

OUTTAKES

The art of art -- here are a few things I have learned about painting and paintings.
— frames do make a difference. Even a modest metal frame (the kind I use) makes an important element of a painting. A border? Or is it a boundary, a slice out of another universe.

— I've experimented with paintings that were not rectangles. Very strange, but it can be done. But only if you produce a painting without any frame, pushed a little forward off the wall.

— I learned from 'professional' artists, who usually quoted Michelangelo, "never make a square painting, there is a magic formula. That is true, a painting with the size according to formula, is indeed pleasant, soothing, solid. Of course I experimented. Yes, one can make paintings that are taller or wider than the formula dictates. The 'off-ideal' creates a tension, an emphasis. Taller than ideal makes a painting spiritual, wider than idea suggests great size, horizons.

The same formula, incidentally, also applies within a painting. A horizon is at the ideal location a little more than a third from the bottom. Lower emphasizes the sky, higher is threatening. Splitting a painting in half, vertically, is very tricky. It is definitely threatening to the seer; if the two halves have almost-but-not-quite contrasting colors increases the threat.

Triage — today found on a web site one of those “slide show” pictures. The usual warning. Yes, some of the pictures were gruesome, wounds, blood. One showed only the face, lying on his stomach, his head turned, eyes closed. He looked maybe 12, 13 but I've never been good at guessing age. Even in sleep, or probably drugged, the face looked pained. Below the head were blankets that stopped where his hips were. Under the rubble, legs crushed, medical miracle: amputate both legs well above the knee but the boy lives. I thought beyond the crushed legs. What kind of life can that boy have in a country like Haiti? Here, we could figure out more sophisticated medical miracles that might give him artificial legs he could walk on; maybe; at truly enormous cost.

But modern medicine cannot think beyond fixing. Sorry kid, it was the only thing we could do to save your life. What life? Makes me shiver.

Our irreverent life style is one of the original reasons for Islam's resistance to our attempts to put the whole world in our basket.

... We are destroying the earth, changing the earth so severely that we are changing the climate. The waters of the world ocean are expected to rise three, some scientists say sixty feet. Most of the greatest cities are bordering an ocean. And over half of the world's people now live in cities. Plants and trees are already moving north (in the northern hemisphere); birds are changing their yearly trips. Or, something can trigger another eco-mechanism that brings another Ice Age upon us.

Are we stupid?

The answer to that must be, yes and no. With our lifestyle of always buying more things—that we call goods—and throwing away tons and tons of rubbish, meanwhile generously scattering poisons all around — take a breath —our life style has come to include a sort of blindness. We talk a lot about the future, meaning our own, and usually in terms of dollars, but we don't want to know about our collective future.

We cannot live without hope, we say, and we have inverted that, Since we cannot live without hope, and we see that tomorrow is very scary, we deny that there isn't anything we, or some scientist, cannot overcome. We cannot die.

But, yes, we can. We do, sooner or later. I know that I shall die. I think it is normal to think about that. But some seem to think we cannot think about our mortality. We may not like the idea, but death does not ask whether we like him or not.

The tree that is in my way I can cut down. I can even dig out the whole root ball, and throw it away. If there is something wrong with the acre that I own, I can fix it. Buy fertilizer, get a bulldozer, or I can always sell it.

Actually, that acre cannot be owned. It has its own destiny, we are its creation, not the other way 'round.

I think that the phenomenon of mass denial is a symptom of something that we ourselves have set in motion, and that now has so much energy that it cannot be stopped. As we deny that we are mortal, we deny that the species can die out, or certainly change. Change in ways that we cannot foresee, even less control.

In our sadly split nation we see I and other.

In a war, enemy soldiers wear uniforms, or the helmet is a different shape. What makes fighting insurgents, or terrorists, or guerrilla fighters, or the Resistance, so difficult is that those enemy soldiers do not wear a uniform, we cannot identify them before they do what it is they do.

What divides us is not uniforms, not how we look, not even what we wear. It is words. But we use those words very sloppily, we never pause to define what we mean by the word LIFE, for instance, when some people identify themselves as pro-life, others as pro-choice.

Obviously nobody alive can be against life. So, what does pro-life mean? It seems to mean accepting that modern medical technology can and therefore must prolong the signs of physical life we assume to signal being alive: breathing, and, a more modern way of measuring is the measuring of brainwaves, and an even more modern way is to interpret the kind of brain waves. Pro-life also means anti abortion, in any form. Life is sacred, but by life they mean an individual life, "because we are spiritual beings" so we should not "murder" a fetus. Sometimes I've been told pro-life also means anti contraception because that can be interpreted as a sort of murder of a possible life.

Medical technology does not define when an individual life "begins." Does it begin when one sperm enters one egg? Or when the blastula attaches to the uterus? Or, when the fetus has recognizable features (is beyond the globular

stage)? Is there any way to determine that scientifically?

No, it is a matter of definition. To me “life” is all life on this planet, which includes plants and animals and bacteria, even viruses — those intriguing somethings that sometimes are alive and sometimes not. And what I think of as life began, what is it, three billion years ago? When one cell life formed in the planet’s water (not yet oceans). And on and on. It has never stopped yet. We, each of us individually, are but tiny shreds in the tapestry of all life. Some shreds are bright, some even golden, most of us rich earth colors. The tiny pieces of string come and go, sometimes forming a dynasty, a culture. The variety of our lives, and all live forms makes the tapestry rich and strong. Variety is the life of ecology.

Pro-choice seems to mean that individuals, men and women, have a right to “own” their own bodies. They have the right to decide whether they want to get pregnant, whether they want to become a mother or a father. They have the right to determine when and how they want to die. They have a right, they say, not to rely on the very latest medical technology to keep their aging, damaged, painful body “alive” by hooking it into machines — at a cost, by the way, that runs into millions of dollars.

But, strangely, in the health industry, bastion of capitalism, the cost is never mentioned.

It must be clear to anyone by now that the two sides, pro life and pro choice, do not, and cannot, communicate, because they talk about very different things. The new Pope is expected to continue the position that all abortion is murder, that God will provide. Surely he must know that in today’s world the rich get richer (and rarely will put up with an unlimited number of offspring) and the poor get much poorer (in part because they are denied access to birth control). Keeping a woman artificially “alive” who has been in a coma for fifteen years, seems cruel beyond belief. If the brain is damaged beyond repair, what hope can there be that the woman might at some future date be aware again? I cannot even guess at the cost of the machines.

Marx invented classes, and the class struggle; some say refinement of the ancient distinction between the haves and the have-nots. A few aristocrats, plutocrats, industrialists, capitalists, captains of industry, CEOs, emperors, kings and queens, dictators all — and the masses exploited, stepped on, servants, slaves. The world as it was for many centuries.

Marx's theory stated that the workers should own what they made. "Should" is always a suspicious word. And we know what we, humans, do with words. The State owned everything made for a bleak society that eventually collapsed of its emptiness. The new China with State Capitalism, strange mixture of opposites.

There have been times when, and places where underdogs growled and shook off their yokes, at least for a time. But, since we think of ourselves as helpless idiots, we have come to think that we must have leaders. Someone has to be the leader of the downtrodden.

The Founders of this nation had some very simple, ordinary words to explain fairly simple and ordinary ideas: freedom, happiness. So simple, unfortunately, that we have been interpreting them ever since.

Like the Ten Commandments. Thou Shat Not Kill. So simple that we ignore it. For 2500 years we have nodded knowingly and passed over to more interesting concepts. Like how to make friends and influence people. Hint: not with armed soldiers. But that too is too simple to accept.

Before Marx, the French Revolution, a new idea was born, a concept we now call "democracy." The masses in charge, and actually choosing among themselves people to give guidance, to lead them. The bourgeoisie was born, what we call the Middle Class—or Classes, plural, because we have an infinite range of levels between poor and rich.

What we see now is the rich and super-rich climbing on the backs of the middle classes. The end of an experiment. But not before the middle classes, with their profligate ways have destroyed the earth, eradicated thousands of species of plants and animals — probably by now millions. Global Warming,

Climate Change. The awakening to ecological thinking, Yawn. A president said the best we could do now that our country is in deep shit is "go shopping."

Global Warming with snow and ice on the ground; don't let me laugh.

Sorry, ecology too is too simple a concept to be taken seriously.

--and, what is our civilization except us. Our whole society, our culture, has grown around the idea that we, humans, are special, that we are so smart that we can take over

the management of the planet. After all, we own the planet. We think. The farther away we put ourselves from our heart, our innermost who-we-are, the greater the abyss.

Oh, people cross the abyss all the time. Often when some force knocks us on the head: either physically or metaphorically. When we wake up, we look around and have this strange disorientation: where am I, *who am I?*

You may have read, or heard, some of the returning soldiers who talked about what it is to come back after Iraq. One of them spoke to what looked like another soldier. He kept shaking his head, and saying . *This is not me, I am not a killer, I don't kill, that's not me.* No, you're right. This isn't you. Of course, you are not a killer. Man is not a predator.

Those of us who think we are, cannot get out of the illusion we live in. Under the banner of "Security" the cables of the net that holds us have been tightened. It is harder perhaps to cross the abyss, but never impossible.

This ever stranger world we created makes us strangers to our deepest selves.

A friend wrote recently, using the word "holocaust" to mean what it used to mean, namely "extreme disaster, destruction, usually by fire." Now the word has become to mean the eradication of Jews, during world war two.

As the word "gay" has come to mean homosexual, rather than joyful, jolly. Words like "democracy," "freedom," are used by politicians to make people feel good; they do not stand for anything tangible any more.

The word "God," has become so used, and used up, that it hardly means anything at all any more, except something grand, big, up there. To some, God is the creator of the universe, to others He is the universe, to yet others he is the divinity, specialness found in all Life. To many the word is an expletive only.

We call this the Age of Information, and while it is true that all information is available to all, all the time, the amount of information is so overwhelming that it cannot be grasped by human minds. No, I should rephrase that. The information so freely available for the most part does not inform, but is meant, designed, to advertise a point of view. Much of what we call

information is propaganda. The consequence is that most of us have created a private censor in our brains (if that is where we consume information?) that accepts only information that fits into our existing point of view. Anything that does not fit, is rejected. As the expression goes, we can now only "preach to the choir" —we speak (communicate) only to those who believe, think as we do. Some I know think that every word means whatever you want it to mean. That really is the end of meaning!

In truth, this is the time of The Tower of Babel (which is Babylon, a small town a few miles south of Baghdad).

We find ourselves on a planet where one species has elbowed its way on top of the food chain, thinking itself in charge, in control of the ecology of the planet. Probably 98% of the individuals of this species exist as servants, even slaves, of those who are the movers and shakers of a worldwide civilization. It is difficult to guess how many people are in charge, but almost certainly only a small percent of 6,900,000,000 people. However many of these top people there are, they have learned to keep their servants in bond by the use of words. These words often mean something entirely different than what they suggest. Words like "liberty," "separation of Church and State," "equal rights." Guess they really do mean whatever you want them to mean for the moment, depending on who says them, in what tone of voice...

One of the new words that is bandied about freely is the word "sustainable." Since a few people now know that we, humans, cannot continue on the path we are on, we have to change before it is too late. A sustainable world.

On the one hand this is a healthy change from the words used to describe the existing world civilization, "progress." Progress means ever better, bigger, every more wealth, more things, gadgets and thus more garbage. Sustainable at least suggests a more modest aim, namely maintaining a way of life we have become accustomed to.

The sustainable world people have theories and plans that have in common a much tighter control (by humans of course) of the world's ecosystem. The existing culture has largely ignored the ecosystem in favor of raping the environment of its resources (another favorite word), without a thought for consequences. Now we must plan, manage very carefully, strictly maintaining the resources of the planet.

Even a few hundred years ago the planet's ecosystem managed itself. Of course, that is

what ecosystems do. One of the most important aspects of any ecosystem is its variety. It has been well documented that the more varied an ecosystem is, the more stable it is. We humans, on the other hand, have not known (and not wanted to know) about ecosystems. We insist on simplifying the planet. We make thousand acre farms that grow one product — is it any wonder that whatever pests love that product will multiply in that thousand acres? In order to maintain our monoculture, we must invent and apply ever stronger pesticides. And since every product species uses some of the earth's chemicals, a thousand acres of one product will leach out much of those specific chemicals from the thousand acres— requiring ever more artificial fertilizers to return those chemicals to the soil.

Natural ecosystems do exactly the opposite. A rainforest often exists on soil that we, humans, think poor, because what one species takes out of the soil another puts back in. Many species live on other species, and are not dependent on the soil at all. Other species get what they need from the air, from rain, from the sun. Redwoods get water from the morning mist. A rainforest is immensely complex, immensely varied, and depends not on soil alone but on the interaction of soil and amount of sunlight and air and water. Sustainable means (or certainly implies) that the sustainability is for our human benefit. That means we exclude species we consider pests or weeds, we exclude "unwanted" animals.

To me, sustainable is simply the latest form of human hubris, thinking we can control the planet better than our forefathers did who plundered it, but have learned scientific ways to control.

Why this need to control? Are we so convinced that we are the highest, the most important, the most special species that exists? Many people cannot even imagine that there might be Life outside of this planet. What unthinkable conceit!

People, this is no flat earth, the sun does not circle around us, the universe does not circle around our solar system — we are virtually invisible specks of nothing at the edge of a galaxy which is part of a universe of a million galaxies. I bet "life" exists all through the universe, in some form or other. Who knows what combination of chemicals could reproduce itself, and probably some of it eventually develops intelligence, even awareness of being aware.

Is it unthinkable that the immensely complex chaos that is this planet is "aware?" And we are fleas in its pelt.

Or, as someone I knew a long long time ago, Ian McHarg, landscape architect/ecologist, said: *Man is a planetary disease.*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_McHarg

outtakes from the last seven years, somewhat edited january 2010