

INTUITIVE PAINTING AND THE WILD RIDE OF RISK AND CHANGE

by Chris Zydel, MA

One of the places where my students will often find themselves getting stuck or stopped in the intuitive painting process is when they encounter the common fear of ruining a painting. One moment they will be happily painting away and then they get an internal directive to paint something that scares them. It could be anything. It could be the desire to paint the color yellow, or maybe they find that they can't seem to shake the idea that what wants to be painted now is a purple kangaroo, but whatever it is, in conjunction with this new impulse there arises a sudden, paralyzing and extremely convincing fear that bringing this next color or image into the painting is going to mess it up.

It's fascinating to me whenever this happens. For one thing, this fear is often pretty irrational. One of my students articulated it so clearly when she said " It's just so weird. It's not like I have any plans for this painting. I'm not going to take it home and frame it. So why am I so worried about ruining it?" At other times the painting has become too precious. The painter gets overly attached to the painting because they like what they have done or are pleased with how something has turned out, and get frozen by the desire to preserve this moment of satisfaction.

Generally the concern about ruining the painting comes up when the painter is contemplating doing something risky. Often they are drawn to try something they have never done before. They find themselves being infused with the spirit of holy experimentation and have arrived at a creative threshold where they are now ready to take a chance. This is a thrilling moment where the creative process is pushing, persuading and cajoling them with the promise of something new, something different, something that has never existed in the world before.

The impulse to "ruin" a painting often shows up at a point where the artist is unconsciously tired of playing it safe. There is some part of them that is

ready to shake things up by venturing into hitherto unexplored territory. They know that what they are about to paint is going to radically change the feeling or direction of the painting, and some part of them is really ready for that change. And right at the same time the fearful, cautious, conservative, let's play it safe part of the mind comes in and starts urgently whispering that this change is going to be very, very bad.

When I have a conversation with my students at this point in their process they will say something to me like " Well, if I take the gamble and go in this new direction I might not like what happens". And it is my job to remind them that yes, that may be true. Maybe they won't like what happens next. But they have to be willing to take that risk. I also have to remind them that they have CHOSEN to be here in this class because some part of them is very interested in using their engagement with the creative process to challenge themselves to stretch and to grow. As scary as it might be at times, what they are really hungering for is an experience of being more awake and alive.

The painting is an excellent place to try new things because what you paint really does not matter. The painting has no consequence in your life. Your job or your status or your marriage or health or family relationships are not at stake when you paint. It's just a piece of paper after all. And if you can't take the risk of ruining a twenty five cent piece of paper with some cheap kids paint, what's the likelihood that you will take risks in some of those other arenas? But I think that is the point. Some part of the psyche fully understands that if you start taking risks ANYWHERE in your life then the movement that accompanies change could all too easily spill over into arenas that DO matter. So there is a built in mechanism to stop this process before it can really get going and you've sold the house and are working as a bush pilot in Alaska!

The truth of it is, anytime I have seen someone go against that voice in their head, and take the risk of doing what they think will ruin a painting, they always end up happy. For example, a woman in one of my classes was painting an abstract painting full of airy, pastel colors. She was

engaged for a while, but then started to lose some steam. As she contemplated where the energy might be next leading her she got the impulse to bring black into the swirling pinks and blues and yellows. And she stopped. Dead. I was standing next to her and encouraging her to go ahead with what she was being given and to take the risk of trusting in her intuition once again. She was full of arguments. "This doesn't make any sense. I don't really need for the black to be here. It will most certainly ruin my painting. Maybe I can bring it into the next painting. Why does it have to be HERE?" She spent a few minutes in this losing battle of bargaining with the intuitive painting gods. She was balking because she was caught on the hook of really liking her painting. She was kind of in love with all these bright, soft colors and now the black was wanting to come in and change everything. It was touch and go there for a while. The resistance had her pretty firmly in its grip. But she eventually did it. Courage and curiosity won out over fear and the need for things to stay the same. She started painting the black and when I came back to check on her a few minutes later she was engrossed and engaged, fascinated by the black and how it was transforming her painting. At that moment, she didn't CARE about whether or not she was ruining it. She was simply painting. She was engaged with the flow of her own creative energy, and that was all she needed.

Listening to and believing the voice of fear around the prospect of ruination always results in paralysis. But when you take the chance and paint the scary thing you regain your freedom. The block just disappears. You are back to trusting your creative energy and connected again to what is fun and satisfying and enlivening. You are back in touch with that sense of adventure and possibility and curiosity. You are filled with the anticipation that comes when you don't exactly know what's around the next corner but you are excited and curious to find out.

When you find your self in the grips of the fear around ruining something you can start to intervene in that process by asking yourself the question, "What am I really afraid of?" Because no matter WHAT you may fervently believe, it is actually not possible to ruin a painting! To ruin something

means to utterly destroy it and unless you have torn the painting up and thrown it away, as long as you continue to paint, you are not ruining anything. You may not immediately like what you are painting, you may feel puzzled or scared, frustrated or disappointed, you may want to tear your hair out, but when you are having an adventure these experiences are just part of the terrain.

The creative process is an exercise in learning to become more fluid and flexible. To become more like water and less like stone. What you want to try and cultivate is a kind of "bring it on" attitude around your painting process. To become a painting warrior and to cultivate courage in the face of what often seems like certain creative doom. And to remember that you can fully expect to "ruin" your painting any number of times before your painting is complete. You can learn to embrace this apprehension about ruining something and even begin to welcome it when you keep in mind that this fear is always a harbinger of creative change. And that change is the lifeblood of the creative process. So next time you are at your easel you can let the painting gods know that you are ready for whatever they might have in store for you by cheerfully reciting the following mantra which is "Ruin it early. Ruin it often!"

Copyright © Chris Zydel 2008