

Cooking up Art  
By Richard Payne

Address to Melbourne Savage Club Monday forum.  
14 September 2015

## Introduction

Good afternoon gentlemen. I'm a Melbourne boy and a professional artist working and teaching from my studio in Daylesford, and I also teach master classes in perspective and composition at Art Academies in Florence Italy, and the USA.

As for my work, my form of expression is painting and drawing and I've always created art. At school I was 'the kid that could draw'.

Whilst studying architectural drafting, I became a private student of my mentor Bob Gill, whose books on architectural perspective and pen & ink drawing are Thames & Hudson top sellers worldwide.

For about 7 years I studied and worked in Bob's studio, he gave me an almost Renaissance, classical foundation in perspective, art, composition and making art. I still remember my first lesson with Bob, now you must realize that then I was quiet proud of my drawing skills. Well, he looked at me over his glasses, held up a pencil and said; *"Richard, this is a pencil, you draw with the pointy end!"*  
You could say Bob believed in starting at the start.

Later, like most painters I needed to make a living so I worked in the fields of architectural illustration, graphic design then more recently, I moved to Florence Italy for 2 years to study classical realism painting at the Florence Academy of Art, arguably the best Classical Realism Academy in the world today. In particular I was interested in the academy sight-size method of drawing & painting.

Unknown to me at the time, the academy had been looking for a professor of perspective for almost 30 years and approached me to create a course on 'Perspective for the Academy Artist' that I did and delivered in Florence. Whilst there I also painted in my studio and privately consulted to professional artists assisting them with perspective and composition.

Well, that's a short introduction to me, and now that we know each other;

"Would anyone like to come with me to McDonalds and we'll have them cook us a Big Mac?

Alternatively,

"Who would like to come with me to Vue de monde in the Rialto and have them cook us boeuf bourguignon?

Both these are cooking and both are made from beef, but they are not equal are they?

The Vue de Monde chef will follow the laws of cooking and taste to create a masterpiece whilst the Big Mac 'chef' may not even know these higher laws exist. Never the less these laws govern how our body & mind taste and relate to food and are used sub-consciously by customers when they eat either the Big Mac or the beef bourguignon.

There's a world of difference in the innovation, realization and emotional experience between the two meals, although you can call them both 'cooking'... they are not of the same value either are they? ... I'm not talking about price but 'value' as an expression of what cooking can be at its highest level?

And this is also mutually exclusive of what might be written in the menu... or what we pay for the cooking... the cooking speaks for itself.

I believe that art is the same... not all art is equal... and whilst "anything maybe art" not everything is art...

... and further; just because a cook says their boeuf bourguignon is fine cooking it does not make it so!

Being a modern painter, trained and still teaching in academies of art, uniquely informs me to discuss with you today:

1: 2015 San Francisco Contemporary Art Fair and the 2015 Frieze New York Contemporary Art Fair.

2: The worldwide revival of the Academy's of Art,

3: How did they get here and philosophically where they now?

3: The opportunity, my own artwork... and a suggested path forward for artists.

## **The Contemporary Art Fairs**

In May of this year I visited the San Francisco Contemporary Art Fair and 2 weeks later the Frieze New York Contemporary Art Fair.

They're both massive fairs, many times larger than 'Geoff's Shed' and attracting major "galleries from over 30 countries presenting the best of contemporary art today". I'm discussing them together today as they were pretty much the same.

The first overall observation of both Fairs was the DIVERSITY of the work on display.

There were isles and isles of gallery's, each showcasing very different contemporary art from around the world.

From childish pencil line work, modernist, op, realism, abstract, flux, pop, native, minimalist, street, you name it, it was there all sitting alongside one another.

There was no particular overall 'movement' or direction of investigation across the work. Each gallery were showcasing artists that were working in their own way.

Although, I did note, that each gallery tended to showcase one artist and that artist did present an identifiable 'body' of work.

Secondly; the work was SIMPLISTIC;

When you stopped and contemplated a work it told you everything it had to offer in that first impression. The work had no layers or deeper intellectual content that it expressed. And there was no need to view it a second time.

Marcel Duchamp might have called it retinal because there was no intellectual depth.

They were really 'one trick ponies'... Look at me;  
I can dribble paint,  
I can pin my drawing on the wall without a frame,  
I can use florescent paint,  
I can splash paint on a chair,  
I can cut up books in different ways.... It went on and on.

Thirdly; there was very LITTLE TECHNICAL SKILL demonstrated in the actualisation of the work, in the composition or the syntax of the visual language.

Whilst standing in front of a large painting depicting a group of farm buildings and painted in flat colours we were told; *"It's very difficult to paint flat colours like that"*

Finally the GALLERIES are very professional and brilliant!

And charging high prices for work regardless of artistic merit.

The most creative work at each Art Fair was definitely the marketing campaigns used by the galleys to build their showcased person as an important 'artist', presenting the work, as 'the work of genius' and important to the advancement of human culture.

A couple of quick examples;

Standing in front of a set of poorly executed copies of various well known masterpieces we were told this artists is a 'genius' as to how she takes well known paintings and copies them... but not exactly... humm.

Or the homeless man who collected pieces of rubbish over a number of years storing it in his cardboard box until an art curator saw his collection, sorted through it and displayed in on 6' x 4' tables... now he's presented as one of the *'most exciting emerging*

*contemporary artists working today*'. That's the homeless guy not the curator. That gallery curator is a marketing guru!

Although eventually, I did see a small work from across the room... an unknown style. Yes! This is what I was looking for!!

It reached out from almost 50 meters away, with real power and innovation. It had, energy, confidence, depth and a freshness that grabbed me by the eye ball and demanded "Look at me!".

Excited to have finally made a new discovery I rushed over to it only to make a bitter-sweet discovery....

... it was a Picasso... Still wonderful to see! And although nearly 70 years old, still standing out in a contemporary fair... it could have been painted yesterday it looked so innovative.

So overall;

- Both fairs carried similar work,
- There were no dominant themes, style or 'movement' across the works,
- A philosophy of 'anything goes',
- Individual artists did work with an identifiable style,
- Simple, easily accessible motifs and without any intellectual depth,
- Minimal technical skill
- High price tags
- Great sales plans from the galleries,

And the bitter sweet experience that with the plethora of work being churned out it still doesn't match up to a Picasso. Whatever he was putting into his work we're not doing it today. ... Picasso still stands out.

## **The Academy's of Art**

From the art fairs I walked into a totally different world... that of the classical realist academy's.

I was a guest lecturer at the Golden Gate Atelier in San Francisco and a couple of weeks later at the Florence Academy of Art METRO in New York, delivering 2-day master-classes on perspective and composition.

Cosimo de Medici established the first academy of art in Florence Italy in 1563 and the academy teaching approach then flowed to Paris and the rest of Europe.

In the early 1400's, Brunelleschi invented the linear perspective system in Florence, with Alberti and others fine tuning the his work right up until Robert (Bob) W Gill wrote Basic Perspective and Creative Perspective which are now the definitive works on the subject.

A major moment for me personally was standing in the doorway of the Florence Duomo, with my students all around me, teaching a class on perspective in the spot where Brunelleschi first demonstrated his new invention to a group of Florentine dignitaries.

Today's Florence Academy of Art is a USA owned school in Florence that draws from the legacy of the Paris academy of art to continue the academy tradition.

The academies are elite and difficult to gain entry to. Students have often already earned an art degree at another institution and many are professional artists looking to learn how to draw and paint the human figure like a renaissance master.

My workshops cover the principles & laws of linear perspective, shadows and aerial perspective then move onto how to use this knowledge within the sight size system, how to handle groups of figures, landscapes, interiors and a wide range of situations. The last half-day they apply the new knowledge when drawing in the model room with a live model.

A positive for the academy system is that students do learn to draw and paint technically beautifully.

But with it can come an over emphasis on the technical side of painting, a technicians love affair with the act of painting rather than the act of creating works of art.

Strongly supporting the academies is the Art Renewal Centre (ARC) in the USA, that declares they are "leading the revival of realist art".

ARC's philosophy is very well articulated and they make a strong argument for realism and the academy approach, but with it comes a narrow definition of fine art as; realism. The Art Renewal Centre opposes modernism and virtually any art created in the 20th century.

The work created using the academic classical realism method is very well actualized, with high technical skill although, as another outcome of the meticulous approach the work is often dead and lifeless. The work also tends to be theatrical, staged, sentimental and backward looking with little energy.

So on the one hand we have the contemporary art world; that seems to have a freedom of expression (anything goes) but is directionless, simplistic and technically limited.

'Contemporary' painters & artists seem impotent to create art with power or intellectual depth and offer up anything they think can be branded and sold by gallery agents.

On the other hand, the classical realist academy/realist movement; technically very impressive produces dead, lifeless paintings that look to the past.

Two opposing philosophies.

How can we make some sense out of all this? What's going on? How did we get here?

## How did we get here and where is here?

Firstly, this chaotic situation art finds itself in today is actually a familiar position that's happened many time before over the 30,00 years we're been making art.

Can you imagine the young painters in late 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, fresh out of training, yet to make their mark?

Looking around at the artist who have just gone before. The work; of Raphael, Da Vinci, Titian, Michelangelo, Ghiberti and the whole Renaissance & Old Masters gang?

The young artists must have thought....

"This is as beautiful as anyone could ever paint",

"Everything has been done in art"

"There's nothing left to do"

Can you imagine standing under the Sistine Chapel ceiling and thinking; "How am I ever going to beat THAT!"

"Where to from here?" ...

They must have been intimidated, depressed and directionless...

... Then Mannerism came along and art sped off in a new direction with vigor creating work abstracted and idealized in an expression that had never been seen before.

Similarly, near the twilight of 'Classical Modernism', young artists were faced with the intimidating life's work of the Modern Masters; Picasso, Matisse, Mondrian, Dali, Kandinsky, Cézanne and the rest. They must have said similar things;

"Painting and art has been push to the limit",

"There's nowhere to go from here",

"Where to next?"

This time though, artists really struggled to find a path forward... how to express themselves in their time?

Many forces came to play by the 1960's; amongst them were the artist as celebrity and another I believe was a feeling of not being able to follow on from the Modern Masters and being totally psyched out by them! They were just too good and their work communicated their ideas with startling innovation and power!

Movements sprang up in main stream art under the catch all of Post-modernism, Abstract expressionism, color-field, pop, minimalism, etc but, like an immature teenager unable to respond to an adult world, they had the common threads of;

- "If I can't succeed by the rules then I'll change the rules in my favor",
- Criticize everything,
- Denounce established wisdom and,
- Aggressively attack everything without offering an alternative or any solutions.

So, during this period we see: -

- The aggressive denouncement of classical methods of teaching and creating art E.g.: in the 1967 the academy in Paris smashed their classical plaster castes used for teaching drawing,
- The denouncement of beauty and the rise of a cult of ugliness,
- Art as therapy and 'self expression' rather than the communication of ideas and emotions.
- And the denouncement of established knowledge with a mantra of *'there are no rules'*.

Once the art world accepted "there are no rules' in art then anything could be art and anyone could be an artist.

This had the added advantage of clearing the field for anyone to be a celebrity artist and make lots of money!

With this, the concept of an artist being a scholar, philosopher and craftsman offering society the objective results of their labor, could be ignored.

To be a celebrity artist you didn't need to spend time mastering your craft. Nor did your work have to communicate anything of worth, engage with the history of art or even be created by you.

You could hold up anything, call it art and swing a strong marketing & sales campaign into action... bingo you're an artist!

And there were 'no rules' so work couldn't be objectively evaluated.

To further legitimize the works being created, Marcel Duchamp's statement; "it's art because the artist says its art" was misrepresented and adopted as a truth.

Of course when Duchamp made that statement around 1913 he was actually being provocative from his desire to de-value art and his 'anti-art' position. An intellectual gauntlet thrown down to the art establishment of the time.

But now it was defended, held up as truth and used to justify anything as art. As long as the artist said it was art then it was and could be sold in galleries at ever increasing prices.

As the work became more disparate art philosophy came to the rescue with eloquent meta-narratives 'saying this is art because...' that were pinned to the works trying to give a scribble, a stolen image, an un-made bed or a pile of bricks some credibility.

The proposition adopted by the art world was; because the menu is eloquent, it makes a Big Mac fine cooking.

But of course that's not actually true and never will be.... It's a fraud.

There may not be any rules in art but there are laws!

There are laws whether the artist is aware of the laws or not.

The law that; A square is always a square,

The law that; an element of a picture interacts with other elements in a work and with the edges of the picture,

The law that; Humans give lines, colours and shapes meaning... It's hard wired into us.

There are laws to how we see and process images and the world around us, regardless whether the artist is aware of them or not just as in cooking.

Whilst anything maybe art, not everything is art.

The dilemma contemporary art is caught in today is; -

A: it's stance that; "there are no rules", "it's art because the artist say it's so" and "anything can be art" is philosophically incompatible with having an objective criteria to assess the quality or relative success of a piece of art. Except possibly what someone will pay for it.

B: Having rejected craftsmanship & technical knowledge, artist's ability to actualize an idea is compromised, leading to ever-simplistic expression, stealing or copying.

They're trapped in a dead end.

They've abandoned the tools & philosophy that enable an artist to actualize a composition and communicate their ideas at a high level... to more art forward.

From the Academy/realism position:

Faced with the end of Modernism and rejecting the directions of mainstream post-modernism, small enclaves of academy's were re-established, of particular note those in Florence, Italy.

Looking to Jean-Léon Gérôme and Charles Broussin of the 19th century Paris Academies for guidance to maintaining the classical technical skills and knowledge they retreated back to a by-gone era restricting their definition of art to 'Realism'. They rejected anything to do with modernism.

Now, as a reaction to what's called the "*20<sup>th</sup> Century art scam*" we're seeing a global resurgence of the realist movement and the art academy system as artists seek drawing & painting skills and the classical knowledge that art institutions stopped teaching around the 50's & 60's.

The positive for a student in the academy system is that by using the sight-size method, working from the drawings of Broussais, antique plaster casts, copying master works, still-life and drawing the classically posed human figure from life, students develop solid drawing & painting skills. They do learn to draw & paint beautifully.

Simultaneously though, this intense training of the hand & eye also subtly imposes a particular aesthetic on the students. This is because the plaster casts and Broussais copy drawings are a blend of Neoclassicism and Romanticism that become the 'preferred taste' of the students. Taste does need training but not to the point of dogma.

Whilst the academy system does lead to an accurate copying of nature and creation of realist art, it also leads to a constant narrowing of focus on technique and the technical rather than creating art. The objective becomes the faithful reproduction of what's in front of you, like a human photocopier machine, not the expression of art. That's why sight-size is such a powerful portraiture and still-life system.

Rather than seeking to create a fresh, new art form, there's a tendency to look backwards with a trained aesthetic, seduced by the technical beauty of previous art, holding it up as the ultimate goal to be achieved we could end up replicating what our grand parents were doing, over and over forever.

Here in Australia, the Meldrum School of thought summarizes it well; painting is a pure science, the science of optical analysis or photometry by means of which the artist, in carefully perceiving and analyzing tone and tonal relationships, could produce an exact appearance of the thing seen.

This speaks nothing of art and emotion.

So; the academies answer to "where to from here" is to scurry back and hid in the past.

A: Their philosophy of 'only realism is art' is very restrictive and stagnating. Ignoring the richness of discoveries and freedom won in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

B: Students aesthetic 'taste' is trained to conform,

C: They do have high levels of craftsmanship and technical knowledge to actualise ideas.

D: The technicalities of drawing & painting can become the end goal rather than creating art. It also tends to... produce technically outstanding but lifeless, stagnant, theatrical work.

## The opportunity, my work and a direction forward

With all that as a back drop, let me state clearly that I think we are in an exciting time to be an artist regardless of your choice of expression; Painter, writer, poet, sculpture, musician, architect or intellectual.

My enthusiasm comes from the fact that right now, we have the luxury of looking back at post-modernism for it's learning's whilst seeing around us how its lead to inertia. And with the revival of the art academies teaching sight-size we are re-discovering essential skills and knowledge.

We have the freedom AND the access to the tools & knowledge to move art forward and create art of our time.

'Where to from here?' How about we add beautiful objects to the inventory of the world that are of the highest quality art we can make.

For me, high art is art that communicates without a meta-narrative, it:

- Reveals a universal beauty or inner meaning,
- Evokes a feeling or emotion,
- Communicates something with depth and,
- Is well actualised.

Personally, my way forward is to approach classic themes from a new perspective, thus building on the great conversation of art. The continuity is important to me because it locates the work in time as part of the development of human culture and suggests to other artists that they can respond to what I've said.

My art also needs 'cut-through' as everyone knows our world is visually saturated. But that Picasso I saw had 'cut-through' so we know it can be done.

The goal is that a work reaches out and says, "Look at me" then when you get closer, it says, "look at this".

Rather than creating purely retinal work, as you contemplate my work over time, you see something different and it slowly reveals itself to you as you live with it... it has the ability to change with your mood and have different conversations with you at different times.

And of course the viewer takes his or her own palate and experience into the visual dialogue. Once the view has engaged with the world offered by my painting, the viewer can wander and explore ideas, beauty, meaning, memories, etc. Paintings and all art for that matter are an escape from the hash, often-brutal real world of trying to survive and a reminder that there's something more to being human than just survival.

I've recently completed a painting titled; A dance in Vienna. The motif is the Viennese waltz and it illustrates my approach to making art.

This could have been painted in a purely academic or realist manner to show a couple dancing, superficially depicting nature, the anatomy, the fabric, the fall of light on them, all skilfully painted.

Limiting my expression to copying nature, realism, and a retinal image like thousands of painters and paintings before me.

I chose to use all the advances in the visual language and art both classical, modern and post-modern to strive for a new, expression of the Viennese waltz, for our time.

By using the Golden Mean, so beloved by Leonardo da Vinci in his Annunciation and other works, I created a foundation of harmonious sub-divisions of the surface and a beautiful mathematical rhythm, this gave the painting a classical foundation of elegance and a unity,

To heighten the feeling of the dancers being in their own world and a feeling of a modern world not the old world, I used Cezanne's advances in manipulating space,

The work on motion by the Futurists informs the movement of the dancers and the colour is influenced by modernist colour theory and by Pop art of the 1960's.

Drawing upon the Paranoiac Critical method of Dali and the work of the Surrealists to abstract the couple added an unidentifiable time period and stopped this being a portrait of particular couple dancing that we are looking at... them dancing.

This is ALL couples dancing the Viennese Waltz... me, the viewer dancing and feeling the movement and music.

Why go to all that trouble?

To create a painting that evokes:

- A universal beauty that speaks to all humans bridging time, and cultures,
- The feeling the Viennese waltz,
- These are things worth protecting and keeping. Don't let this die out. This is important to being human not just acquiring 'things' and wealth, not just destroying and taking from others... we can be so much more than that dark side of our nature... we can be beings of light and beauty and build a beautiful world.

Now my work could have just shown a couple dancing the waltz and no more, it could have been paint randomly splashed on the canvas needing a meta-narrative ... or it could stand on it's own and aspire to be `something greater.

... a Big Mac or boeuf bourguignon

Thank you