

AN ADDRESS TO ART STUDENTS¹

Peter Breen

I once wanted to be a sign writer but that didn't go anywhere and when I wanted to do art at school my very practical father thought that art meant too much art history – so I didn't do art at school. But as all of us are artists, every day I do creative things. In my day to day job [as a radiographer], my brush is an x-ray tube, my canvas a piece of x-ray film and my subjects are the sick and sometimes winging mass of people wanting a diagnosis for their ills. Nothing comes close in black and white beauty and contrast, not even Max Dupain, to the picture of someone's bowel filled with barium and gas - a beauty to behold! X-rays are still to find their place in the galleries of the world. Trying to name the exhibition would be fun. Maybe "Black and White impressions of a partly filled colon"!

When I say "graffiti," what springs to mind? Invariably when I ask the average group this question there are one or two whose blood pressure rises to dangerous levels and a few dear souls who suddenly get Tourette's syndrome! I am part of an exciting arts space in Fortitude Valley called *Jugglers*, which incorporates a huge graffiti or street art space, seven art studios, and two galleries, one of them being Fox Galleries owned and curated by Michael Fox.² This place has been going for less than two years and it has all been funded by a few friends who are mad enough to want to experiment with new ideas and concepts in art and visual art. Part of that organic growing place and space is *graffic* – a pilot mentoring program which aims to mentor a select group of street artists towards positive employment and positive life outcomes, involving the artists in the studios as part of the mentoring program.

One of the last lines of Simon and Garfunkel's haunting song *The Sounds of Silence* is "The words of the prophets are written on

¹ This paper originated as an address to graduating art students at North Brisbane Institute of TAFE on 2 December 2004 in formally declaring open an exhibition of the students' work.

² <http://www.cafejugglers.com/>

the subway walls.”³ What is art, what is visual art, if at some point it is not prophetic, if it does not disturb us, if it does not irritate us, if it does not start a riot, if like Andy Warhol it does not lead us to challenge mores, stereotypes and comfort? But the sounds and sights of clean and clinical predictable conservatism are everywhere, screaming loudly for our acquiescence, and artists are most vulnerable to falling into marketing rather than creativity.

I had lunch with Archibald Prize winner Cherry Hood last year in Sydney and talked with her about being an artist and being great with a pencil. She told me, “Art is more than copying, design and illustration. I was good at drawing but I did not really become an artist until I began doing my Masters 15 years after my primary degree, then I realized what art was, what creativity was. I estimate that half the great artists are not great at drawing and drafting. Art is in the heart, a way of seeing.” Of course I am not despising skill and technique. As conservative art critic Giles Auty has said in *The Weekend Australian*, the missing skill that young artists are not taught is a fine drafting skill. But along with skill and technique must be the fire of creativity lit in the heart, catching the spark of the spirit of the creative.

At *Jugglers* we have a four-pronged focus – creativity expressed in the visual arts and music, a growing community, projects that address social justice issues, and spirituality. We are convinced that life and art talk to each other, that neither the spiritual element nor social justice, nor community can be separated from life or from art. Even though the creative act – particularly for painters and sculptors - is done in private, the value of community for feedback, critique, support, and affirmation, is indispensable to growth.

But let’s get back to that prophetic voice, the voice for and from the hurting and the marginalized: That voice and the prophetic voice for them in our society, the reflection of the pain and the cry of the marginalized, is best seen not in legislation or words but in film, in the play house, in graffiti, in painting, in sculpture. Who hasn’t been moved by *Fight Club* or *American Beauty* or Glenn Morgan’s *Banjo’s Funeral*? How can anyone truly paint or sculpt and be separated from their own emotions, much less what they feel about the world? Beautiful pictures and bowls have their place to create beauty and peacefulness and a sense of restfulness and are essential as part of the disciplinary process of learning, but don’t be satisfied with drawing, copying and producing marketable pieces. Stretch

³ Paul Simon, 1964.

yourself within your chosen medium to speak of your own deep self and to learn to see below the underbelly of our culture.

Andy Warhol and his Factory – to which someone likened *Jugglers* just this week - was hardly known for his work with the marginalized or for his spirituality. But Warhol attended Mass several times a week and served dinner in the soup kitchen at the Church of The Heavenly Rest on all major holidays. He created the largest series of religious art by an American artist and at his funeral at St Patrick's Cathedral in 1987 art Historian John Richardson said: "Hidden from all but his closest friends was his spiritual side...and despite the fact that many knew him in circumstances that were the antithesis of spiritual, that side existed in Andy and was the key to the artist's psyche."⁴ Explore and grow your art in community, through spirituality and with some kind of exposure to issues of social justice, poverty and war. If it doesn't make you a millionaire it will give you a following and make you influential!

Brisbane is an exciting place to be an artist at the moment but it wasn't always like this, particularly in the Bjelke-Petersen days. You don't know how lucky you are! Talk about the words of the prophets being written on the subway walls! The arts were largely underground in the 70's and 80's! But Brisbane is now on the art map thanks to people like [former Brisbane Lord Mayor] Jim Soorley and [Brisbane City Councilor] David Hinchcliffe. In June last year that indispensable South Australian art magazine *Art Link* themed Brisbane under the title *Critical Mass: the New Brisbane*. In the editorial Ian Hamilton wrote: "Art schools have developed innovative courses and arts education for young people is being taken seriously. These efforts are refreshing attempts to inculcate an appetite for contemporary art among young people and to involve them in the public life of the city."⁵

Whatever you do, never stop creating, painting, sculpting, potting, drawing. Let the fire that has begun continue to excite you. Be stimulated, stop everything else, sell everything you can to paint, to sculpt to draw, and do it for the passion and for the sake of being creative not for the marketing, for if it comes from your heart with refined skill they will come from around the world to buy it.

⁴ Rose Marie Berger, "A Holy Fool: The Spiritual Vision of Andy Warhol," in *Spirit of Fire: Faith Art and Action* (Washington, DC: Sojourners, 2003).

⁵ "Critical Mass: the New Brisbane," *Artlink* vol. 23 no. 2 (June 2003), 15.