

The Vintage Voice

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Painting in Retirement

Fred Peck

About three years into retirement I decided to try painting (paintings, not the house). This was a decision fueled by boredom, unused cans of old house paints, perhaps a second glass of wine, and an impulsive moment when I looked at an abstract painting and thought, “I could do that.” Most people wisely let this kind of moment pass, but a few of us decide to act.

I had been to art museums before, or at least their gift shops, and had read about some artists, so I knew I would need 1) art materials; 2) a place to paint; 3) subject matter; and 4) talent. It would turn out that the degree of difficulty from the first to the fourth would be upward and steep.

Materials were easy. I had the house paint and a few paint brushes. I remembered there were some odd-sized plywood sheets under the car in the garage (and was delighted to find they revealed beginnings of abstract art due to oil and other fluid leaks). What I did not have was money to spend, so it was clear from the outset that I would use found materials and recycled supplies. I learned from the can that house paints are acrylics, so I would be an acrylic painter. I knew I had to avoid outrageous framing and matting costs. In other words I would need to work in the genre known as outlaw or outsider art. I had already made a few excursions to my local Home Depot and knew where their dumpster was, so I felt confident.

Where to paint? I live in the Pacific Northwest where it rains all the time, except when it sleets. That meant I would need to be indoors or at least under cover. I am married, so I wanted to avoid any location that my wife considered hers exclusively. That left the garage. With five days of careful rearranging, I was able to carve out a small space. This would hereafter be known as a studio. Some stacked boxes made an easel, and I was ready to paint.

But what to paint? It is amazing that with a world of landscapes, seascapes, heavens above, and people below, it can be art-stoppingly difficult to decide on something to paint. This probably has something to do with commitment avoidance. Fortunately I had read about a neurological condition known as face blindness, where otherwise normal people could not remember faces, even of loved ones — or in the case of some of us, parishioners. I learned that portrait artist

Chuck Close has face blindness. He takes photographs of faces and then maps them out, doing with graph paper what most people can do with their brains. I like Chuck Close, so it was settled; faces it would be.

Then I heard about a local art program which was requesting works for a juried show that would feature self-reflection in different art forms. I realized this would give me the chance to paint what should be a familiar face: mine. (I would later learn you should never start by painting faces, and you should never begin by submitting to juried shows. Fortunately, the jurors received exactly the number of submissions that they had openings.)

With a show in mind, I began and finished my first painting the same day. It was wonderfully easy. Brush strokes were broad and easy, probably because I was using a three-inch brush. I felt loose and comfortable, like when I interviewed for a job I knew I would never get. Paint flew everywhere. It was fun.

Then I started a second painting. It was a little less fun and a shade more serious. I realized almost immediately I had begun to ask the question from which there is no escape: Is this good? Self-reflection had opened the door to self-criticism. Inevitably the question of talent.

I had a friend who was a renowned physician and scientist and teacher. He had started out wanting to be an architect. I asked him what happened and he said, “No talent.” Visual expression invites almost immediate evaluation in ways other kinds of expression don’t. Okay, except maybe for sermons. Paintings just hang there waiting to be judged: “Look Harriet, I like this one!” Or more likely, “What’s this supposed to be?”

It was the neighbor across the street who set me free. He is a professional artist, formally trained, and reportedly successful. He came over and looked and said, “You have a style, which is a good thing. If you were younger you might get training, but then you would have to work years to get your style back. You’re old. You can just keep working into your style and not let anyone distract you.”

Indeed. So we can, and so some of us do.



Fred Peck retired in 2007. He lives in Vancouver, Washington and can be reached at jehoseph@hotmail.com.