

Risk, Reinvention, and Revolt

by Gregory Evans

The first thing that an artist has to understand goes against everything that many artists believe they stand for. Business is entrenched in the art world, and to wish to go back to a time before is futile. Business is no longer separate from our artistic endeavors. If we want our work to be seen, and it MUST be seen, then it is via business that it is shown – if our work isn't seen, it has no reason to be. Consider the Zen Koan – “If a tree falls in the woods and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” This is about action based on having made a choice and that action's result, its response, or consequence – these two elements are the foundational building blocks of our living universe. If there is no response from an action taken, no consequence, then it doesn't concern us, does it?

Here's our problem – artists, by nature of either personality, circumstance, or both, are highly individualized, autonomous and singular. We drag ourselves each day into our attics, lofts, garages, studios, caves and spare bedrooms to be alone with ourselves and our muses, disdaining any form of interruption or distraction. We snub our noses at just the thought of someone even daring to enter our god-like, paradisiac realms of creation and trade secrets.

But we are artists and not infallible - we fall prey to uninspired moments, blaming anything and everything outside of ourselves for our lack of performance while continuing to claim our solitary existences in self-defense (or self-preservation) saying we care not for what others think. Meanwhile, we thrive on compliments on our work and our coveted sales. We're artists – we don't need anyone. Yeah, right!

If we are able to achieve some level of success, we will feign being a team player, acknowledging those around us with great thanks. Thanks to our agents, our gallerists, our curators, our collectors, our fans, we have arrived at that place so rightly deserved. We can thank all those around us for their loving support, but inside, we still convince ourselves that really it was just us, us alone that did it all. Hmmm...

That's the twist, of course. As artists, we really believe that this peripheral but cooperative business

activity is irrelevant to our actual creative process, our vision, our product. It is our product that is what is great. It is us, in our singular nature, behind closed doors, who have created this cherished and beautiful work of art – no one else had a hand in it. Our creations are our children – they bear our stamp, our blood, our sweat and our tears.

But, when someone like a gallery owner steps up to represent us and our work, this person is now contributing their own stamp, blood, sweat and tears to that work. This allows the work to grow. If a collector steps up, then it grows even more. When two or more gather around this energy started by an artist, the love of the work from others can make it huge! Many need to contribute to make things great. No worries though, you can still put your name on your work, but remember this, your work is not just yours!

Its a lonely existence to exclude others.

Risk

“Passion is more powerful than reason.”

– Alex Verdenne

So let's get on topic here. I'd like to start by saying that first and foremost, its not to those great artists who already take risks I address here, but to those who have forgotten that it is by taking risks that we become great artists. Risk is an essential, for without that risk, none of us would have ever become artists to begin with.

So what is risk, and how does it apply to what you do? Anytime you approach the unknown and you leave that which is comfortable for something that isn't, there is risk involved. Any

time you face potential rejection or ridicule or even loss of client–base (income), you have employed risk.

Anytime you challenge yourself, and, for example, decide to do something that you've never done before, like paint a cubist–style portrait when your usual is a realist take on your subject, you've taken a risk.

Many risks can be taken with little risk at all, except for the self-inflicted humiliation we subject ourselves to when were not as successful as we wished to be. Give it a shot anyway, go ahead and be bold, jump into that great abyss. There's no need to blow it out of proportion – its great to explore. Not all risks can be, or will be, life changing, and it is never the end of the world to deviate momentarily,

forgetting all you think you know. The necessary thing is that you risk, at least a bit, from time to time, because some of those risks CAN, before you realize it, be life changing!

If the risk you take, if your departure is far from home, if it doesn't please you, you can always return to what is familiar to take another risk another day. After all, it's just a one-off, and nobody says that you've got to share it with the world (that's another, altogether different kind of risk). Remember, anytime you return home from a daring journey, some wild adventure, you might just find that upon your return, you have actually brought something of value back with you alongside those few bumps and bruises, and so your risk, your journey into that unknown, has brought growth with it, both to you and your work.

“I could roll myself in it, drink it, eat it and kill myself, suffocating in it.”

– George Condo

If you like the adventure, then do it again, maybe in a different direction. At some point you'll find something worth exploring in a deeper way. Taking risk becomes easy with practice and pattern, and really, what you're changing is only patterns of behavior...

Painting is pattern. It's patterns of lines and shapes and colors. It's also patterns of systems and certain behaviors and beliefs. It's all those

patterns you've established that provide you with a sense of accomplishment, but those same patterns, those same behaviors and beliefs, can also enslave you. The patterns available to you are infinite, and they deserve exploration, so be aware, if you feel that you've found some permanent solution, some eternal pattern, because really all you've found is a nice place to rest and you've forgotten the truth of the journey itself!

Taking risks are at the foundation of creative activities. How many of us didn't risk something when we first decided to paint on a canvas – when we bought some tubes of paint, picked up a brush, and started slinging paint around the dining table, with only a bit going where it was supposed to?

Painting is an organic experience – it wants to change, to grow, to evolve. Painting wants you to be its partner, it wants to dance with you to a song that's forever changing. You can play it safely, or you can go out on a limb to reach for those finest fruits, those sweetest fruits that may only seem to be so far out of reach.

Don't let your comfort stop you from being the adventurer you are! Be bold and be daring. Punk it up and scare yourself, discover other parts of yourself, find something new within yourself and bring it out.

Loose or tight, Realist or Abstract – remind yourself that you're not looking for what you

already know, you're looking for what you don't know...

Reinvention

“What's essential is that I paint, and accept that there's something stronger than myself.”

–Alexander “Alexone” Dizac

It's risk, and risk alone, that allows for the reinvention of one's self and one's work. Risk doesn't require that you reinvent yourself or your work, but it is the foundational practice that encourages, or at least allows a reinvention to take place, if you choose. The two can work hand in hand, for as the artist changes, so does the work, and as the work changes, so does the artist.

Thankfully, many have stepped up by taking those risks. Some more slowly than others, and that's okay, but a wave has been set in motion that can have us see great change in art and its presentation, – this is a wave that many consultants, collectors, curators, and gallerists are now plugged into. Sadly, for others, it's a wave that many would choose to ignore.

As an example: since the internet has become such a powerful channel for the sales of art, galleries have been trying to adapt to this new arena which is sometimes viewed as a challenger or competitor, thought its not. The internet is only a tool, and like any tool, it must be seen for what it is, and it must be used correctly. Galleries are not being made

obsolete because of this, and they won't disappear, but their business models are changing with the addition of this tool to the business repertoire. New behaviors are being put into place, new patterns are being established – that's how we grow.

We don't have a lot of experience to draw upon here, for the modern art industry was a fledgling entity just over one hundred years ago.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the invention and increased popularity of the “new” camera, a few artists quickly stumbled upon a “What now?” paradigm. If anyone with a camera could now reproduce reality onto a flat support, there was no longer any need for a painter to paint traditional portraits, pretty birds and landscapes. There arose a need to ask what painting is for if its suddenly just a time consuming method for creating what the camera could create, what the camera could do better. These artists didn't step up to change art itself, but to change what they were doing with art. They needed a reason to be. They took risks, and they reinvented themselves!

*“Show it through **your** eyes, don't do it because 'that art sells.'”*

– Todd White

It seems that an artist must question his motives for painting – motives must be examined. Is it some deep need or compulsion

that you do what you do, or is it for the money (real or imagined)? Are you just entertaining yourself and never challenging your own vision? Are you resting on those laurels you've laid, your past accomplishments and successes? Have you become content in your static existence, relishing in your apathy?

To go backward is to do nothing; it is pure loss; it means that one has neither understood nor profited by the lessons of the past.”

– *Gustave Courbet*

Reinvent yourself. Reinvent your portraits. Reinvent your landscapes. Reinvent your still-lives, your abstracts, your narrative, your story. Be daring, seek new challenges. If you seek the perfect color, the perfect brushstroke, the perfect technique, you can continue on your search for that perfection, but remember, all those colors, all those brushstrokes and techniques only contribute to something greater than you yourself. They contribute to the final image, and that is what is of import here – that is what we are creating.

Really, if one really wants to tap the extremes of their imagination, one has to tap their own personality, because it is through your personality that imagination passes. One must be willing to confront head on the way one sees the world, because its this vision that ends up on the canvas.

Study those who have reinvented themselves

and you'll see art reinvented. Study those who have walked that path before you. Study everything you can – absorb it all until you are filled with the work of others. Be a sponge! Once you have filled yourself with all that you can, forget it, forget all of it – squeeze yourself dry and go do something different, something you haven't yet seen. Open your eyes to see something different and your eyes will show you something that's different.

The next time you consider painting the proverbial Honore de Balzac, do it with the same attitude that Rodin used when he sculpted his Monument de Balzac. Take criticism where its offered, even if its a slap in the face, and then forget that, too. People will eventually come around, but for now, seize your own greatness, and know that its yours.

There's nothing like being awarded a badge of honor when you know that you really haven't yet done something to deserve it.

Revolt

“... I fear that I'll have to follow my desires.”
– *Willim de Kooning*

Growth implies movement and change. If you're moving and changing, you're growing. This can only be done by risk and reinvention which can lead to our final, coveted quality, revolt.

Cultural change only occurs by revolt and revolt can only follow from risk and its resulting reinvention. Art is no different. Change is born of a deep need to shake things up, from a deep dissatisfaction of the status quo. This change may be a mild to fair departure from what is accepted, or it may be so extreme it disturbs and destroys the whole of the cultural paradigm.

Whether we know it or not, it's revolt that we are aiming for when we take risk enough to reinvent what we do and who we are. What starts as a personal thing always must become collective if its to have the greatest impact. This is why we cannot be alone, or stand alone.

Everything moves in cycles – it's all circular. With revolution, each time we complete a cycle we find ourselves near to where we started, only we've elevated things, we've lifted things and been lifted with them into a higher octave. That's why its called revolt, because it revolves, but raising it up, lifting it into new realms, can only be done by choice. If we don't lift things up, we're just running in circles, we're screaming and shouting while nothing changes and all things repeat themselves. It might be revolving, but its not revolting. It's historical in either case.

“I mock Verbatim”
– Robert Williams

There are those ripples of revolt on the surface of our industry, but we must rise to that surface to see those ripples for what they are. If we rest in comfort far below, we see nothing and we stagnate. If we rise just a bit, we can sense there is something going on, but unless we join those at the surface, those that are part of this shaking, this vibration, we can't know it for what it is. We can't know what it represents, or where it could go. If we complain that things aren't working for us, if we moan about what we lack or what we deserve but don't have, its because we are still denying ourselves and the truth of what we could be. Looking up is not enough, we must rise to the occasion that awaits.

From Mannerism in the late Renaissance period, to the first effects of the manufacture of the camera shaking up our soon to be impressionists and Fauvists, and the then later explosive popularity of that same camera demanding a response from Braque and Picasso and others during the Cubist movement, artists have risen to the occasion. Long before art was an industry, artists have always stepped up to the challenge of changing public perceptions of what the image can do. Now, we artists don't stand so alone, we are not so autonomous, the world is not so small a place. Those who have joined the milieu of the industry must show those same qualities that artists show – they must push themselves and take risks, greater risks, and great rewards may follow.

Andy Warhol with his pop–realism was a lifting from the CIA financed movement called abstract expressionism. Street artists transcending the mundane graffiti gang–tags and claiming our cities walls as their own canvasses and later entering the studio to do more portable and longer lasting works were liftings – its all revolving! Its all revolt!

Whether you're an artist, consultant to the stars, curator, collector, gallerist, or agent, you can always go another step further than you have. Artists cannot be the only persons taking risks. We all can risk, we all can play. We can dance with no other agenda than to be a part of something that could be great. Rebel along with those artists who rebel. Come into the dance like a child and do something that matters more than the bottom line. Redefine what you consider is success and failure, then you 'll find there is no failure.

History has shown us that the one thing all movements share is money - a lot of money. The last hundred years have made this even more evident. Movements have always been funded. Like water is to plants, money is to art. Without funding, a fledgling idea can die before it is born...

The abstract movement would have never happened if only the artist had stepped up. It took a group, a large group of artists, gallery owners, curators and collectors, all possessing

an undying devotion to a new form of art to make what happened in France in the early 20th century such a substantial offering – an offering that has lasted a century and given permission to other, future artists to move from the cubist ways in new directions. Cubism was a huge shift, and it was collectivity that set its momentum – the money followed.

Artists can no longer ignore each other – they can no longer be isolated in their own little worlds of successes and failures. Artists must support each other, encourage each other, and all those in the whole of the art industry must step up and NOT just support the individuals who create image, but must take on a collective attitude towards something much bigger. When something good is happening, those movers and shakers have got to look for the new talent and encourage cooperative attitudes. Artists can struggle with this communal ethos, but it can be understood because it is the artist who is normally sequestered in their studios, buried up to their gills in wet paints while neglecting even the need to eat – what artist has the time to manage a business when they have brushes to clean? Things must be changed. Artists must change. We must become more inclusive, more wild and free with ourselves, and no longer be confined by our personal and world-views of what being an artist means.

“The day is coming when a single carrot,

freshly observed, will set off a revolution”.

– Paul Cezanne

We must all, from artists to collectors and all those between, up our game and take bigger risks. We must all imagine the unimaginable. We all can imagine – we each envision success, reward and recognition to some degree for ourselves – but the power of imagination and its applications on our mundane lives is severely disregarded – we limit only ourselves. We have rules to observe – there are specific ways to follow if one is to achieve success. I ask, where would art be today if it weren't for taking risks?

Our realities must really be stretched along with ourselves ourselves if we wish to step beyond the ordinary. If we don't reach out, we have no reason for pursuit in our lives, everything becomes static, unchanging, and sadly comfortable. When you come up for some fresh air and see those ripples becoming large waves, you can begin to live. When those ripples do start swelling with the power of collectivity, those willing to ride with this new force in our fresh Post–Urban world, will stand to make a mark by their contributions to

something bigger than we can see right now.

I don't believe any one artist can ever change this world on their own, but if you feel that this industry does need change, it will come only by risk, reinvention and revolt. Its not only the artist that needs to address this, but if artists don't change what they're doing, then no one else can change things – we are at the center of this big, creative world, and we can't expect others to do what we refuse to do ourselves. Why would collectors and buyers change if you won't change, why would galleries change? Museums won't change, agents won't change, nothing will change - unless we would change.

So, all that being said, perhaps, as artists we need to find support, love, admiration, collectors, representation and so on, or perhaps, just perhaps, we simply have to imagine what has never been imagined before, and the rest will follow.

“In the end, everything depends on one's self, on a fire in the belly with a thousand rays.

Nothing else counts.

– Pablo Picasso

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