

I think I should begin with what my daughter and I both got out of our fortune cookies at Hong Kong last week. “Art misunderstanding by calm, poise and balance.” Hopefully what I say today will make at least a little more sense.

One of the biggest problems when it comes to the question of Looking at Art is defining exactly “What is art?” – Philosophers continue to debate this issue. I promise not to put you to sleep by doing this but I will point to the work of philosopher George Dickie who talks about the core personnel that surround a work of art, meaning -- the artist who created the work, -- the presenters or art world personnel who present the work and -- the goers who appreciate the art. Dickie points out that only ONE of these core personnel is essential and that is the artist. Others can appreciate and evaluate the work but the purpose and intent of the maker is what confers the status of art on an object. Dickie points out that when the paintings of Betsy the chimp we first exhibited they were shown at the Museum of Natural History in Chicago and they were seen as a curiosity. If they had been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago they would have been christened “ART.” I’m not sure why we think we have to define art. As Picasso said, “Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the song of a bird?”

We will definitely NOT go into the question of aesthetics and how that affects the definition of art but I do want to make a couple of comments. Dickie reminds us that “one can make a work of art out of a sow’s ear but that does not necessarily make it a silk purse.” And there are many other issues that need to be taken into consideration. I recently received a protest email (complete with photographs) about an artist in Latin America who had found an emaciated street dog, brought it into the gallery and chained it to the wall. Over the period of the show the dog was left to die. The photos showed visitors standing around drinking their wine. I was horrified and immediately signed the petition to not allow this “work of art” to be brought to the US for an upcoming exhibition.

There are those who like to draw distinctions between good art and bad art, between craft and art, between fine art and illustration, one of my pet peeves. I was delighted to discover that the two pieces by Terry Lindquist are taken from a series he titles “Purely Decorative.” What you see is it – no hidden messages, he wrote. I like that. A lot of times these distinctions, real or imagined, arise from the JOBS of the person defining the terms. I’d like to talk about some of these points of view.

✍️ First I’ll talk about the artist/creators themselves

- ☞☞ Second the professionals involved with art – educators, art historians, the jurors, art critics and agents
- ☞☞ Thirdly the general public, including collectors
- ☞☞ And lastly the work of Dr. Ramachandran, a neurologist who has identified 10 universal laws of art.

Taking the step of defining oneself as an artist is not an easy one. I remember thinking initially that it was somehow arrogant. I would call myself a painter or a photographer but using the word artist seemed too self-aggrandizing. In part that comes from the layers of judgmental, critical assessment that are heaped on works of art. I believe I've mentioned in the past a book entitled *Trance, Art and Creativity* that ranks the importance of the creative process above that of making art object. I'm not sure Warren Katz approached the re-construction of his electric car parked outside the fellowship as an artwork but bringing it to the opening of our member's exhibition tells me that he honored the creative process and the artifact that resulted from this process. Now Warren, if you would just let us go out and paint flowers or something all over it we could call it "REAL ART."

Artists tend to look at art from lots of different perspectives. Regarding their own work some people do it to explore their inner selves. Diane Davis wrote that her work is very much a self-narrative. She says, "I use objects from nature and the human body to represent feelings or events in my life. The piece at UU was done after I was diagnosed with a hereditary form of macular degeneration. The seed pod is the oculus."

Others work to express some strongly held point of view. Pat Cameron says, "I want to make a statement depicting how I, personally, see something of perceived beauty and how I aspire to recreate it in an interesting and unique way on my tablet."

Still others are turned on by the creative process itself. Jean Lawrence wrote about the painting in the back of the room that it began as arrowhead plants from her wetlands series but she began to tweak it and it turned into a purely abstract work. She wrote, "My painting is made up of many layers of ... colors and shapes. The PROCESS of painting is very important to me." Whatever the medium, the hands-on process is very seductive for most artists. I can't believe Stuart Chapman would have done all that work on his lovely marble sculpture if he hadn't been enjoying the process. Pat Smith told me about the fact that when she did the piece on the wall to your right she was experimenting with using water-soluble oil paints on Yupo, a new kind of plastic paper. The process of painting, sculpture, photography – all

of these can give artists a way of centering themselves, escaping into another world, feeding their souls.

Many artists are hoping to earn a living in the arts although most that I know choose to teach or find other means of supporting themselves. In part that comes from not wanting to compromise their work for the sake of money. When looking at their own work artists are constantly evaluating to determine if they have achieved their purpose in making the work. Henry Albers stated simply that he is working to learn how to paint so that it turns out to be what he wants to paint. He wrote, "So far I think I am getting better and I think these are two of my best. Wait until next year!" Go Henry!

When looking at other people's work artists generally look through their own particular pair of glasses. We tend to evaluate other's art according to the standards and purposes that are important to ourselves. Art school or training may give us some objective opinions but our subjective points of view are always at play. As I'm sure you've noticed my own purpose in art is to push edges, find new expressions, expand my horizons. When looking at other artists' work the bells go off when the artwork makes me see the world through new eyes.

So what about art teachers? Generally they are interested in teaching students to look at their art from what I call a "craft" or skill perspective. Concepts such as composition, balance, design, tension, current technology, skill in the medium – all of these kinds of things are important in helping students achieve their goals. These concepts often get taught as essential or dogma but at times the success of a work comes from rebelling against those rules. Expressionism was considered an abomination when it was first presented because it did not fit the rules of representation that were in vogue. Ultimately a good teacher stands back and watches the pupil outgrow his or her tutelage.

An art historian, though noting the skill or craft of the artist, would be more interested in the rebellions, the new perspectives that change the course of art and how it is practiced. The influences of culture and the historical time-frame of a work of art, particularly as technology alters the tools available to the artist – these are rich fodder for the art historian. Currently the use of the computer is affecting how work is presented. Bud Worrall confessed that his lovely landscape photographs had in fact been slightly tweaked to create a more coherent, seductive image. When visiting an exhibition the art

historian sees the threads of technology and concepts that reach back in time and across oceans.

Then we come to the professionals who are primarily interested in choosing art works for various reasons – here I'm including the judge or juror, the art critic, the curator and the agent. Generally these people have either art or art history training. The critics tend to be dogmatic and judgmental of the work itself whereas the others are making choices based on mandates external to the work.

Recently I was listening to a book on tape, *The Portrait* by Iain Pears. It's basically a monolog (implying a dialogue) between the painter and his subject, an art critic whom he had known throughout his career. My somewhat cynical view is that critics are power mongers in the art world -- they can change how people see art and can be cruel in the name of art, which is probably why I enjoyed this novel which expressed some of these same points of view. Having been the recipient of some bad reviews of my work over the years I enjoy the opportunity to trounce on the critic. In the book the critic is quoted as saying "I persuade people to love what they hate, buy what they do not want, despise what they love.... The good critic can make the mediocre famous, the great obscure" because they straddle the galleries, collectors, patrons, and journals. I long ago decided to disregard or low-rate the critics though Pears touched a sympathetic place in me when he noted that the critic, viewing work with an artist or student, is able to "catch the excitement of discovery, feel the joy of novelty" which is no longer available to him or her.

The curator, on the other hand, when assembling an exhibition may choose to eliminate excellent work or work he or she is partial to for the sake of the whole exhibition. Things like space, theme, financial backing and available artwork limit curators.

Judges of art shows also arrive with their agendas. Often judges or jurors are educators, critics, well-known artists, art historians, occasionally a friend of a friend who has strong opinions. Their background and expertise can vary widely. As earnestly as the juror of a show might try to be impartial, most will admit to their subjective biases -- and probably the state of their physical, emotional and mental health on any given day.

The agent or gallery director is by definition looking at the market or sale value of the work. I clearly remember a gallery owner in Atlanta telling some of us she loved our work and that if it were done in "this color instead

of that” or looked more like “so and sos” work she would hang them in a heartbeat. Recently someone told me about a cartoon they had seen that pictures two storefronts, one titled Gallery of Fine Arts, the other called Gallery of Art that Sells. On the Fine Arts Gallery there was a sign saying “Going Out of Business.”

When it comes to the general public and collectors there are a number of things that inform our judgments. Perceptions, purpose and purchase price are a few of these. My oculist recently told me a story related to perception. His patient having been given a prescription for her glasses brought them back to the doctor some years later explaining that she thought that she needed new glasses because all of the medicine has leaked out of them. Our perceptions are colored and often altered by the terminology used to describe a work of art, by having read a critical review of the work or by our cultural upbringing and environment. Regarding purpose, we might be looking to build a collection, for monetary value or for sheer interest, whereas we would choose something different if we wanted to add a work of art to our living room or to decorate our homes. For some the purpose is to broaden our horizons, to learn something to challenges our vision. And then of course there is the purchase price, sometimes an obstacle to obtaining something we really would enjoy owning. Collectors purchase works as investments or as obsessions they might have with a particular type of art or art object.

Now to the work of Dr. Vilayanur Ramachandran, Director of the Center for Brain and Cognition at the University of California, San Diego. I ran across a BBC interview with Dr. Ramachandran entitled “The Artful Brain” in which he outlined what he called the ten universal laws of art. I discovered he had written a paper earlier in which he had identified eight laws so it may be that there are more than 10 by now. These are the 10 he spoke about at that time. (indicate) His thesis is that artists either consciously or unconsciously use these to titillate the visual areas of the brain.

He begins with another quote from Picasso that says, “Art is the lie that reveals the truth.” In other words how does visual perception translates into such things as artistic universals? Dr. Ramachandran does point out that culture plays a tremendous role in how we view art but that is not the whole story. Let me read a quote from his lecture:

“Let’s assume that 90% of the variance you see in art is driven by cultural diversity or – more cynically – by just the auctioneer’s hammer, and only

10% by universal laws that are common to all brains. The culturally driven 90% is what most people already study – it is called art history. As a scientist what I am interested in is the 10% that is universal – not in the endless variations imposed by cultures. The advantage I and other scientists have today is that we can now test our conjectures by directly studying the brain empirically.”

The first law he calls “peak shift” and he illustrates this concept with some animal behavior experiments. In training a rat to discriminate between a square and a rectangle the researcher places cheese behind the rectangle only and the rat starts liking the rectangle. But amazingly if you take a longer skinnier rectangle and show it to the rat it actually prefers the longer skinnier rectangle to the original. It has become MORE rectangular than in its original version. It’s like the process of drawing caricatures – we take whatever is unique about a subject and amplify it and it looks even more like itself than it did. Dr. Ramachandran states, “...if you do it just right you get great portraiture, even a Rembrandt.” To further explain this phenomenon he quotes experiments done with seagull chicks. The first thing the chick sees is its mother who has a long yellow beak with a red spot on it. The chick starts pecking at the red spot, begging for food. The goal of vision is to compute the best way to get a job done and through millions of years of evolution the chick has learned that a long yellow thing with a red spot means there is a mother attached who will give it food. You’ve probably guessed that their experiments showed the beak didn’t need to be attached to a mother for the chick to start pecking. But the next step in the experiment revealed that even the beak was unnecessary. They presented a long yellow stick with three red stripes that didn’t look anything like a beak and they found that the chicks actually pecked at the three red stripes more than they did at the real beak.

What Dr. Ramachandran suggests is that if those seagulls had an art gallery they would hang this long stick with three red stripes on the wall, worship it, pay millions for it, call it a Picasso but not understand why. He proposes that that is what we are doing when we appreciate contemporary art. Peak shift or the idea of ultra-normal stimuli can explain why something in art that is non-realistic can be enjoyed and appreciated. He suggests that even the sunflowers of Van Gogh or the water lilies of Monet function like the yellow stick with three red stripes – they excite the visual neurons that represent color memories of these flowers even more effectively than a real sunflower or water lily might.

Dr. Ramachandran's second law is called Grouping. I'm sure we've all seen the puzzle pictures in which one only sees black and white splotches on first viewing. After staring at the piece for several seconds one suddenly sees a Dalmatian dog or a face. Vision is an extraordinarily complex and sophisticated process and these kinds of images are like a perceptual riddle. The reward comes from reaching that "AHA!" point in viewing the work. Vision evolved mainly to discover objects and to defeat camouflage. We take this for granted because when we look around we see clearly defined objects. What an artist tries to do is to generate as many of those "Aha!" signals as possible by optimally exciting these areas of his painting or sculpture. I was thinking of Stu's driftwood landscape where first I saw pieces of driftwood and then suddenly it appeared to me as a landscape. Or Wendy Allen's walking sticks made from things she described as "a broken stem" and "a piece of crepe myrtle attached to a root from the a beach shrub." But she filled them with lots of visual secrets that emerge as you look at the piece. Several works in this exhibit have created the "AHA" moments in their work.

Law #3 is called Contrast. Terry Lindquist shared an article on visual perception in which the author noted that our perception of luminosity and contrast (derived from the rods in our retina) is far superior to our color vision. Dr. Ramachandran suggests that the reason lies largely in the allocation of attention. The main goal of vision is the discovery of objects. Information exists mainly in regions of change – i.e. edges – and it make sense that such regions would, therefore, be more attention grabbing, more interesting than homogeneous areas. Pat Keoughan told me that she is always drawn to "the color, contrast and design nature provides in flowers." You will note that in her flower in the front hall she has actually re-emphasized those regions of change, those edges that first drew her attention. She uses the computer and metallic markers to manipulate and embellish the image allowing color and veining to inform where her pen goes. And I've always seen Eloise Rowe's use of paint and color as creating contrasts that draw the eye. Eloise has developed her craft over the years and her skill level is obvious.

Law #4 is designated as Isolation or Understatement. Dr. Ramachandran points to the cartoon-like outline drawings of bulls in the Lascaux Caves which are much more powerful and evocative of the animal than straight photographic images. Perhaps the best known aphorism in this area, especially in the arts, is "Less is more." Here again the issue is attention. The doctor

points out that you can't have two overlapping patterns passing through your nerve cells at once. You can only allocate your attentional resources to one thing at a time. It turns out that the right parietal area of the brain is concerned with the sense of artistic proportion. Sometimes children with autism or adults with frontal-temporal dementia are left with the right parietal area still in tact and unencumbered by demands from other brain areas. The results often are amazingly beautiful drawings because of the isolation of information being transferred. Now, Ruth Geraci definitely does NOT have dementia but her choosing to zoom in on those flowers, basically to isolate them, shows me she is in touch with that part of her brain. Curiously when asked about her work she chose to tell me the story of watching a rough green snake while visiting Bellingrath Gardens to photograph flowers. She wrote, "This smiling snake suggests the rebirth I have experienced since retiring and moving here. I have shed my old skin and am growing a new one."

Law #5 is what Dr. Ramachandran calls visual peek-a-boo, perceptual problem solving. He says everyone knows a nude seen behind a diaphanous veil is much more alluring than a full-color Playboy photo. Our brains evolved in highly camouflaged environments and the wiring of our visual centers to our emotional centers ensure that the very act of searching for the solution is pleasing, just as struggling with a jigsaw puzzle is pleasing long before the final "aha." Again it's about generating as many "ahas" as possible in the brain.

In Law #6 Dr. Ramachandran talks about symmetry. He points to our enjoyment of looking through kaleidoscopes as children. He also states that biologically important objects that are symmetrical tend to grab our attention. Apparently in animals and in humans when choosing a mate there is a preference for symmetrical over asymmetrical or lopsided objects. His point is that symmetry is built in to the evolutionary development of survival and that it is hardly surprising that we have a built-in aesthetic preference for it.

Law #7, called Abhorrence of coincidence/generic viewpoint, addresses the fact that there is an infinite set of points of view that could produce retinal images. (show drawing) Whether the objects are actually overlapping or are objects that happen to coincidentally be placed in such a way as to appear overlapping, the brain favors the generic interpretation. Dr. Ramachandran states that the brain abhors suspicious coincidences (show drawing) and

thinks that if an artist is trying to please the eye, he or she should avoid such coincidences.

He suspects that surrealist art doesn't have much to do with the visual representations per se but involves playing with links between vision and semantics. It involves the whimsical, playful aspect of art that juxtaposes congruous and incongruous elements that engage other aspects of our aesthetic experience.

Dr. Ramachandran does not address laws #8 and #9 in either of the papers I read. I expect we would all agree on an empirical basis that repetition, rhythm and orderliness (#8) and balance (#9) are things we find appealing, even if don't know the neurological background of those feelings. Ana Hodgkin wrote that she liked the composition and colors of an old newspaper photograph that she represented in her painting. In my opinion this work shows elements of these laws which is what draws our attention.

Law #10 deals with Metaphor, perhaps the most important and the most elusive, according to Dr. Ramachandran. He says a metaphor is a mental tunnel between two concepts that appear grossly dissimilar on the surface. When Shakespeare says, "Juliet is the sun," he is appealing to the fact that they are both warm and nurturing. So why should grasping an analogy of this kind be so rewarding to us? There are many paintings that instantly evoke an emotional response long before the metaphor is made explicit by the art critic. He suggests that the discovery of similarities can lead to a limbic activation, limbic having to do with areas of the brain concerned with emotions and drives. It is a basic mechanism that we tap into, whether with puns, poetry or visual art. George Hines's piece definitely goes for the pun which adds a whole new dimension for me.

In conclusion Dr. Ramachandran proposes that a lot of what we call art is based on these 10 principles. We recognize, of course, that much of art is idiosyncratic, ineffable and defies analysis but would argue that whatever of art can be expressed as a law, however small, emerges either from exploiting these principles or for a playful deliberate violation of them. I want to conclude the way the doctor concluded his presentation on the BBC with the following joke – A young man brings his fiancée home to introduce her to his father. His father is astonished to note that she has a clubfoot, a squint, a cleft palate and is hunchbacked and can hardly conceal his dismay. Noticing his father's reaction, his son calmly tells him, "Well Dad, what can I say? You either like Picasso or you don't."

