

INTERVIEW OF AN ARTIST/ENGINEER

Karen Hoyt

After listening to Janice's report last week on the influence of artists' environments on their work, I became interested in what aspects of the artists' surroundings were most vital to their work. I chose to interview a friend who works as an electrical engineer and sees himself as a "closet artist" with a love for watercolors.

I asked Jerry to think back over his work and try to isolate the circumstances that enabled him to create what he considered a successful painting. My line of questions was:

Which elements of your working environment seem to help your frame of mind?

Is there a procedure you feel you must go through before, during, or after a painting session?

What means, if any, do you use to consciously get yourself into the appropriate mood to work?

Have you noticed any common denominators linking unsuccessful work?

Do you use auditory or visual material for stimulation?

Do you perform better when relaxed or when under pressure?

Do the clothes you wear make a difference?

How about your body position. . . Do you sit or stand?

Does it matter if you are alone or not?

After a discussion of how nice it is to have an efficient studio with plenty of space, good lighting, relaxing music and an arsenal of supplies, Jerry pointed out that he could work "in a pig sty" as long as he is enthused about his idea.

Jerry's attitude, or state of mind, seems to be the key ingredient

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in a fruitful painting session. When he has an interesting idea, he becomes absorbed in it and oblivious to his surroundings. He explained, "Nothing else really matters...I don't know if it's hot or cold, whether there's music on, or what. Sometimes I'll wake up and get hungry and I go out to the kitchen and get something to eat and come back and the mood is not broken, and I just pick up where I left off. But if I'm frustrated and the ideas aren't coming, then maybe being in a nice, conducive environment would help a lot."

The type of work Jerry finds most meaningful is done from his imagination and memory. Considering the elusive quality inherent in memories, it's easy to see why his state of mind is so vital during a painting encounter. He says, "If I'm tense, I can feel a flop coming on, and I know that's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy, because if you think you're going to have a flop, you probably will, but I think there's more to it. I think I can sense an agitation in myself that is different than being charged with energy and having a good destination in mind or having a good idea, and having this sort of nervous undirected energy. It's a subtle difference and I don't know how to explain it to anybody, but I can feel it in myself. When I have this lot of energy but it's not directed anywhere, I tend to get frustrated very quickly, and when I get frustrated, then the whole thing just goes to hell. I mean I'm better off then just going off and reading a book about art or cleaning my palette than I am painting because it's just...nothing ever seems to come of it."

As an art teacher, I'm concerned about how I can positively affect my students' feelings about their work. Jerry's statements indicate to me that a spacious, well-organized art room with plenty of light and an

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abundance of supplies is conducive as a physical environment, but that this advantage cannot guarantee success for students. I believe that an atmosphere of acceptance must surround artists or students as they work, and this climate of caring can only be generated by people. Jerry brought this thought to light during the interview by declaring, "I'm sure that a lot of people who are famous artists are individuals, but I think for me it requires support from another person or group of people. And I think the art classes I've been in, and painting with my best friends make all the difference in the world." He recalled the excitement of sharing ideas and inspirations with artist friends and summarized his feelings by saying, "If I were to design an environment, it would have to be somewhat under control, and you'd need a supportive environment before and after you're painting. I find that while I'm painting, I'm not even aware of myself...like whether I'm sitting or standing. But before and after that, I really need my friends." He mentioned how Picasso and Braque worked so closely together during their exploration of Cubism, and the local example of Grant Wood and Marvin Cone.

As human beings, we need to feel accepted, at least by our closest friends, before we are comfortable enough to express our real selves. Just as Jerry needs support from his friends, so do students need the security that teachers, peers and family members can offer.

Jerry expressed an unwillingness to allow undesirable emotions to enter into his work. He is painfully aware of the negativism that surrounds us, and responds with, "Why not paint a positive picture, a loving picture, a happy picture?" I'm sure that perpetuating a depressed state of mind through one's art is possible, but it may also be healthy

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to express "negative" emotions to come to terms with them.

When artists or students find themselves in a supportive environment, they may be more likely to accept their own real feelings, without labeling them good or bad. Emotions do surface eventually, and channeling them into one's art seems appropriate.