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INTERLUDE

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Artist

Beautiful uncertainty: The art of breaking and making

ABSTRACT

Falling into art-making by accident introduced me to an image-world of symbol, metaphor and meaning. As a practising artist, I have been able to explore open-ended possibilities, and discover the deep beauty of ambiguity and the unknown. As a teacher of mostly non-art majors, I have been given the opportunity to share this fragment of my autobiography, and have discovered a diverse audience of students hungry for complex and nuanced challenges that develop their abilities to see, feel and intuit. My classroom acknowledges and explicitly values these fundamental human qualities, and for many students offers an antidote to an education that otherwise appears to value only quantification and instrumentality.

KEYWORDS

making
breaking
creativity
ambiguity
image

I am a visual artist, trained as a photographer and painter, although I prefer to self-identify simply as a poet. The form of my work has changed over time – starting with large-scale painted photo murals, I slipped into the realm of electronic media, which then morphed into network-based electronic books that combine still images, video, audio, text and even programming. Although my tools are continuously evolving, my work remains anchored in particular philosophical and emotional obsessions: memory and history, gender and the body, power and powerlessness, fear and compassion. As an artist, I try to

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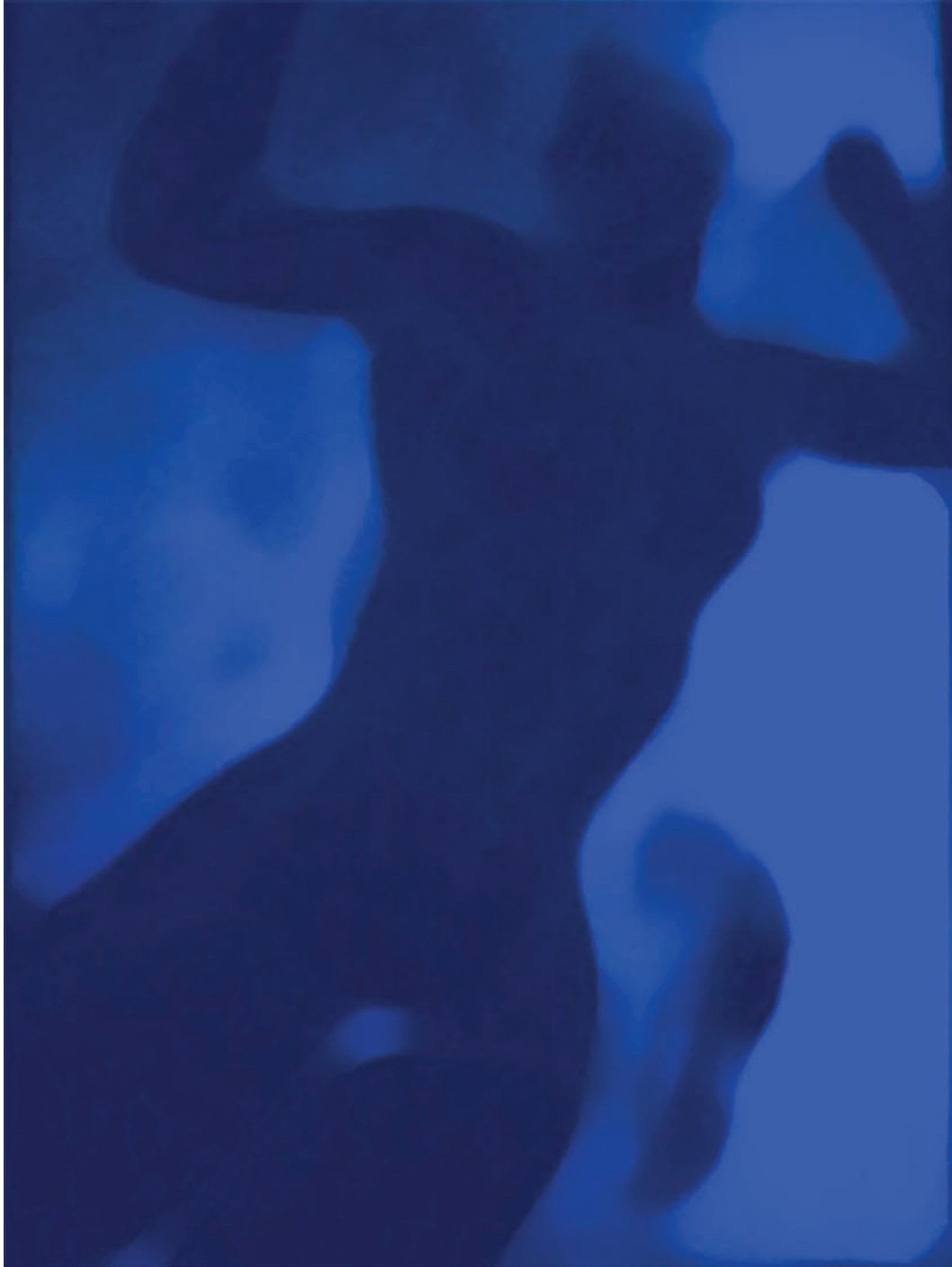


Figure 1: Joseph Squier, My Blue (2015). Courtesy of the artist.

inhabit that place inside us that precedes language – that more primal world where we can only look and point.

How in the world was someone like me drawn to teaching, and why do I find such deep joy in this practice? At first glance, I appear to be such an unlikely and weak prospect. I am left-handed and dyslexic, with a relentless case of ADHD. I am easily bored and can trip over this edge in a flash. I court risk, fear and danger because they embolden me. I seek out the magnetic pull of the unknown, constantly cultivating new states of not knowing. I find ambiguity irresistible, as if it were a land and a language – dark woods ripe with hidden treasure and happy accidents. I like getting lost, most particularly because it takes me places where I do not belong. These traits, I have discovered, define me. But they have always and continue to get me into trouble.

Although I was early on pegged as a good kid and a bright student, mostly meaning that I was good at taking tests and could sit still in my seat, I secretly hated school. I was a pleaser, and so school was mostly an extended performance for the adults around me. I developed the ability to spend long hours at my desk; I became adept at reading and writing on subjects to which I felt no personal connection, and I could absorb and repeat back information on command. I learned to answer just about any kind question, but was never taught how to actually ask questions or why this might be important. The deep joy and excitement of curiosity and enquiry was not part of my educational preparation for entering the world.

You should also know that I have, from my earliest memories, lived intensely in the visual. It is the one place that has always felt like home, and one particular way in which I never feel lost. I can make my way with words, but I make meaning through images. I do this relentlessly and with abandon. This is not a choice, and like so many of my other core traits, was a liability at school that required constant management and suppression.

I entered college as a biochemistry major, an accomplished but not a particularly happy student. But along the way to earning my degree, something accidental occurred; I managed to stumble into a couple of photography courses. This experience turned my head and rocked my world. After my college graduation, in what for my parents was a complete bolt out of the blue, I announced that I had decided to move to San Francisco and enrol in an art school. I had stepped off a ledge and was in free fall. My family was grief stricken. I was ecstatic and enthralled.

I am an artist. I break things.

This personal manifesto, only seven words, has taken me nearly three decades to craft, and I am still at work at understanding just exactly what it means. Of course, in reality it is a bit more complicated than that. Maybe those seven words are just my own personal Zen kōan for trying to express and unravel the remarkable mystery of my life's practice.

Assembly, disassembly and reassembly. Making, breaking and remaking. Asking questions. Discovering the more beautiful question. Getting lost. Journeys into the unknown. Rehearsal and failure. Resilience and determination. Discipline, dedication and incremental mastery. Curiosity. Passion. I am an artist.

And now, many years later, I teach in an art school situated within a large research university, and by choice I teach mostly non-majors. My classrooms are filled with future engineers, entrepreneurs, physicists, journalists and, yes, teachers. I look into their (mostly) young faces, and see myself a few decades

ago. And I know that many of them cannot really articulate why they have found themselves in an art class, but that they are following a mysterious and mostly mute pull, something elusive and unexpressed, that has drawn them into a conversation with me.

But I have my own hunch about why they have walked into my classroom. Because in the age of 'No Child Left Behind' and teaching to the test, many students are hungry for an experience that is qualitative and non-instrumental. They are, in their own way, resisting the formulaic, preferring instead those situations where both problems and solutions are not clearly outlined, and where surprise and nuance are pursued and rewarded. We humans crave mystery and ambiguity, and in my class those things are given value. I offer students permission to get lost, help them understand that risk is the beating heart of innovation, and that failure is just rehearsal for eventual success. And as we journey into the visual world, I guide them into an understanding that looking is not the same as seeing, that much of our insight and wisdom lies beyond the boundaries of what linear text on a page can convey, and that the answers that they seek in their inner lives cannot be mapped by a multiple choice question.

Most of these students will not make the same choice that I made. They will not abandon their current paths and step off my particular ledge. And that is not what I want for them. Rather, I hope that they take what they learn in their art class back into their home realms, their real lives and their emerging futures. I dream that some remnant of our conversation will help them carve out courageous and vibrant lives as professionals, citizens and neighbours. I envision them taking my offering – this small but precious fragment of my own autobiography – and making it their own, in a form simultaneously familiar and also utterly unrecognizable. Assembled, disassembled, reassembled. Made, broken and renewed.

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Joseph Squier is trained as a studio artist – a photographer and painter – but for the past two decades he has worked at the intersection of fine art and new technology; composition, rhetoric, and literacy; creativity, innovation, and design thinking. His artwork has been exhibited extensively throughout the world, featured in numerous national newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times* and *Print Magazine*, and has been reproduced in over a dozen books. Squier is a founding editor/curator of *Ninth Letter*, a literary/visual culture magazine and website, which has received over 20 major awards. The impact of his creative interests on his teaching practice can be seen in the development of 'Writing with Video', a course which combines media production with creative inquiry, design thinking, social engagement, rhetoric, and composition. Squier's most recent creative project is *FLAGRANTWORLD*, a self-assembling database-driven electronic book that combines elements of painting, poetry, song, and cinema.

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