

How Critical Thinking Sabotages Painting

Painting requires different abilities from articulating what one's art is about.

By LAURIE FENDRICH

*Painting is a medium in which the mind can actualize itself; it is a medium of thought.
Thus painting, like music, tends to become its own content.*
— Robert Motherwell

During the two and a half decades I was a full-time painting professor before retiring in 2014, followed by the year and a half I spent as a visiting artist at two prominent art schools, I observed dramatic shifts in ideas about teaching painting. Professors of my ilk see painting as a hands-on art form best learned through looking at great paintings and at painters in action, and by painting while being coached. The new pedagogy has been endorsed mostly by younger painting professors but a few geezers too, who see painting as best learned through critical thinking, a method borrowed from literature and the social sciences.

“Skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing” a subject, “critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking.” So says the Critical Thinking Community. The approach benefits disciplines based in words, and I use it myself when teaching modern art history and humanities seminars. But it's a disaster when used to teach painting, whether to college art majors who want to become painters, to students who want to go into neighboring fields like graphic design or photography, or to biology students who decide to give painting a try.

Applied to painting, critical thinking too often ends up calling into question the very medium—a deconstructionist impulse that particularly sabotages beginning students. Playing baseball or tennis requires accepting the game as a whole, and so does painting. But unlike baseball or tennis, painting is an open-ended pursuit without any numerical victory or defeat. It's fraught with subjectivity and uncertainty. It is, as an artist I know has said, one semi-mistaken brushstroke after another applied until a kind of truce against the possibility of a perfect painting is reached.

Painting is particularly ill-suited to the critical thinking that has become ubiquitous on college syllabi and de facto mandated by outcomes-assessment mavens who demand that all professors, even art professors, articulate “desired outcomes” from specific “goals and objectives.” Nonetheless, given the corporatization, bureaucratization, quantification, and discrediting of subjectivity and taste in higher education, it has been able to establish first a foothold, then a beachhead, and ultimately a colony in that most unlikely of places, the college painting classroom.

By sidestepping its subject, critical thinking inadvertently bolsters the old idea, around since Plato but not in full flower until the Romantic era starting in the 18th century, that art can't be taught. In a cloudy, anti-pedagogical way, it's true: The spark of inspiration and creativity involved in making art is mostly beyond the reach of teachable knowledge, unless you give credence to those airport-bookstore self-help books and online you-can-be-an-artist boondoggles. Equally true, however, is that this idea has had an insidious effect on art students and professors because — on the ground, as they say — it's an invitation for professors to stop teaching and students to stop learning.

With today's identity-conscious students wanting, right off the bat, to express in paint ideas about anything from gender crossing to wealth inequality to global political oppression, competence in painting's traditional skills has become almost a no-go zone. Painting professors have retreated to merely "supporting" and "nurturing" student painters, asking only that students "articulate" what they're trying to do — that is, to retroactively apply critical thinking to their works. As a result, a lot of students leave painting courses prematurely feeling good about themselves because they're able to talk some pretty good contemporary smack about art. But few have learned much about painting.

In the fall, I had some extended conversations with the renowned California painter Wayne Thiebaud. A professor of painting at the University of California at Davis for almost 40 years, and after that perhaps the world's most famous art adjunct faculty member for another 16, Thiebaud is a spry 95-year-old who spends most days in his studio and plays a lunchtime hour of tennis every day. He rose to national prominence in the early 1960s with his thick, cheery paintings of lusciously colored candies, pastries, and cakes. For a while, he was considered one of the original Pop artists, along with Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg. He moved on, however, to paintings of exaggeratedly steep San Francisco streets, landscapes of the flat midriff of California (where, save for a brief stint in New York, he's lived most of his life), and lonely human figures.

Thiebaud has the kind of talent and bravura that lets him teach by painting his assignments as continuing demonstration, alongside his students. In that, he's a rarity.

"Painters don't really want to paint in front of anyone," he says. "They prefer to make their mistakes without anyone watching. But this is a great way to show students how the act of painting is done by a living painter — as opposed to Titian, who isn't here." From his friend, the abstract expressionist painter Willem de Kooning, Thiebaud learned that painting is "a process of starting over at every stage." Painting offers, in other words, constant and multiple paths to success (and failure). Thiebaud's love of tennis might come from a similar virtue: The game (like baseball, but unlike football) promises a chance of victory right up to the very end.

Thiebaud believes the two most important things a painting instructor must teach are how to render a three-dimensional object convincingly on a flat surface and how the painter's combinations of color create the sense of light. Practice-centered teachers like me, though we vary widely in our methods, essentially agree. We introduce students to painting through fundamentals — basic color theory, the behavior of pigment color, principles of composition, ways to make paintings appear flat versus ways to create three-dimensional illusions, paint handling, a little chemistry, and a few art-historical examples of artists (Édouard Manet, George Bellows, Alice Neel, Helen Frankenthaler) who handled paint particularly well. As Thiebaud puts it: "To call everything art is an obfuscation for the students and fails to clarify what we're trying to get at as painters. Painting is concrete, but art is abstract. I don't think we know what art is. But we know a lot about painting."

So how did critical thinking get into the mix? First, there are many administrators who like the way it makes otherwise incomprehensible images appear under the thumb of reason. Then there are painting professors who embrace it because they think it gets rid of stodgy, laborious, and boring foundation requirements that crush the souls of young, sensitive students wanting to express themselves. There are also those who think that 150 years of modern art obviate both the need for, and the possibility of, teaching fundamentals. What kind of 'fundamentals' did Marcel Duchamp or Jean Dubuffet or Donald Judd or Joseph Beuys or David Hammonds need? they ask. Others note

that since the common list of painters who mastered the fundamentals are derived mostly from a pool of white, European males, requiring painting students to attain a certain competence in them is sexist and racist. Finally, much of the hard painting work that rests on the triad of mind, hand, and paint can be, some *au courant* professors assume, outsourced to photo-transfer, digital scanning, and ink-jet printing. Since techniques are presumed to be instantly available off the technological shelf, a motto of convenience has taken hold in some art programs: “No technique before need” is the buzz phrase — an attitude that strikes me as a lot like saying there’s no need to learn French until you get to Paris.

Meanwhile, some painting professors enjoy the collapse of any shared convictions that painting has universal or core knowledge. After all, that relieves them of the unpleasant task of making judgments about the quality of student work. Once critical thinking takes over, the focus shifts from visible virtues and flaws in the painting in front of everyone to the student’s putative ideas and noble intentions regarding art and what it can do for the world.

Colleges and art schools have traditionally welcomed students in all majors to sample painting for a semester or so, which is OK as far as it goes. Being a painting professor does carry an obligation not only to mentor art majors but to serve a variety of students taking breadth electives. But for those painting students with a feel for paint and a drive to learn, teaching painting through the lens of critical thinking amounts to lost time. I’ve had a depressing number of students in advanced painting classes tell me that when they look back at their beginning classes suffused in thinking critically about the practice of painting itself, they feel cheated because no one required them to learn anything fundamental about the craft itself. They were asked from the get-go — to use the language of art-school catalogs — to ask bold questions, conduct rigorous social and political investigations, and engage in playful creativity.

Even on the graduate level (I do occasional critiques as a visitor), some poorly trained students lack a basic understanding of how pigment behaves, differently from what color theory predicts. For example, in theory, black added to yellow tamps down the intensity and darkens it, but to the human eye, it produces what appears to be green. They don’t know that oil colors appear darker when applied to the canvas than they appear on the flat palette. They don’t understand the subtle and crucial difference between a color’s intensity — its brightness — and its hue or value. Worse, many painting students at all levels don’t care about these things. They’re willing to accept the sourest, muddiest, most clumsily executed painting if an iconography of personal identity or social critique is crudely visible.

Because critical thinking often overlaps with vague ideas about critical theory, critical thinking applied to painting also leads to a lot of rhetorical gobbledygook about painting and the way it conveys meaning. Nowhere is this more evident than in the many student artist’s statements (*de rigueur* in an age of outcomes assessment) I’ve read over the past several years. Most of them are poignantly well-intended but poorly written. Unfortunately, in the face of demands that they be “articulate” about painting — a part of culture that defies totalization in words — lucidity is lost. In trying to puff up their statements into the jargony prose their professors (particularly on thesis committees) will approve, they pepper them with semi-understood terms lifted from postmodern literary theory.

It’s not uncommon for painting professors — few of them trained in Continental philosophy, or any other philosophy, for that matter — to bandy about such words as “identity,” “oppression,” “pictorial discursiveness,” and “ontology.” Gone is the idea that painting is understood only by

groping one's way to imperfect meaning through poetic expressions or universally understood metaphysical ideas. The imaginative writing of, say, the poet and art critic Frank O'Hara or the aesthetics-focused philosophizing of the painter and scholar Robert Motherwell would be nearly incomprehensible to today's painting students, many of whom have grown used to hearing painting talked about as if it were the subject of a sociology dissertation.

The art world sets an unfortunate standard in this unreadable stuff. For example, here's an excerpt from the Museum of Modern Art's press release about its 2015 "Forever Now" exhibition of contemporary abstract painting:

The artists in this exhibition ... use the painted surface as a platform, map, or metaphoric screen on which genres intermingle, morph, and collide. Their work represents traditional painting, in the sense that each artist engages painting's traditions, testing and ultimately reshaping historical strategies like appropriation and bricolage and reframing more metaphysical, high-stakes questions surrounding notions of originality, subjectivity, and spiritual transcendence.

In other words, paintings as everything but painting.

Painting contains its own roughly defined rules. The art is flat, rectilinear, and smeared with colored pigments. It differs from the many boundaryless arts born in the late 60s and 70s — installation, conceptual, and performance art — where the creators essentially do what they want. A painter can bend painting's rules only so far before a painting is no longer a painting. Moreover, unlike new genres that only now are building their histories, every painting exists in the long shadow of great paintings from the past.

James Elkins is a professor of art history, theory and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a lively, prolific writer with first-hand knowledge about painting. He has an MFA in painting to go along with his Ph.D. in art history, and explores painting education in his books *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students* (University of Illinois Press, 2001) and *Art Critiques: A Guide* (New Academia Publishing, 2012). I asked him if painting, bounded and defined by its own rules, might be exempt from the Romantic idea that art can't be taught.

"Probably not," he said.

In an earlier book, *What Painting Is* (Routledge: 1999), Elkins describes in detail the particular kind of uncertainty endemic to painting, beginning with the nonrational ways in which painters throughout history have come up with bizarre concoctions out of such things as blood, urine, and horse hooves to make their paints. While modern chemists have developed synthetic substitutes for most traditional natural pigments, in terms of its gooey, messy essence paint hasn't changed one iota. Elkins makes the case that painters and alchemists alike handle their materials "without knowledge of their properties, by blind experiment," and mix their substances not by formula, but by feel.

Yet relying on feel isn't quite the chancy process it might at first seem. Feel is a way for painters to escape clichéd Martha Stewart colors and discover situational new ones among the millions the human eye can perceive. Because modern painting relies so much on the individual artist's feel, Elkins doesn't see much place for concrete knowledge of the Thiebaud-esque sort. "It's no longer clear that

painting is something that requires a body of knowledge that can be studied and learned,” he says. “It may be ‘stepless’ — beyond the reach of any routine education.”

According to Elkins, the prescribed “way to make a painting” was abandoned with the Impressionists, and painters became perpetually at risk of “sliding into a wasteland of mottled smudges with no rhyme or reason.” He doesn’t consider this a bad thing. He thinks painting is a perfect match for our “anxious age” and is “the greatest art form for expressing our place between rule and rulelessness.”

That’s all well and good at the top, with paintings created by good, near-great, and great artists. At that level, yes, the celebrated uncertainty of painting, the way every brush stroke tries and partly fails to correct another, may be impossible to teach, only accessible to the talented through observation and experience. But that approach, in my view, obscures the aspects of painting that are certain and that can be taught.

As painting professors become increasingly enamored of critical thinking, or pressured by academic fashion to embrace it, they lose the ability to understand these aspects, and they abandon pursuing the fruits of direct observation in favor of the dubious pleasures of verbal abstraction. Inspired (if that’s the word) by such flaccidly overreaching exhibitions as “Forever Now,” their students come to the fore as the next crop of “emerging artists” who prematurely indulge in deep social and political readings of their own paintings. Professors aren’t being tripped up by the operational uncertainty of painting — that has always been the medium’s magic and its glory as well as its challenge. What’s hindering them is the faux-uncertainty of borrowed critical thinking that stuffs painting into a box of pretentious words.

Well, then, if the craft of painting is hard if not impossible to teach, and if the theory of painting doesn’t help make great or even good painters, then maybe painting doesn’t fit in the modern university at all, you might argue. What good in an academe increasingly dominated by STEM fields and metrics are painting’s subjective, haptic procedures and its holistic approach?

Lots of good. For starters, its vast range of colors — compare it to the limited range offered by the additive colors of the computer screen’s pixels — and its felt composition within a rectangle offer models for understanding alternative ways to organize what happens on computer screens and smartphones.

More important, with its openness to incorporating chance and accident, and its continual internal morphing as it grows, painting offers a direct demonstration of how innovation can come from within a physically prosaic and limited enterprise. Painting professors and students should abandon the windbagery of academic critical thinking and remember that, while there may not be any bedrock fundamentals in art, there are plenty of fundamentals in painting. And if now and then they take time to notice when it is stirring, beautiful, and exhilarating — well, no harm done.

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<http://chronicle.com/article/How-Critical-Thinking/235719>