

INTUITIVE PAINTING AS A JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN

by Chris Zydel, MA

"We're lost but we're making good time." Yogi Berra

As I walk through my painting studio on any given day I am sure to hear at least one plaintive cry of " I hate this painting because it doesn't make any sense!" or " I can't believe that I've spent so much time working on this absolutely meaningless painting!!" There is an assumption when people first begin an intuitive painting practice that understanding what is happening in their painting is an important part of the process. They think that the healing that is intrinsic to engaging with their creativity can only happen if they are painting something that is clearly meaningful.

It is common and natural to want to know what something means as it shows up on the paper. We are so much happier when we can figure things out, when the path ahead is clearly marked, and when we can feel like we are moving towards some well defined goal. When we begin to paint we bring this same desire for clarity into our painting process.

In our day to day lives we like to think that we know what is going on but in actual fact we live steeped in a world of mystery. All of the most important questions in life we have no answers to. Where do we come from? Who are we really? Why are we here? What happens after we die? Why do we suffer? How can we ,with great enthusiasm, make the same mistakes, over and over again?

We often cringe in the face of these unanswerable questions, and so we decide that we will only ask questions that we can answer and we will only paint things that we already understand. As we move through the seasons of our lives sometimes bad things happen. And sometimes we face difficulties that seem like more than we can bear. And sometimes we are blessed, for no apparent reason, with love and good fortune , and all we can do is stand there, open mouthed in amazement. The real truth of it is

that we are not in control of our lives much more that we ever want to admit.

The need to make sense of things and to have definition and assuredness is a function of the ego and the mind. This is the realm of the day world, the land of lucidity and light. This is the place that is ruled by plans and goals, reason and productivity. This is the world in which we have the illusion that we are in control.

The heart and soul are more at home in the uncharted realm of the night and the intuitive painting process is an invitation into the night world. This is the world of the dreamtime, the realm of what is hidden and unknown. It is the secret and invisible land of pure energy that lies behind our daily mundane experience and the shadowy and often perplexing domain of the unconscious. The night world is by definition confusing because we literally cannot see. And to navigate well in the realm of the night we need to be willing to give up our need to explain everything in terms of what is reasonable or rational.

The intuitive painting process is a practice of surrender to the energy of creativity, much like a shamanic practice. There is a transformative power in the act of painting when you can allow yourself to open to the painting itself as a living thing. We are afraid to drop down into that realm of unadulterated energy because it doesn't always make logical, rational sense. It doesn't make sense that standing in front of a piece of paper and simply engaging with images, forms and colors can make any difference in your life at all. But this process will change you. It will wake you up and call you towards what is sacred and mysterious and alive.

If we really allow ourselves to be led by the painting process we will be confronted with all kinds of things that we don't understand. One of my students often finds herself painting these long snouted, many eyed creatures. They keep showing up in her paintings and they are always different. They come in wild colors, different sizes, and almost always with rows and rows of teeth. The first time they appeared she was highly agitated. " What are these???" she would ask me feeling distressed." I

don't know where they are coming from or why they are here?? i've never seen anything like them yet I am completely compelled to paint them!!" Were they friendly or unfriendly? What were they doing? Where were they going? What did they want?

It gave her tremendous energy to paint them. She felt alive and on fire as they came out of her brush. The messages that she was getting from the painting were very straightforward. Paint some green teeth. Now it needs blue and purple squiggles going down it's back. Now it needs another eye. OK. Stop now. No more eyes. The painting was very clear in terms of it's instructions about what to do next. The only question that wasn't being answered was why they were there at all. Her mind was going nuts as her paint brush continued to move. Her soul and spirit were deeply engaged and completely satisfied. It was her mind that kept jumping up and down, sputtering and outraged.

When I get into conversations with my students about the importance of letting go of meaning and things making sense they often want the reassurance that if they keep going in their painting it will ultimately all come together. Right? If I just keep trusting the process I will eventually get to a place where this all becomes understandable. Well, the answer is, not necessarily. The point is not to get everything to always line up, but to learn to get comfortable with being uncomfortable about being in the dark . We long for a life where the way before us is at all times plainly visible and free of doubt, but we live in a world of light AND dark and on the road to meaning and clarity we often have to go through long patches of chaos, confusion and the feeling of being lost.

So what do we do during those times when we don't know where we are or where we are going? When we don't have any external guideposts , no clear direction and no destination? Well one thing you can do is to paint. And allow whatever wants to come into your painting just be there even if you don't quite get it. On this little piece of paper with a few colors and the crazy contents of our hearts and minds we get to practice just being with what we don't grasp and can't comprehend. A pink cat shows up in the

middle of a landscape that a moment ago was filled with darkness and despair? So be it! A cow wants to come in under a chair? Let it happen! You have an absolutely overwhelming desire to start painting green dots in every corner of the painting for no apparent reason? Why not! It's an opportunity to learn to openheartedly listen to your intuitive voice and to embrace the courage necessary to face the exhilaration and terror of the unknown in a spirit of curiosity and compassion.

If we try to stay open to what is showing up, even if it makes no sense, we discover something interesting. We discover that even when we are blind, bewildered and wandering around in circles that we are actually doing just fine. We feel so frightened when we don't understand because we think that everything is always up to us. We forget that we can trust in life and in spirit and in the great workings of the universe around us and in us. We forget that no matter what the external circumstances we are always being held in the palm of god's hand. We find that there is a place in our hearts where we can rest in the mystery, be intrigued and energized by the mystery, and be in wonderment . And we find that there is something healing in and of itself by just simply allowing ourselves to sit in the experience of not knowing in an attitude of trust and surrender.

Copyright © Chris Zydel 2007