

002 - GATHERING MOMENTUM – CLAIRE BENN

If you want to find your own voice, the first step is to start looking for it.

Someone once said to me, "I thought that artists were visited by Divine Inspiration and it all just kind of happened from there. I now know that creating good work - that's truly your own - requires a great deal of slog and hard work".

Slog and hard work. Sounds terrible. But to do anything well requires application and discipline. It doesn't just happen.

Singers sing
Writers write
Dancers dance
Athletes train
Runners run
Climbers climb
Gardeners plant
Farmers farm
Sailors sail
Chefs cook
Teachers teach
Drummers drum
Pilots fly
Musicians play
Artists practise

To be a practising artist is to practise.

It's a combination of many things; Looking. Searching. Refinement and Refinement. Planning. Practising. Implementing.

On a practical (and in some cases, virtually no-costs-involved) level there are many things you can do...

Looking

- Take your camera. Photograph stuff that takes your fancy. Get so close that the picture no longer resembles the subject and takes on a texture and life of its own.
- Carry a teeny-weeny notebook and pencil. Stop from time to time and draw something without looking at the paper. Do this enough times and it's amazing what can happen. Lo and behold! An abstract grass-head, strange barbed wire, a set of lines that is hugely architectural, essence of bird, a strange squiggle that is somehow still very pleasing and potentially useful!
- Really look at the work of artists you admire and try to establish exactly what it is you love.
- Really look at work you loathe and try to establish exactly what it is you dislike.

- Review your own work and self-critique it. Try to be honest and objective. Is what you see the way you still want to work? If not, how do you want to change?

Searching

- Do the imagery. Cut, doodle, squiggle, tear, squirt, draw, manipulate. Make marks, generate piles and piles of imagery.
- Articulate; write down just about anything in the teeny-weeny notebook. Don't read what you've written, that comes later.
- If you have a stash of stuff, take a good, long look at it and ask each item why it's in the treasure box.
- What about all of those books? Most of us are book-addicts and yet how often do we truly read them? We might look at the pictures, stroke our favourite images but – read them? Seek out the book(s) that could help, read and re-read stuff (every day if necessary), access any notes or essays you have on personal imagery, composition, design. Dig stuff out from the web on self coaching. Buy 'Picture This' by Molly Bang and read it 73 times and do the exercises in it 100 times. Buy other books on composition and try out what they have to say.

Defining

- Visualise and articulate what the vision is and what you need to do to get there.
- Alternatively, imagine you have got there. Look back and ask “how did I do that?”. Looking forward (visioning) can drive the identification of obstacles, whereas looking back and defining focuses/concentrates the mind on the positive steps FIRST.
- The next step is to implement those positive things without even considering what the obstacles might be. Stay very focused on the positive steps, the things that will take you where you want to go. These positive steps are likely to be large things. That's fine – when you know what they are, then you can concentrate on the detail (and God will be in the detail).
- Work small in order to explore more options, play more, take risks and learn. Create 100 compositions the size of a postcard or even a business card. Do it with cut paper, crayons, aquarelles, paint, dye, oil pastels, collage, stitch - whatever.
- And it doesn't all have to be “work-work”. Take time out to feed your soul. Listen to music (or to the silence). Dance, meditate, do yoga, go cycling, jog, cook, garden, take a bath, read good writing, go to a gallery, go for a walk, stare in to space for a while. Stop and smell the flowers - “*smells detonate in our memories like poignant landmines*” (Diane Ackerman). Take the time to look and develop your eye. Really taste a glass of wine. Stroke the cat. Touch things. Re-charge.

Refining

- Do all of the above for 6 to 12 months then take some time out to consider it. Generate the imagery. Practise technique, get to grips with media, engage in the process. Then, gather the output together and dedicate time for reflection and selection.

- When you have a stash, pin it up and really look at it. Set aside stuff that resonates with you. Have an 'absolutely, totally, certainly' pin board. Have an 'hmmm, maybe' pin board and stuff all of the 'rejects' (for now) into files or large envelopes. Don't throw any away (yet) as it's entirely possible that some may come into their own in the future. Reduce and enlarge the 'resonate' pile (and consider trying this with the maybes and even some of the doubtfuls). Only the hand and the will can make the vision reality. Keep doing imagery exercises and believe that enough stuff will come out of your heart, head, hand and body – enough stuff to sing with.

Practising

- Practise technique. USE the silk screen, brush, sponge, stamp, bottle, feather, pen, pencil, needle, thread. Tie, pleat, scrumple and fold. Throw, stroke, pin, cut, layer, unpick.
- Work with the media. Dye. Dye paint. Discharge. Use fabric paints, water-fast pens, resists, leaf and foil.
- Use whatever you think might enable the vision. Understand how your body, your hand, your mood impacts on the tool you're using. Build understanding of the relationship between you and the tool. Build muscle memory so you can get the tool to do what you want, when you want it to. Observe the different properties of the media. Their possibilities and potential constraints. The impact they have on the hand of the cloth. Their sensitivities and foibles.
- Go on a retreat/workshop – but only if it genuinely moves you towards the vision.
- *"We learn by doing, there is no other way"* (John Holt, educator).

Planning

- Figure out what it'll take to get there (God can be in the detail).
- Consider your cloth. Figure out what media will best do the job you need to be done, and what tool will do it.
- Cut the stamps. Expose the screens, distress the paintbrushes.
- Book the time in.
- Find the space; both emotional, psychological and physical.
- Save the money; if you want to take a class, buy tools and media, rent or create studio space, go part-time in order to generate time... it'll take a level of financial investment. Start saving and investing right now.

Implementing

- You've worked to acquire Knowledge and build Skill. You've already got the Attitude or you wouldn't have got this far.
- Just get down to it and manage your expectations. Remember, you may have to create nine in order to get 'The One'.
- *"The point is that you learn how to make your work by making your work, and a great many of the pieces you make along the way will never stand out as finished work. The best you can do is make art you care about – and lots of it"* (Art & Fear – David Bayles & Ted Orlando).
- Consider skipping workshops for a while (unless it's something that could specifically help you move towards finding your own voice!)

- Undertake 'private' work vs 'public' work – don't share, don't do personal stuff in a class situation, get input from no-one in terms of stylistic suggestions for your work.

Above all, enjoy the work and enjoy the journey.