

WOMEN, PAINTING AND POWER

by Chris Zydel, MA

I'm standing in my studio, watching ten women painting in silence with exquisite focus and concentration, and the energy is just humming. All of a sudden I hear a groan from one of the women and the words "Oh no, I hate it. It's so ugly". I smile, feeling a sense of great relief and dread.

__Relief because another woman has just blindly stumbled into her gateway to creative freedom. Dread because I know the resistance and arguments I am going to be coming up against as I try to talk her out of destroying what she deems ugly and to even to begin to take the radical step of accepting what she has created with curiosity and compassion. I have to be quick here because women are nothing if not stealthy and crafty and will waste little time in eradicating the evidence of what they consider unattractive art.

This is a class in what's known as intuitive painting or process painting. The purpose of this kind of painting is to learn to listen deeply to yourself and to then courageously express what you find , without censoring anything, in a spirit of spontaneity, surrendering to the creative process . It's very different from typical art classes where the primary focus is on developing technique and ending up with a pleasing product. This type of class uses art and painting as a way to get more in touch with the inner world of soul and psyche. The focus is exclusively on exploring and expressing that internal process.

This road is difficult for most women, because even though many of us have done some kind of self investigation and recognize the value inherent in that search, we are still fighting an uphill battle against a very strong cultural bias that teaches us to place the greatest value on what is outside of us. We are taught that feelings and an inner life are fine as far as they go, but what is truly worthwhile is how we look, what we own, who we know, and where we find ourselves on the economic and status hierarchy. __The mysterious stirrings of our soul, the needs of our hearts, the messages from our bodies, and the genius of our intuition, are

STILL, even after all of the battles for liberation that we have fought, denigrated and considered trivial, somehow not really important, not realistic or grown up. In the world of the process arts the world of emotions and dreams, imagination and feelings are staunchly defended as sacrosanct and even given center stage.

The women in my painting class know the rules of intuitive painting, one of which is that they are not to destroy anything or cover up what they have done just because they don't like it or have a negative reaction to it. They know what they are attempting here is an exercise in radical self acceptance which means embracing everything that comes out of them especially if it makes them uncomfortable because there's "gold in them thar hills" of the psyche that they can mine to great advantage if they are just willing to stay with the discomfort. But the urge to disavow the abomination of a perceived ugly painting by making it disappear can be overwhelming.

There are four words in the English language that you should never use in reference to a western 21st century woman if you don't want to get your teeth knocked out. Those four little words are ugly, fat, bitch and selfish.

Each of these four words addresses an issue of great importance for a woman, and what they all have in common is that they are keys to unlocking the door to our forbidden feminine power. And one thing you can count on is that each of these four issues will show up eventually if a woman seriously gives herself over to making her own art. Which is one reason that women often shy away from the creative process.

These words have extremely negative connotations for a woman and have been used to denigrate and control us for a very long time. The charge around them is so intense that as soon as we hear them we throw up our hands, recoil into a place of shame, close our eyes and back away from them as if they were Kryptonite and we were Super Girl. Since we are unwilling to be curious and explore them, we never get to see that in actuality these four words describe very positive qualities and archetypal energies that we desperately need if we are going to be complete, whole,

actualized and effective feminine creators of our own lives.

One of the biggest internal obstacles to reclaiming our power is a potent archetype at work in most women's psyches that can be called the Inner Good Girl. The Good Girl lives for approval and she garners that approval by keeping women small and safe and non-threatening. She is not interested in growing up and is content to remain eternally immature and young. Ultimately, she is the one that keeps a woman from being able to develop and flourish as someone who is strong and potent, gutsy and capable of taking authority over her own life. And the Good Girl never wants to risk being fat, selfish, ugly or bitchy!

If a woman takes her creative life seriously, if she makes a commitment to herself and devotes herself to her creative work, she will eventually reach a crossroads where she has to confront the Inner Good Girl and the list of Good Girl rules if she wants to continue creating with passion and authenticity.

We all know what those rules are. Smile, smile, smile, be sweet and nice, never get mad (or even annoyed), look pretty (which of course includes being thin), smell good, be clean and neat and always be pleasing and accommodating. Don't be loud, stay in the background. What you think or feel is not really all that important. Don't upset anyone. And never, ever make another person uncomfortable. If you can't say anything nice don't say anything at all. Never rock the boat. In the Good Girl world perfection is an attainable goal and you need to work relentlessly, tirelessly, exhaustively, to be the absolute best mother, daughter, wife and friend you can be, all the while berating yourself because you inexplicably and continuously fall short of the mark.

When a woman starts her creative life she brings these same attitudes and expectations to her art. She only allows herself to paint pretty paintings that are perfect in every way. Paintings that are nice and make people smile. She is unwilling to risk disturbing or intense color or imagery; nothing that is too strong or stands out too much. But painting in this way

eventually leaves her feeling bored and stifled. Pretty can be wonderful as part of a larger repertoire, but if it's all you are allowed to do it eventually becomes both a noose and a cage. ___At a certain point in her creative process a woman needs to be willing to ditch the Good Girl by breaking the Good Girl rules. But breaking those rules leads a woman into the territory of the shadow side of the Good Girl, the dreaded yet fascinating BAD GIRL!

The Bad Girl is alive and well in most women's psyches and is the part of us who is sick and tired of the long list of restrictions that hem in her wild and juicy self. She is feisty and bold, full of audacity and unafraid to go for what she wants. She is adventurous and courageous, and enjoys the excitement that comes with taking positive life-affirming risks. ___But our relationship to her has a strong shame and shadow element so she often gets expressed in way's that end up hurting us. She is the one who eats the whole container of the mint chocolate chip ice cream in one sitting, who doesn't return necessary phone calls to annoying family members, who spends money that she doesn't have on clothes or shoes, and who has inappropriate relationships with men or women that aren't good for her. What I am presenting here a way to reclaim the Bad Girl energy in a way that is affirming and positive. To recognize that what we have been calling bad are actually disowned parts of ourselves that need to be brought back home.

The Selfish Girl: *Unafraid of putting herself first, of being needy and proud of it, of nurturing herself, of conserving her own energy, of filling her own well, willing to have limits, making her own self care her first priority, willing to be her own good mother, willing to take time just for herself, willing to confront and overcome her guilt about taking care of herself.* ___This is the first bad girl to show up when a woman attempts to have a viable creative life, and the first one I see when a woman walks in the door of my studio to attend a painting class. I hear over and over again from these women how much they have lost themselves in taking care of everyone else. How tired they are of putting everyone else's needs first and that they have come to this class because they want to do something just for them, something that

has no visible benefit to anyone else.

I wholeheartedly support them because for a woman to be creative she needs to be willing to take time just for herself. She needs uninterrupted time when she enters her studio, sits down at her computer or her easel, and sees what wants to come. She lets herself get dreamy, does nothing, stares out the window, is seemingly unproductive, inviting the muse to enter her, and inviting the often secret and mysterious movement of her soul to express itself.

She faces herself through her art and begins to find out who she really is. "What do I think? What do I like? What do I really want? What moves me, brings me pleasure, makes me feel alive.?" It is a me, myself and I time, a time that needs to be treated as sacred and inviolable in order to allow those creative juices to flow unimpeded and to eventually turn into a raging, rushing river.

However, it's usually not long before the telephone rings or someone taps (or sometimes pounds) on the studio door with the cry of "I need you! And I need you RIGHT NOW!" It could be a friend, a child, a mother or husband, a work obligation, or a pipe that has just sprung a leak. All of a sudden, somebody else's needs become more important than her need to be creative, and the woman is faced with the eternal female question. "Do I once again close the door to my studio and turn my back on the needs of my own soul? Do I once again prove how reliable, dutiful, compassionate, caring, self-sacrificing, available, loving, responsible I am, at the terrible price of my own creative self? Knowing that I have the small, and getting smaller consolation of being able to say "Well at least no one is going to be able to call me selfish!"

The Ugly Girl: *Willing to buck the tide, to be her own unique self, to not always conform, to step away from the need for approval, to be willing to risk censure, to step outside of the box of what is acceptable as a woman in this culture, willing to be weird, different, unique, outrageous, bold.*__The most common lament or desire that I hear from my women painting student's is "But I just want my painting to be beautiful." or "Why can't I

make it more beautiful", or " I don't like it because it is not beautiful".

For most women, beauty is a need, a deep irrational hunger, and an unconscious compulsion. Our identification with the need to be beautiful is so great and so ingrained that we rarely, if ever, question it. Beauty is the key to the magic kingdom of well- being, happiness and success. It is the source of our value, the guarantee of love, our only legitimate access to power, and on a very deep level has meant survival itself. Because so much is at stake, the pressure a woman feels to be beautiful and to create something beautiful is enormous.

Our whole relationship to beauty shows up painfully and clearly in the painting process. While she is painting, there is always some beauty standard- whether she is aware of it or not- that a woman is trying to live up to. Maybe the ideal is of a painting that is neat and flawless where no mistakes or messiness, no drips or uneven lines are allowed. Or the idealized vision may be one of a painting that is balanced and symmetrical, a paragon of elegance, grace, and impeccable good taste. In this version of perfection, all the colors must match, and can only be in the range of muted pastels with the overall effect being soothing and pleasant, like a well put together design in a home and garden magazine.

Whatever the ideal, the energy put into achieving it is relentless. When I watch a woman paint I am always amazed by the passion she has for endlessly fussing over and fixing her paintings. Spontaneity is out of the question. She just takes it for granted that her painting must be well thought out, planned, and organized , and under as much of her control as is humanly possible. She is used to not trusting in her own innate beauty, and expects that the quest for beauty will entail nonstop work. She never questions the ceaseless dieting and exercising, the hours spent shopping for just the right outfit and the worrying over her skin, her hair, her nails. She always has and always will fall short of the beauty mark and just assumes that beauty is something she will continually struggle for and rarely, if ever, achieve. ___The really sad thing is that she sees nothing wrong with this fretful and anxious approach to her self and to her

artwork. This ceaseless and ultimately hopeless striving for the unattainable ideal is just the norm. It's really the only thing she has ever known.

These narrow constraints of beauty that a woman finds herself tangled in are always some variation on the Good Girl creed. These socially accepted standards are based on a definition of beauty that is related to being nice and non-threatening, to not standing out too much and conforming to an established norm that is pleasant but not powerful. Beauty is related to compliance and convention, to following the rules and to fitting in. The Good Girl beauty ideal means that it's not OK to just be herself, warts and all. She needs to clean herself up and make herself acceptable.

When a woman is painting, the Ugly Girl often sneaks in as a mistake or imperfection, a smear or a smudge, something messy or uncontrolled. When the woman tries to clean up the mess, she finds with increasing horror that the muddle only continues to grow. She is constantly having technical calamities. The paint drips or runs, she can't control her brush, chaos reigns, and it seems like there is nothing she can do to make it stop.

She is desperate to get back to pretty. In risking spontaneity, she has found, to her horror, that she has created something that appears harsh or loud or imperfect. Or, even worse, something grotesque or malformed. She frantically tries painting more safe images, more flowers, rainbows, peaceful landscapes. But the flowers develop sharp edges and dark colors and grow completely out of control, the rainbow colors become wildly fluorescent, and the landscapes become populated with darkly mysterious shapes and figures.

At this point she has stepped out of the confines of charming and attractive, and into an unfamiliar landscape of the wild, the untamed, the unkempt and disheveled. This is often the beginning of a relationship to the inner Wise Old Woman archetype, also known as the Witch. This is the face of the deep feminine that doesn't care about appearances. After all, the Witch walks around with missing teeth and warts, and obviously doesn't care what other people think. This is an awakening of the aspect of

a woman's soul who is no longer a slave to approval and who has begun to walk down the long road away from woman as product and commodity. **__The Fat Girl:** *Willing to be big, be visible, to come out of hiding, to be a woman and not a little girl, to take up space, to be hungry, to say what she wants, to know what she wants, to be full of herself, too big for her britches, to be a full adult, unafraid to say yes! A fat girl isn't afraid to take up space and to take her place in the world.*

In my studio I offer high quality paper that is of ample size, but students can tape the sheets together to make even larger paintings. It's a heady time when a woman can let herself spread out and take up some real space, when she can make a HUGE painting, one that can sometimes cover an entire wall.

Creating a giant painting is a dizzying and terrifying prospect, and a woman often needs lots of encouragement and permission to take this step. In fact I usually need to nudge her a little. She will start with saying something about MAYBE needing to go a little bigger with her work. She feels something pushing on her, wanting to come through, and so she will ask if it's OK to use two pieces of paper instead of one. I generously offer to get the paper for her but come back with four pieces of paper, instead of the asked for two. No matter how "nice" she is, at this point she is more than willing to make a fuss, to strenuously object about how it's too much, she could never fill up that much paper, she doesn't have enough to express, she couldn't possibly take up that much room in the studio.

But as I continue to calmly pin the four pieces to the easel, nodding supportively, yet ignoring her increasingly frantic protestations, I see the gleam in her eye. She wants this opportunity to take up space, to proclaim herself in living color, to be unmistakably seen, but is trained to not give voice to this desire. I watch her as she struggles with the forbidden excitement of the challenge, the possibility, the sheer daring of it. The door to a secret longing is creaking open on long unused and rusted hinges, opening to her hunger to be big, to be bold, to be outrageous, to be visible as completely and utterly herself.

The Bitchy Girl: *Willing to be fierce and powerful; unafraid of her own anger, unafraid to speak up, to take a stand, to have limits and boundaries, unafraid to say NO! Unafraid to combat abuse, refuses to be treated badly, willing to break connections and walk away from toxic relationships if it means protecting your own wild and precious self.*

Another major crossroads occurs in the painting process when a woman realizes how angry and enraged she feels and she lets herself express it on paper for everyone to see. However, the feeling of anger is so taboo and so threatening that it will usually sneak in the back door as just a little color. Some red or black appears on the page and then slowly or by "accident" grows larger than the woman had intended .

As this continues , the artist begins to feel a little uncomfortable. She will stand back from her now unruly painting with a puzzled frown and turn to me , saying something like " That looks awfully angry," followed quickly by, "You know, I'm not really angry. I don't get angry. A little frustrated maybe, but never angry." This is a very precarious moment in the process. I have had women actually walk out of the room to get away from this intimation of anger, put on their coat and announce that they really must leave now. I am generally able to coax her back to the painting for the rest of the class, but once she leaves I will often never see her again. The reality of her own angry feelings is just too scary, the prohibitions too strong, and all I can do at this point is hope for her that someday she will be able to feel safe enough to take that deep plunge into her own passionate and furious heart .

For the woman who is ready to take that terrifying yet thrilling dive, admitting that she is indeed angry can allow an amazing intensity of feeling to come flooding out. All the years of saying yes, yes, yes when she wanted to say no, no, NO to unreasonable demands, to abuse, to putting her own needs on a perpetual back burner, come out on the paper in a frenzy of paint , of color, and of image.

For one woman it comes out as a bright red background, with black words painted simply and starkly to read "I AM SO PISSED OFF!". For another ,

it is a large image of a woman with wildly flying red hair, bellowing open mouthed and brazen " What the \$#%@ about me!!!"

A 60 year old woman, who has been married to a Methodist preacher for 40 years, surprises herself by painting a warrior goddess in hot pants, with a Colt 45 in one hand and a cake spatula (to be used as a whacking weapon when necessary) in the other.

The paintings sometimes depict images that are recognizable out of myth, such as a snake haired Medusa, and sometimes are expressed as a whirl of color and chaos, populated by weird, otherworldly creatures sporting very large, VERY sharp teeth. But what they all have in common is that they jump off the page with the ferocity of emotion portrayed. There is no mistaking the intent behind these paintings which is some version of " I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!"

I recently read an article in a marketing journal that was warning advertisers away from using the words power or powerful in ads directed towards women. The writer of this article was not questioning the issue of women's fear around power, just stating an obvious (to him) fact that women won't buy things that are associated with the language of power.

We have a long history as women around being disempowered and victimized, and we have internalized this fear of power, of our own power, for way too long. We are living in times of great change and uncertainty and it is critical that we reclaim our birthright of strength, authority and creative vision to take advantage of the opportunity that we have to recreate the world as a place where our most treasured values can survive.

There are many ways to face and to heal this power wound, and approaching it through our creativity is just one of them. But it's a good place to start. As my women student's and I have learned over many years, it's quite possible to experience courage, transformation and self love by wielding the business end of a paintbrush. And breaking our long allegiance to the Good Girl and allowing the Bad Girl an honored place in

our lives is not only healing, but makes life a lot more interesting and fun!

Copyright © Chris Zydel 2007