

*An answer to five questions
Related to Being an Artist in Business*



Patriarch Cypress, Point Lobos, California

by

Alain Briot

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*A discussion of Specific Issues
Related to Being an Artist in Business*

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1 - Introduction

This essay consists of a series of questions and answers. In its presentation, the essay takes the format of an interview. However, it is not an interview per se in the sense that I was not asked each question by a single person in a single sitting. Rather, I was asked each question by a different person at a different time. I brought these questions together to create a natural flow of ideas, a casual exchange of thoughts on specific topics. In doing so I found that, when brought together, these questions form an interesting and contemporary insight on both the world of fine arts and the marketing of fine arts.

2 - Do you think that the role played by art in our society is changing?

What happens in our society is that merchants and entrepreneurs continuously strive to offer new products that go in the direction the society is going. So, for example, if the society is going towards having less and less time to do house chores, such as cleaning, cooking meals or other, as such as is the case in our society, then you find that more and more products that are designed to save you time, to do the same chores you did before but faster, are becoming available. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is important to understand how this works, because very often people see this process as being “progress.” Well, it may be progress, in the sense that these products allow you to make better use of your time -spending less time cleaning the toilet for example, something that just about everyone appreciates. However, it may also be regress, in the sense that you are now spending very little time doing things that are truly valuable in terms of enriching your life, such as cooking a fine meal, something which is less and less common in American households today.

So, to recapitulate, products are introduced to serve the utilitarian aspect of our lives and go in the direction our society is going. This approach is based on the fact that there is a need for such products, and therefore money to be made helping people adapt to this new direction rather than to try to change it.

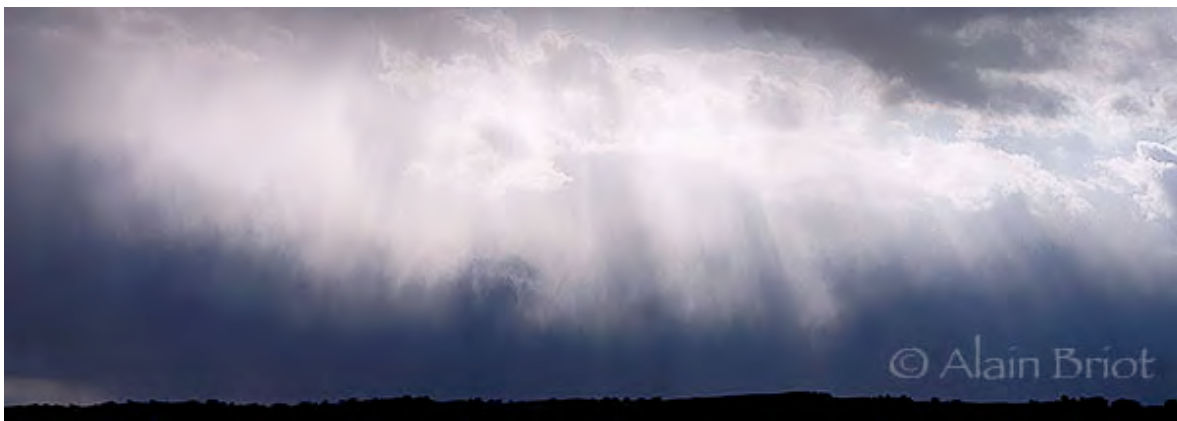
However, as we just saw with the fine cooking example above, these utilitarian solutions, as we may call them, infringe upon the artistic aspects of our lives. Here I take it for granted that fine cooking is an art form. At least it is for me.

And this in turn –i.e. providing products that help us face the challenges created by the society we live in- is so successful that artists who go in business, artists who sell their work, start to see an advantage in using the same approach. So they create and sell art that is adapted to people’s lives, rather than art that people need to adapt to. So art becomes, at best, a novelty that we quickly become used to, rather than something that we question day after day after day. Art becomes a commodity in a way. Art is bought for its practical aspect as much as for its artistic

quality, and some times, and I think this is increasing more and more, art is bought more for its practical qualities than for its artistic aspect.

Another way to put it is to say that art must be artistically appealing to the buyer, but if the practical qualities are not there, then the artistic appeal alone is not enough. In other words, customers want art that is easy to take care of, art that won't break if it falls, won't get damaged if it is moved around, art that is easy to hang –not too heavy for example- or art that is easy to clean. For example, we see more and more photographs that are mounted on a firm support such as compressed wood and which have a laminated surface, making it possible to dust them off easily with a wet wipe or a duster. People don't want to clean glass or have to worry about glass breaking, or be bothered with reflections in the glass. So we are seeing a whole trend with pieces that are framed in ways that do not feature glass: wrapped canvas, mounting and lamination, floater frames, etc. It's one of the main directions that framed pieces are taking right now.

Certainly one can say that photographers decide to do such pieces because they like this kind of presentation, but again you can also say that this is done for marketing reasons. After all, the archival quality of dry-mounted and laminated pieces is missing since the photograph is dry mounted to the support and covered with laminating material. This is an absolutely irreversible process that goes against most archival recommendation one would get from an expert in archivability. And there we have the real conflict, and that is that photographers who use this process are also taunting the fact that their work will not fade for 100 or 200 years, that it is archival, and so on. Certainly it won't fade, if the proper printing process was used, but if there is a problem with the support or with the lamination, the photograph is doomed to destruction. So we have conflicting goals here: practicability and archivability. The fact is that the two cannot easily be reconciled, so one has to make a choice about which one is most important. And the one aspect that is chosen, in the majority of instances, is practicability because, as I explained, it is the main deciding factor, together with price, for the majority of the buying audience.



God Rays, Kyaatataypi

So what we are seeing here is a trend in which people who buy art do so not only for the artistic qualities of the work but also for the practical qualities of the work. And by practical, I mean practical. Way beyond just the color of the artwork matching the color of the couch,

which was really a decoration versus art issue, not a practicality versus art issue. I don't want to get into the difference between art and decoration, but let's just say that decoration is closer to art than practicality. Decoration issues are concerned with everything matching each other, the different elements of a home décor, or of the décor of a specific room, looking good together and moving in the same direction, towards the same aesthetic goal. In a sense, this is relatively close to art. In fact, some artists do both expressive art and decorative art. And decorative arts are concerned with certain practical issues. For example, a beautifully decorated dinner set has to have a practical aspect to it. I mean the plates have to be of a certain size, the cups have to have handles that fit in your hand, the bowls have to have a certain size, etc. That's function and it has been the case since ceramics were invented and used to create dinner sets. But what we see now, to continue with the same example, is that ceramic dinner sets also have to be dishwasher safe for example. They have to be stain-free, so that when they come out of the dishwasher, not only did they not get damaged, lose their color, or get some of the décor washed off, they also have to come out without any stains on them so that the lady of the house can take them straight out of the dishwasher and put them in the kitchen cabinets.

Now I don't know that much about ceramics, but I am ready to bet that it somehow prevents certain things to be done with ceramics, or with other types of tablewares, things that would result in the pieces being damaged in the dishwasher. Now that is easily confused with style, while it really is the result of new demands being placed on art. For example, I am ready to bet that very small details, that are fragile in nature, like little ceramic elements placed on each piece, such as leaves, or other small things, might break off in the dishwasher and thus are not used today. This results in smoother pieces, pieces that don't have elements "sticking out" so to speak, and in turn this smoother look is becoming the trademark of contemporary tableware, and in turn we see it as "progress" just like we see things that make cooking faster as "progress". But the fact is that it is really another instance of a demand for more practical art, art that merges seamlessly in our lives, art that is just as much art as it is practical.

3 - How do artists fare in this new environment and how do they handle this situation?

Well, it depends on the choices that each artist makes. Most commercial artists, the majority in fact, decide that it is to their benefit to meet the demand for practical art. For them, this becomes a marketing point: that their art accommodates the demands of modern life. But in doing so there is a risk that they make their art less artistic. There is a risk that they are in fact making a product that meets the demands of everyday life, more than they are making an artistic creation whose goal is to enlighten our lives, open our minds to a new reality, or again create an object that presents us with another way of looking at the world.

Here you see the conflict head-on so to speak. How can one create art that caters to our desire to make our lives easier –art that is easy to clean for example- and at the same time create art that opens our mind to a new reality? Aren't those two goals opposite? How can art merge in our lives and at the same time get us to question the world we live in, or see this world with new eyes?

4 - Is art becoming more and more decorative and less and less artistic?

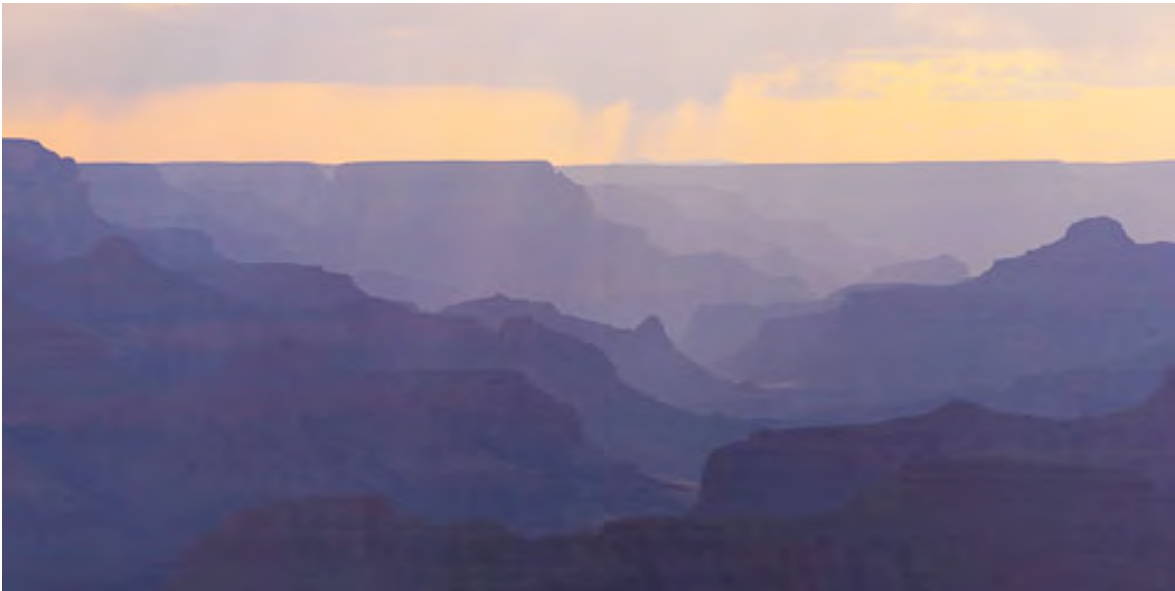
Yes, I think that most art today is becoming more and more decoration oriented. That is, the purpose of art is becoming more and more practical. We are seeing less expressive art and

more decorative art. We are also seeing the emergence of a new category, which is expressive art with significant decorative qualities.

This is perhaps the most successful category of art at art shows right now and I expect that this success will continue. This category basically says: “here is the expression of the artist, of his talent, packaged in a way that fits perfectly in your home and in your life in terms of size, color, presentation, display and cleaning. What can you find wrong with it? Since you cannot, why are you hesitating to buy it?” In short, it is art that is designed to not only enthrall the buyer, but also to answer all possible objections, including price and shipping. Price is very carefully calculated, and shipping is pre-planned, usually done with custom-made crates that are sometimes returned to the artist after delivery. In other words, such artists are excellent business people who design products that they sell under the category of art.

5 - Has the practical aspect become part of the buying process for art Collectors?

Absolutely. I see it all the time. Customers come to me and they have a tape measurer in one hand, a notepad in the other, and they are armed with the precise dimensions of the area they need art for. They are concerned about the dimensions of the piece as much as they are concerned with the actual subject matter of the piece. And if the two do not work together, if for example they find a piece they like but which is the wrong size, and a piece they like a little less but which is the right size, and if the piece they like best is not available in any other size, they will choose the piece which is the right size, because size is more important than subject matter at that point.



Grand Canyon Mesas

The piece has to fit the space, not the other way around. And since the kind of spaces people have in their home, called niches most commonly, are relatively standard, you find artists who offer pieces in these exact sizes, to make the decision making process that much easier, and to generate more sales. Standard sizes is a very strong selling point, and again this regardless of the subject matter. People no longer want just art, they want art that comes in standard sizes that

fit the areas designed to display art in their homes. But, they are not ready to pay commission prices for this art either. They want to find it ready made because ready-made prices are lower than commission prices.

As you can see, being an artist in business is miles away from just being an artist. Most artists don't even know what standard sizes are. We have to go over that with just about every artist we help market their work. It's like teaching the alphabet, except that we don't say A, B, C, D. Instead we say 8x10, 11x14, 16x20, 20x30 and so on. You wouldn't believe how many artists don't succeed in selling their work because they are trying to sell non-standard sizes!

6 - Do you have recommendations about how artists should approach this situation?

Again, I think that it depends on the decisions each artist makes in regards to all that we discussed previously. But, there is no doubt that it is changing how artists approach art, especially if these artists are making a living selling their art, which most of them do. I mean most artists who will consider these issues are making a living from art.

For example, I have an artist friend who is originally from Bulgaria and has been living in the US-- in Scottsdale, Arizona-- for about 10 years. He has his own gallery and his work sells well, but even then he is considering buying and selling real estate because he cannot turn enough of a profit after paying all his expenses. Well, in regards to his work, he showed me paintings he created in Bulgaria, of which he only has a few, and paintings he created in Arizona, of which he has many. In fact his gallery is filled with those. Well, to make a long story short, the paintings he created in Bulgaria are relatively small, maybe 16x20 maximum size, and very carefully done. If I was collecting his work these are the ones I would want to acquire. They are truly expressive and done for no other purpose than to express his emotions, at least from my perspective.

The paintings he created in Arizona on the other hand are very large, up to 60x90 inches or larger. In fact, he doesn't paint anything in the small sizes he used in Bulgaria. These new paintings are also about subjects that people like and want to buy. In fact, some subjects are so popular that he may have ten or fifteen paintings of the same subject in his gallery at the same time. For example, when I visited his gallery, he had multiple paintings of Anasazi Pottery (prehistoric ceramics from the US Southwest), in a variety of formats and composition. He calls them "Pots". He had vertical "Pots" panoramic pots, horizontal pots, 40x50 pots, 60 x70 pots and more. Basically, what he is saying is "if you like pots you came to the right place: no matter what the size of the area you want to decorate might be I have a piece of the correct size." And, if the customer can't find the exact size they need, he'll make a custom painting, in whatever size they desire, for only a minor increase in cost. I think he currently charges \$500 more for a custom piece, on a \$2000 to \$6000 regular price. That's 25% to less than 10% more, which is very little for a commissioned piece.

Alain Briot
Arizona
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