

Art 102

My basic education in art had to wait until after high school and college. College brought mostly technical coursework. The high school I attended was primarily interested in saving my soul. The good Sisters and Brothers didn't exactly fail at their task, but I can't say they made it any easier for me. Too bad there wasn't a Sister Wendy around to help me discover the link between art and spirituality.*

Before I learned to listen, I never fully appreciated art. If a painting wasn't pretty, I would discard it for one with more decorative value. My artistic purpose seemed no more than to match the color of a canvas to the living room furniture. In my college Art 101 class, I dutifully completed the course requirements, one of them by secretly copying an old photo for my self-portrait assignment. I didn't really want to learn about art at that point in my life, I just wanted to Ace the course.

Eventually I realized a great part of our humanity was missing from my life. But it could be discovered through art. I am still unable to describe in words exactly what it is that only art can touch inside me. But I remember one example.

On a late winter afternoon in a local gallery a few years ago, I stood quite still and listened as a young woman breathed. As we viewed a very large block print hanging before us, I loomed silently behind her, not wanting to intrude into her space. We didn't know each other and I couldn't see her face. The sun slanted through tall Palladian windows in the hallway behind us and threw sparkles down the length of curly brown hair cascading off her shoulders. To be honest, I was playing the voyeur to her emotions, as she inspected the piece and reacted to it with small sounds.

At first I wondered if she was crying, as her shoulders moved up and down rhythmically. A moment later I heard sighs of pleasure, or maybe longing. The large black and white print was certainly not inspiring or even pretty. It depicted a grimy cityscape of buildings and people going about their normal tasks, all seen through windows or from up above rooftops and down on street corners. The work had a flat perspective and no fixed scale. It appeared primitive in its execution.

I moved a half step closer and asked, "Does the print mean something special to you?"

"What?" she said.

"I'm sorry, I noticed your reactions, that's all."

"I'm just listening," she said.

"Yes," I replied.

"To the artist," she continued, and then turned fully toward me.

I hesitated and in a moment said, "Hmm."

Too late, I knew that sound was condescending.

Another moment passed while I tried to look intelligent.

She finally said, "What do *you* hear?"

Giving up without a struggle, I laughed and said, "Just my stomach rumbling."

"Here," she pointed to a man and woman on a rooftop, who held each other in a tight embrace. "What do you think went through the artist's mind as he carved this scene into the wood?"

"He loved someone and would never let her go," I said. "I remember a summer night on a rooftop ..."

"What did he want to say," she interrupted, "down here in this scene of a couple arguing on the street corner?"

"Well," I ventured, "maybe he quarreled with someone and maybe he was sorry about it. Maybe he loves her."

She looked at me. "And what would she like to say now to the man she swore at and belittled?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"Yes, you do," she said, sighing. "And so do I."

I am always stunned by insights from the young. They cause me to wonder about my own stupidity, but I'm warmed to know we sired their generation. She moved away, her finger tips trailing down the velvet gallery rope that keeps us from hugging each painting or sculpture that has touched us.

I stayed a while longer. The entire print was now all but singing. From the soaring heights of the buildings, and the winds of regret heard whistling between them, to the absolute lack of color, its absence the most eloquent of brushes.

Through a window high up on the work an older couple sat reading on opposite sides of a room. They ignored each other. "What would he want to say to her?" I asked myself.

I can't draw or paint, but I have lots to say. Taking pencil or charcoal in hand from time to time, I doodle out my psyche on scraps of paper. And because I love ink, I carve primitive images on linoleum or wood and I print them on my old press. I've learned to sit back and listen to myself through the images I've drawn. I am often not aware of what I want to say, until my hands have spoken.

Since that day, I haven't viewed a painting or a print or sculpture without straining to listen for what the artist was saying. There is so much to hear.

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