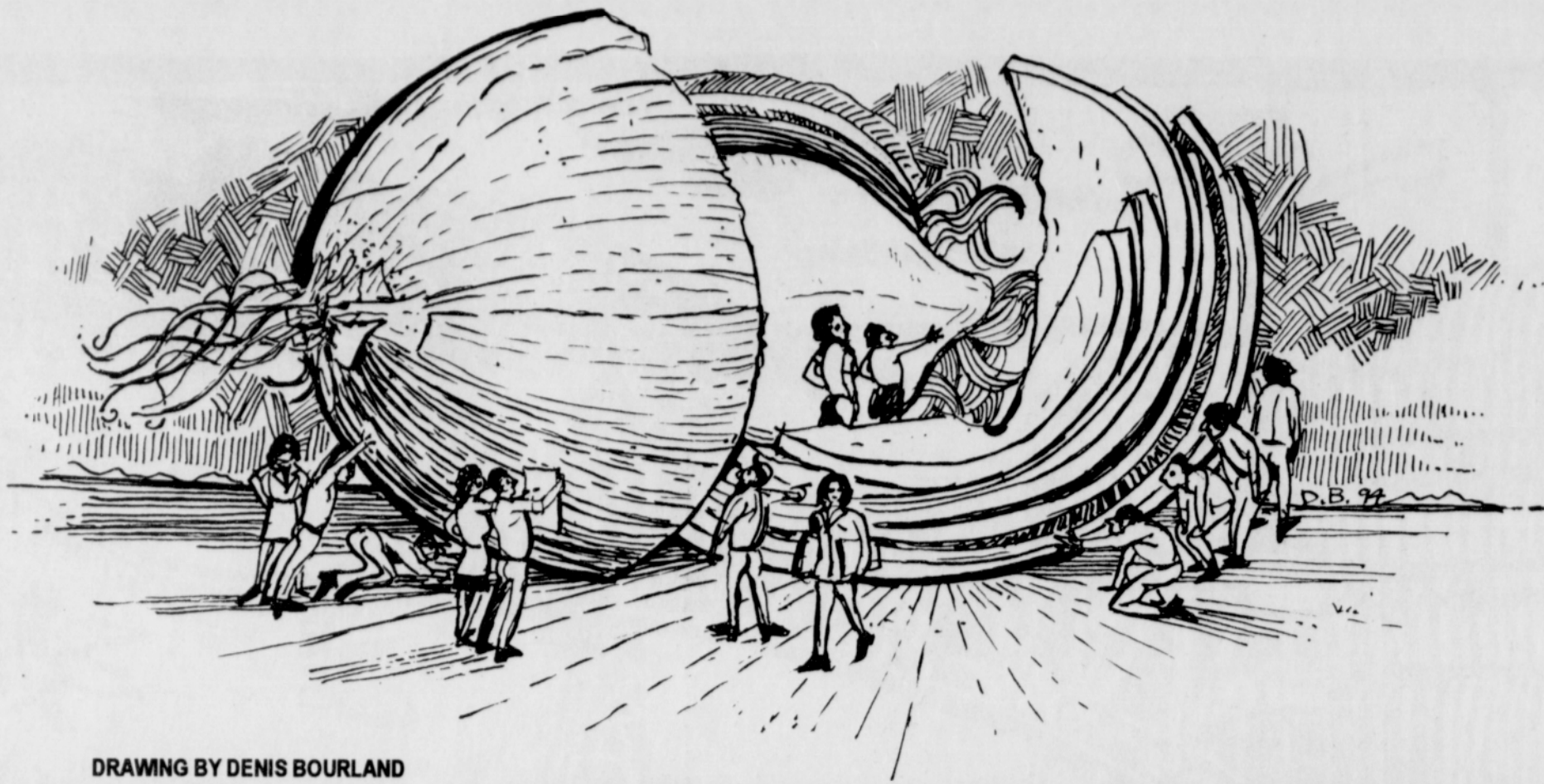




DRAWING BY DENIS BOURLAND

WHAT'S ART GOT TO DO WITH IT?

BY DENIS C. BOURLAND

A personal primer for the budding artist, connoisseur and collector to aid in the identification of visual artworks that goes beyond the ordinary and possibly into the realm of the extraordinary.

Offset press reproductions, signed or not signed are not fine art. Limited editions of etching, serigraphs (silkscreen), lithographs and other works in accepted handmade graphics techniques and their creative combinations could be fine art if judged by their content. I would also include photographs and even original cels from great animated films. Treasure the original and not the reproduction twice removed from the artist.

On the subject of artistic technique and technical prowess, I feel that we could admire a work for its craftsmanship but usually truly great art transcends "slickness" of execution and easy facility with the materials. In fact, it is almost universally true that the great works of visual art from the modern past and present are characterized by a searching crudeness in technique as measured against the standards of their day. Van Gogh, certainly Cezanne, and to a lesser degree, Gauguin, come immediately to mind as good examples. Yes, even the great Picasso painted in sort of a crudely magnificent shorthand. As to the more recent modern American masters, the works of DeKooning and Pollock positively wallow in paint to the point where the process, the very act of painting, becomes the subject of the painting itself.

So-called non-objective, or abstract if you will, works of art are hard to accept at first until you can set your mind to embrace them for what they really are: *themselves*! They are the subject of the painting evoking indefinable emotions using color, form, space, texture and technique with only the elimination of recognizable objects to the equation. It is often noted that good music is created in much the same way. Then why not works in a visual medium? Why not indeed! Think about it. When viewing a non-objective work of art you may be witnessing combinations of the visual vocabulary that have never been combined in that particular way before; and act of pure creation using the basic "stuff" of nature as seen through the retina and distilled through the emotions of the artist's mind.

At first it does take a leap of almost blind faith to embrace a good piece of non-objective, non-realistic art and enjoy it for itself, as itself, without looking for the little bunny rabbit in the upper left corner. That is not to say that meaningful, even great works of art, cannot be ever again created in a realistic manner. Today the provocative works of Chuck Close and Lucian Freud come near that ideal. (If you're not familiar with their work, look them up...you should be.)

Works that are politically motivated or express a particular ethnic viewpoint can be and sometimes are very moving, but let's face it, their appeal is usually brief and quickly dated regardless of their visual quality with a few exceptions like Goya's etchings of *The Disasters of War* or Picasso's *Guernica*.

Now this onion peeling process is less defined. Before you could probably discard the whole peel without losing anything of lasting value to future collectors. From here on these two things should be manifestly clear; originality and uncompromising artistic integrity are paramount. The bandwagon jumpers and "ism" followers are gone.

There is a lot of good painting and printmaking out there and a lot more that is, to be kind, barely mediocre. Just take the *tour de gallery* here in our little coastal towns or even as far as Portland and you will understand whereof I speak; that is if you have any interest in and appreciation of the visual arts beyond a black velvet painting of the "King"...which, by the way, could really be magnificent if it was done in the right way.

But "good" is just that; merely acceptable but rarely inspiring, original or even interesting to the trained and sensitive eye. Well then, how can we possibly know what could be great without relying on "gut feeling" alone?

What is considered to be *art* today is legion. Gone are the narrow definitions of the High Renaissance and the 18th and 19th century romantics. Contemporary art has broken those confining academic boundaries a long time ago and the artistic lifestyle, spirit if not the passion, has flooded over practically all human endeavors. Why even speak of the *state of the art* in advertising refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and guided missiles?

This is fine...I guess. It may even be good in the long run but it also tends to blindside the aesthetic part of our mind in recognizing what could be truly original and important in developing an art for the future.

Now I am going to let you all in on a little secret, to wit: How can anyone with the slightest interest in and knowledge of the visual arts, art history and contemporary art trends spot works that go beyond the ordinary and truly speak to the mind and soul in new, original voices not yet heard? But let me warn you, examples of these works are extremely rare and in most cases very hard to understand at first. So let us prepare ourselves to perhaps know them when they are heard. Let us together peel back, skin by skin, the myriad layers of that huge, complex onion called *Art Today* and see how we can find any pearls of great value deep, deep within. What I propose to do is to no less distill by a process of elimination the current examples of what is popularly considered fine art to hopefully to get to the pure essence of what might be really important art.

First, let us eliminate the regional and provincial in our search for this distilled purity. Example: Cowboy & Indian art, so-called Western art, is not art. It possibly was in the romantic days of Catlin, Remington and Russell but nearly all since has been characterized by critics as, at best, maudlin romanticism. If you like it, if you collect it, fine. But do not fool yourselves and others by calling it great art.

Landscape art that harkens back to the romantics of the Hudson River School and even the great Impressionists of the late 19th century is all well and good but has nothing to do with us today. It is what it is: illustrations of a time and place that may evoke feelings of nostalgia. Like it if you do; cherish it if you will but do not classify it as fine art.

The field now belongs to the visionaries and the doer-dreamers. There is nothing sadder than a cubist in the '90s and,

conversely, nothing more thrilling than the working poet/artist dreaming dreams as yet undreamt.

For example; Expressionist painting and drawing - that art of the inner-mind and soul usually depicting the darker torments there - are generally valid attempts to bring art out of the morass of mere "picture making" on to a higher plain of human experience. It is at its best when it exposes deeply personal emotions symbolically and in a universal manner; something that we can all relate to on a personal level. Can anyone fail to deeply moved by Much's *The Scream* or Vincent's *Night Cafe*? This layer of the onion must be carefully examined to glean out the few, true diamonds from the gritty sand and gravel of well meaning amateurs and stylistic bandwagon riders.

And from here on, knowledge is king for the budding artist and art collector for the more known the more valid your own personal vision will be on a universal measure of value. All the depictions of big eyed, sad little waifs, puppy dogs and "sofa-sized" starving artist paintings eventually end up on the trash heap or on the walls of the local thrift store. Works that are done or chosen with knowledge and then love become the family heirlooms and possible candidates for the museum walls of the future.

The onion is smaller now and perhaps a trifle more manageable. This peeling process could go on and on but then soon there would be nothing left. Perhaps now we should look at the remainders with an open heart and mind; not to be too quick to condemn. Maybe that large pile of dirt and stone in the middle of the cavernous white gallery room could have some significance that goes beyond the artist's vain attempt to shock. Maybe that statement in video tubes wrapped in neon and submerged in a vat of Jello could have cultural significance that may shape the souls of men and women beyond the month of June...maybe not.

Then again the little old man who paints with children's watercolors on cardboard shirtbacks from the local laundry using an old rooming house table as his easel, never sold a thing in his lifetime, could change the course of artistic sensibilities. After all, Vincent almost did it...some say he did. Who knows? For that is the wonder of it all. That's the true art.

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