patina. Today it offers a false sense of position - one to which we gleefully,

though erroneously, elevate ourselves above the working class. With hard work considered a negative and excellence being no more a requirement, compensation

becomes more important than satisfaction. Instant gratification, once a capricious attitude, is now embraced as the need for immediate recognition intensifies. Once it was enough to be an amateur (a lover of art). It was enough to be a proud learned apprentice and eventual craftsman beloved and respected for our skills. Now, we live too many years to accept waiting for that blessing to come. The title, more often bestowed upon humans after their death, is too little, too late. We can't wait to be pronounced artist later. We are children of grandeur. We need to be pronounced genius now - not later.

Sad as all of this is, creativity and striving and working hard in the arts is still out there - often being anonymously practiced by the so many who could care less about the titles and crowns and identifiers. They love sticking their hands in the muddy clays and malleable waxes and paints and varnishes and turps. They love the stains on their tshirts and jeans and the drips on their shoes.

They love creating and find it enough to be moved by those who are moved by their work. And so, the good work done is followed by better work and then the excellent that eventually springs forth. And this is satisfaction enough. Who needs to be king?

Bernard Poulin
Ottawa, ON