

Thinking about Your Thinking

I am going to venture into a topic that many of you who are beginners may not understand, and that is OK. Those of you who have been painting a while may have some familiarity with this subject, and some of you who have been painting a number of years may fully grasp what it is I am trying to convey.

Here goes.

Not too many years ago I began to realize that my better painting choices, or strokes, came from my subconscious. The subconscious impulses seemed to have a strength and integrity of judgment that I was incapable of producing consciously. The intuitive impulse seemed to be backed by years of experience, as if the mind could filter through the complexities at hand and weigh them against past painting failures and successes. Whereas, if I contemplated the moment, studied it, and logically analyzed it, it seemed as though I lost the depth of thinking that I would have had had I allowed the creative impulses to take over. It is as if my strokes were weakened by the focused analysis and the particular, and not constructive to the painting as a whole.

Some of you are saying "Aha, it's that right brain, left brain thing we've been talking about! Isn't he aware of that? Where has he been?"

Well, yes, I did read the introduction to Betty Edward's book on the subject, so I am a little familiar with it! However, I am much more familiar with it experientially. I'd like to explore this topic a little more in the practical realm of my painting experience. Understandably, your experience may be different, but I believe it is a level of thinking we all want to aspire to.

What can I compare this subconscious driven decision making process to? I think it is not unlike a professional chess match. In chess the variables are so complex, and the dynamics are so fluid from an ever changing opponent, that a free mind relaxed in order to see all the variables is essential. Nothing is static. The thinking cannot be forced here; an understanding of the entire dynamics has to be seen. Tunnel vision is not acceptable; a totality of play has to be understood. Intuition is called upon.

Or, let's take the analogy that my good friend and excellent watercolorist, Noel Thomas made: painting watercolors is like being a race car driver. Having never driven a race car, I can only imagine what it would be like. But I cannot help but think Noel is right. I would think that such a professional has to fight the temptation to see the immediate and rather focus on the whole of the situation. Otherwise the driver's life would be in danger. Correct responses on an intuitive level backed by years of experience are imperative.

So I think that the watercolorist, chess professional, and race car driver have in common the desire to reach that higher level of subconscious decision making. We are being challenged with a very fluid and dynamic set of circumstances. We live for the adrenaline rush we get when we are able to sustain that level of concentration. In essence, it is the higher plane of awareness that is such a joy to experience. We have learned to rely on the instantaneous vision, and not to second guess ourselves. We trust that the sense of emotional touch can be stronger than the sense of sight. I have learned to "feel" that the stroke is right, rather than see it. (For much of my painting, I don't tend to

look too close at where I am painting; a quick glance is good enough followed by a softening of my gaze as I take in the totality of the painting.)

So how do we get to that level of thinking? I've mentioned in previous newsletters the importance of preparing the painting process with simple value patterns and big shapes, which all lead to an emphasis on abstract design, and in turn, abstract thinking. I find it fairly easy to get started in this manner. Questions will pop into my head like "I need this stroke, why not try this, this needs to be lighter (or darker), why not try this color for fun?", or my favorite: "Let's have fun and ruin this painting (the best paintings come out of this impulse)." As long as I am thinking in this vein, the experience is delightful and I am riding on the adrenaline high.

However, the big challenge for me is to keep my mind focused on the subconscious level of thinking. It is almost as if I am saying to myself "Stay on the right side of your brain! Watch Out! You are starting to slip over to the left side! Yikes! The Danger Zone!"

Logically, I have to think about my thinking! It seems odd, but after 30 years of painting I feel most of my effort goes into controlling my thinking, rather than what is actually happening on the paper. For example, I have found recently that I will quickly lift off a stroke if it was not applied with the right thought; I don't even take the time to see if it helped the painting. The intent was wrong, so odds are it is a weak stroke. The stroke needs to go down with an attitude of "It needs this, I don't need to explain why, but it calls for it"

Detrimental thoughts are "ought to" statements such as "I ought to put this stroke here because that is what it really looks like". or "I ought to clarify this statement so that the viewer will understand it better". These are clues that my thinking has gotten off track (to the left side of the brain).

I find it easier to stay in the intuitive side of my thinking when blocking in a painting, but as I become fatigued, I am very easily unaware of my tendency to slide into the analytical side and trouble begins. For me it can happen very fast, maybe in minutes. So what do I do? I've learned the importance of disciplining myself to put down the brush after I've made several consecutive "ought to" strokes. The brain has slipped out of "hyper thinking" and needs to recharge before booting back up. Time for a nap, lunch, or a joke with one of my associates (this one really helps).

Here as we celebrate 25 years of being in business, years ago I would have thought I would be refining my technique now, but instead I seem to focus more on refining my intuitive impulses, which in turn produces some pretty nice paintings! (And because of it, I am having the ride of my life!).

So refine your technique by thinking about your thinking. Think about it!

Keep your brush wet!

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