

Drawing with a Naturalist Impulse (2016)

"I do not just observe the mountain nor lay siege to it. I do not aim to climb it to the summit nor conquer its every peak. I draw the mountain to experience the intimacy of its presence in real time among real people and where I live. I am the mountain of my inner life whose summit belongs to another."

Drawing with a naturalist impulse in the 21st century beyond postmodernism is not a new movement or style. It is a revival of an impulse of honesty and integrity in art that was sidetracked or railroaded by the impressionist and abstract movements in the nineteenth century. The impressionist and abstracts movement eventually devolved into subjectivism and a mannerist form of criticism subsuming the craftsmanship of fine art to postmodern tendencies towards abstract expressionism, symbolism, minimalism, and fantasy art.

According to art historian Gabriel Weisberg, the naturalist impulse is "a literal transcription of contemporary society with images that mirror daily life crafted *en plein air*"¹ to reconstruct reality in a representational manner and a spontaneous response to Nature itself.² In Weisberg's comprehensive account of the historical position of naturalism in art, he emphasizes the anecdotal, even poetic, context of themes such as drawing with sunlight and a naturalist aesthetic that uses photography as referential models not to be imitated but to inspire a faithful transcription of human endeavors in real time amongst real people. It is a faithful transcription of nature composed and transformed by the artist's temperament and worldview with an awareness of innovations such a technology and industrialization that have affected every human life. Therefore the naturalist impulse is neither photo-realism, hyper-realism, nor idealism, but a commitment to detailed observation as incumbent upon the artist to express with great skill and technique. The artist's intent is to give voice to a wisdom that interprets life as real and ascending above the idealism of classical romanticism and modernist traditions.³

The naturalist impulse is not only a faithful transcription of contemporary society, but also an art form that expresses innovation and experimentation in context of clarity of meaning reflecting a personal experience of transformation that resists the impulses to excessively interpret the signs of the times and the institutionalization of dogma and doctrine including art criticism and a didactic worldview. Instead, the artist constructs his drawings from many sources and carefully combines these visual elements of contemporary life in an expression of reality that is a lived-experience and not mere copyist or interpretive. I see a mountain before me and I draw her many faces as Nature reveals herself in light, shadow, line, and form. The drawings are not landscapes or a still-life in studio settings. Nor are they social commentary, political activism, religious fundamentalism, or abstract notions. They are the mountains I see before me and my desire to understand the experience of climbing those mountains. Life embodies many mountains. Mountains embody choice. I choose to climb the mountains and live among their impressions upon my life. Therefore, as I see I draw.

¹ Gabriel P. Weisberg. *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse.* NY: Harry A. Abrams, 1992. p.8

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p.13

Inherent in the process is a strong tie to academic traditions of skill and craftsmanship, essential to the viewer's appreciation of my voice, uncluttered by innuendo, incoherent abstractions, and a plethora of diversions from what are pretentious attempts at drawing (and painting) on a blank canvas with a blank mind and no skill.

It has taken me over fifty years of experimentation in all art forms to come to the conclusion that the natural impulse is the closest to my artist's heart as a means to communicate the lived-experience as being worthy of investigation by means of connoisseurship as appreciation and rightful criticism of my creative journey of art, critical thought, and spirituality. In other words says Weisberg, "naturalism is the pitiless leveler of modern art,"⁴ as it constructs real images in real time and about real people. The naturalist impulse aims towards a deeper social awareness of life as it is, and not as pundits would posit otherwise through persuasion, perception, and even deception.

Life as it is embodies a specific mountain not far from where I live. The eastern face of Mt.Arrowsmith looms large and inviting on the horizon every time I take the ferry from my island community to the city of Nanaimo. From deep snows during the winter and barren rock as summer bakes her flanks, I am drawn to the mountain. I have skirted her edges and even managed to drive halfway to the top on gritty gravel logging roads. I've been stuck in the snow when a friend's four-wheel behemoth failed. A nearby logging crew freed us as the sun began to set over the dark forest around us. But, the mountain has never taunted me or ridiculed my fantasies to climb to her summit.

Instead, Mt.Arrowsmith revealed something deeper than the majesty of a landscape that stretches along the Forbidden Plateau along the eastern side of Vancouver Island. The mountain revealed a more intimate experience of mystery. The impossibility of painting a colourful landscape on a canvas fifty kilometers wide and ten high, aggravated by vain attempts to capture the mountain's majesty on conventionally-sized pieces of paper or canvas, or even to project a photographic image on a wide screen, has left me with no other choice than to experience Mt. Arrowsmith's majesty by simply being there from nearby or afar.

But, her mystery is up-close inside small graphite drawings that say *come to the mountain* and experience the quest for meaning not as grandeur but as intimacy.

Living in the light and shadows of a mountain

The journey from majesty to mystery follows my natural impulse to draw with a spiritual awareness expressed in an imagist style of writing epic poetry and drawn upon paper as a visualization of questing. My environment is constructed as a backdrop against which it is possible to see the long-distance odyssey of my epic's character Cerulean, who is I. The impulse is affected by my interaction between the natural and the spiritual of life among real people in real time, of whom I am one.

Naturalist impulses are an antithesis to modernist and postmodernists who are only interested in subjective moods, personal states of mind and soul, hopeless abstractions, and a minimalism with no regard or skill in craftsmanship. Naturalist impulses immerse the artist in the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness. These

⁴ Ibid.

impulses risk becoming contaminated by the eccentricities of performance modes, rather than embrace the incubating transformation of anticipatory modes of discovery.

Drawing with a naturalist impulse is also a leveler in contemporary academy traditions of realism, photo-realism and hyper-realism, where the techniques employed are aimed at exact and exaggerated reproduction of photographic images. Success is measured in a response of “looks just like a photograph.” These techniques are favourites among those drawing with graphite and colour pencils. However, in my naturalist impulse the experience is one of wonder and awe as my pencils travel over contours of many slopes and summits of mountains with visible pencil lines like form lines and hatching that travels across the contours of human form. In a number of my drawings of Mt. Arrowsmith, for example, techniques such as *stumping* and *tissue-blending*, as well as *colourless* and white pencil-blending, are evident. They are, however, drawn over with a new layer of lines in like manner as when the original drawing began. Photographs serve as a proportional guide or lighting reference, but the drawing is primarily my response to being *on the mountain* based on my experiences of Nature (including Mt. Arrowsmith) and *en plein air* drawing on the Pacific northwest coast of British Columbia since 1993. The naturalist impulse draws me to return to the mountains and forests and not be satisfied until I have appreciated all their forms with connoisseurship of Nature’s majesty and the skill of the artist, as well as criticism as the aggregate of both knowing the majesty artistic expression and knowing the mountain that keeps calling me back to the experience of creative freedom and spirituality.

Unintended Consequence: a paradigm shift

Yet, drawing with a naturalist impulse had an unintended consequence, a very satisfying one at that. After a period of many decades, I came to the conclusion that I was not a painter. Even though, I had painted many canvasses, most of which were abstract and some were representational, I had resigned to the fact that some were good but most were mediocre.

Then in February 2020, fifty-two years after I graduated from art college, I had an epiphany: never too late. My inability to pursue a path of serious painting was not a shortcoming or a failure to reach the pinnacle of artistic practices among which I also counted sculpture. Regret about unfulfilled ambitions turned into an unmistakable joy that such unrealized ambitions had become my salvation.

The epiphany compelled me to reexamine my creative journey in light of that which I had always been most passionate about – drawing: specifically drawing with a naturalist impulse. Without a clearly defined will to pursue only drawing and without my knowledge of where the current would take me or where I would end up going against the current, it was curiosity that resulted in a paradigm shift in 1993, towards the finer art of silverpoint drawing. I was introduced to silverpoint by Canadian drawing master John Gould (1929-2010)⁵ and inspired by the metalpoint drawings of Michelangelo, da Vinci, and Dürer.

My drawings before 1993 had been completed in conventional media including conté pencil, conté stick, black carbon pencil, and graphite, with additional excursions

⁵ Gerrit Verstraete. “John Gould: Just me and the Paper.” (Authorized biography). Seattle, WA. KDP Publishers. 2018/2020

into the domain of colour pencils, ink, and watercolour. However, in such media, hundreds of thousands of artists were making their mark. Yet, I was not driven to outdo them all. I was content to follow in the footsteps of masters with the hope that one day I would create footsteps of my own. This contentment did, however, give birth to the online *Canadian Academy of Drawing*, which became a fulfilling practice of mentoring artists around the world. Whether I emulated the success of others (I mean creative success as a mastery of draughtsmanship in line and form and not success of acclaim, fame, and notoriety or financial gain) or I reached beyond to develop my own style, I had my share of doubts that even though my work was an outcome of excellence described as technically fluid, anatomically correct, prolific in output, or just charming and nice, no gallery was beating a path to my studio. I was well aware of this illusion because galleries did not beat a path to most artists' studios. This of course I discovered was the reality of the entire art world, which is not an aesthetic reality but a political one, that is, the politics of pride and prejudice fueled by investment practices among collectors. All public and private galleries including Canada's national edifice of art, have turned a deaf ear to this most demanding yet exotic of art forms. Why? Politics aka money!

Yet, this was my extraordinary fortune, because very few artists had embraced the art of silverpoint. Perhaps no more than a hundred worldwide, most of whom were in the United States, and after due research, I am still the only one in Canada who has embraced silverpoint and taken it beyond the act of drawing into areas of discovery such as taking into account the oxidation properties of gold, silver, brass, and copper.

This may sound partisan and judgmental, perhaps even incredible, but I have followed due diligence as an advocate of metalpoint drawing with efforts that have been acknowledged by such institutions as the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, and the British Museum in London.⁶

Therefore there were no other artists, at least not in Canada, with whom to compare my efforts in silverpoint, even though I have been able to maintain some social media contact.

Silverpoint drawing, properly speaking, is not just doing things on paper with pencil and turning it into a drawing, akin to mere technique. Silverpoint drawing is *conceiving* things on paper coated with rabbit-skin glue and calcified bones (the original coating dating back to the Renaissance, replaced by Gesso and other calcium carbonate substances – I have used all). *Conception* is the act of drawing with pure silver metal that gives birth to a drawing never to be duplicated and only possible because of the birthing of line and form in reaction to calcium carbonate substances.

Without knowing it, yet loving the experience as a phenomenon of inspiration with wonder and delight, I extended my *drawing with a natural impulse* into a small revolution. That makes me a revolutionary. Needless to say, I do not look or act like a revolutionary, and some might even laugh at the idea of it. Perhaps no one will join the revolution, but I know in my creative self that the paradigm shift has taxed my imagination for the better. And there is no better time than now to experience a

⁶ Hugo Chapman, Stacey Sell. *"Drawing in Silver and Gold: Leonardo to Jasper Johns."* National Gallery of Art, Washington: The British Museum, London. Princeton University Press and Oxford. Princeton, NJ.2015. p. 234.

prophetic imagination, especially in a world where uncertainty is rampant and hope is fading rapidly into oblivion beyond redemption.

"Drawing with a Naturalist Impulse" (2016) by Gerrit Verstraete
(September 5, 2016: Last updated Feb. 26,, 2017)