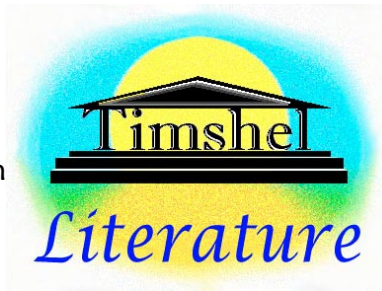


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Just Thinking, 07/07/03:

Close to the Canvas

by Justin Katz

There's something captivating about those television spots of Bob Ross painting his "happy" scenes. The channel remains unchanged as a brush passes by the screen and a bush appears. Blurs in a lake prove themselves to be reflections of the painted mountains beyond. The viewer can watch as a smear that looks to ruin the painting transforms into an important detail.

In Ross's case, it is the act of painting — the performance — that holds one watching a mental image pour out onto canvas. However, as a word and music man, I've always been fascinated by visual arts. Viewable creations give the impression (at least) of a direct conveyance of the vision in the artist's mind to the mind of a viewer. Moreover, visual arts are tangible — involving physical objects, not only with a look, but also a feel, a smell, a sense. The written word must envelop the underlying concept within the comprehensible structures and conventions of language (even if that involves breaking those structures and conventions). Music must be translated to instruments and then be further filtered through performance.

Of course, there are both literary and musical works that explode onto paper, as if they've written or composed themselves, and those are often audience favorites. Nonetheless, the masterpieces of each medium, which capture their unique strengths, tend not to be extemporaneous, although the construction is sufficiently smoothed to seem inevitable and, thus,

relatively effortless. But — even if they are the result of hours of tweaking and several attempts — paintings, drawings, and sculptures often gain the thoughtful brilliance of composition while maintaining the freshness and immediacy of performance.

This relates to what I dislike about too-abstract visual art: it seems contrived, and contrivance is not the unique strength of the medium. An artist whose “vision” consists of a red dot on an empty canvas might instill the belief that, similarly, his head is mostly empty. The path down which modern art has traversed has descended into murky depths of such self-mockery that outsiders inclined to make fun of it risk either having to give up or being seduced into seeing their own parodies as art.

The soul of visual art is in jeopardy along another path, as well, one that holds out a promise of reclaiming some of the squandered prerogative of aesthetics. Technology has brought an ease and perpetual novelty to creation and dissemination that holds potential to revive all forms of art. These very advantages, however, are like a too-striking color on a painter’s palette. Unrestrained by an underlying concept, novelty can be a more corrosive attribute than abstraction, particularly as ease enables dabblers to sap its meaning through repetition.

The ease of technology also affects the palpable life of visual art in a way to which other art forms are not susceptible. Since the invention of paper, writers have been able to scratch out their words on the way to completion without the stray marks’ having any effect on the final work. The same is true of the composition end of music. In contrast, the composition of visual art is intrinsically linked to performance, and the “scratching out” of flaws is not so easily accomplished.

The advent of “Undo” is more profound for visual art than for other media. Indeed, taking the word “media” in a more specific sense, it is obvious that the tools of visual art have been inseparable from the craft, defining the approach and dictating the sense. In literature

impressionism and realism are built using the same linguistic symbols. In painting, watercolors and oils tell different stories.

I devoted much of this extended weekend to learning some new graphic design programs on the computer – specifically, Web design programs. While marveling at the innovation and general niftiness, I couldn't shake the feeling that something had been lost in order to pave the route between creator and audience. That something is the feel and the interaction between ideas and tangible reality. When Bob Ross dabs his brush in a certain way, the bristles touch the canvas and bend so as to create an effect. The fascination of the television viewer is in response to the ability to manage the subtle feat more than to the innocuous content that it serves.

In short, the art evolved around its tools and was thus connected to Life. Physical reality is the larger medium; the imperfections are inseparable from “the point.” Watered-down paint bleeds into cloth because that is how water and cloth behave. To admit religion, God created the processes and materials in such a way as to tend toward that effect. A sculptor capitalizes on the properties of clay; a photographer relies on a certain chemical or physical manipulation to yield an expected result. Yet, sometimes the unpredictable occurrences capture an idea more effectively than could be done with careful control. The symbolism of the creation relates to the symbolism of Creation.

On a computer, a programmer defined how a certain combination of input would render. Medium may not be message, but it grounds ideas in reality. To the extent that people can communicate without touching toe to firmament, they run the risk of losing themselves. The smear on the canvas has no context; the humanity of the painter is untraceable (the streams not provably “tranquil” nor the birds “peaceful”). And with a poorly timed power outage, the work can be lost forever in the blink of a surreal eye.