

There is a misconception that analyzing art somehow kills the experience of art. There are many instances where analysis does indeed kill experience by taking you out of the experience in order to measure, think or speak about it—a painful, ugly, self-conscious act that separates you from total abandonment and enjoyment. It's good to know when to keep quiet.

For a while there was a school of thought in ceramic art that embraced a kind of willful ignorance. The act of art making belonged to the realm of mysterious intuition, and analysis was dubbed the spoiler of wild fun and spontaneity. As much as many artists of this ilk attracted attention to the field because of their work and charisma, this allergy towards analysis in my opinion kept the field static, while the rest of the art world kept evolving.

Mind you, I am not advocating art speak drivél. As a person with a short attention span, if it doesn't readily lead to discovery or a deeper appreciation, I'm not equipped to be interested. So please bear with me.

The big problem with not being able or willing to dissect what it is you find interesting is that you are bound to imitation. Let's say I really like the shirt you have on. How come? "I don't know, it's just cool [i.e. leave me alone]". Well, then I'm stuck having to buy the same shirt. I should say *try* to buy the same shirt, because without knowing the brand, I didn't take the time to notice exactly what the shirt looked like, other than it looked cool. Believe me, I have purchased some pretty doggie shirts trying to capture that "cool" look, and I bet you have also.

Lets back up and take a closer look at this shirt. By noticing exactly what appeals to me, perhaps I find what I like is that it has a very tight geometric design that contrasts with the organic and soft material it was printed on—makes the design seem like it's almost floating on the surface. Now, all of a sudden, I don't even have to buy a shirt. I just like that kind of contrast, and I can look for other kinds of tight geometric patterns on a more organic surface (or vise-versa, organic designs on tight geometric forms), and I might end up with a bed spread, or curtains, or even perhaps a wallet or a table or lamp shade that really don't look anything like the original shirt. Or I might introduce this contrast in my artwork. Just by looking closer and figuring out why something interests me visually and/or conceptually, my world has opened up. I'm no longer a slave to imitation.

An example of the discoveries that come through analysis from my own art practice: One late afternoon during my grad school days I was walking around the concrete urban jungle surrounding the University of Southern California, and a crack in the sidewalk jumped out at me. It was stunning, stopped me in my tracks. It was imperative for me to figure out why the huge reaction to such a mundane thing.

First was the recognition of the crack looking like an aerial view of a river or fault line

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from 30,000 feet—this disorienting change in scale was the result of late afternoon sunlight raking across the surface and exposing the depth and texture of the crack. Upon further reflection, I found visual connections between the gesture of the crack and lightning streaks, tree limb growth, and the path of blood vessels.

Through writing, speaking with faculty and fellow students, other insights came to the fore. The gesture of the crack as a line drawing is almost impossible to contrive, it has its own beautiful fractal way of fissuring. Cracks in clay are to be expected as clay shrinks. That is its nature. But cement is man's attempt at permanence, and as such, cracks are considered a blemish or a failure of the material. So a crack in cement takes on far more vulnerability than it does in clay, pointing not only to the settling of buildings, but to the unsettling nature of the ground in earthquake country.

For me, floor became vessel. Rather than patch the cracks up, I cleaned them out, then filled them with sands, pigments, and metals—not unlike the old Japanese raku potters who stuffed gold leaf into the cracks of their vessels, making the work more precious than if it had made it through the firing unscathed. The qualities of these meandering lines in the floor did indeed become those of rivers, fault lines, lacerations, or lightning (depending on the material used), and the work exposed the natural process of entropy occurring in man-made air-conditioned environments.

A few delightful insights came from the making itself, as well as from the writing.

The work was subtle (you had to look down in order to see the work, not the first place you expect to find work in a gallery) and many people missed it. But for those who saw it, it was a discovery. This to me was as much a part of the creative act as anything I did. Another insight and outgrowth was that the rather meticulous activity of cleaning out a crack and then filling it in became its own sort of bizarre and poignant performance piece in exhibitions a few years later. The crack that stands out most to me was the one beautified with gold leaf during a one night show in a space scheduled to be demolished the following day.

I began making latex molds of especially gorgeous sections of cracks, making concrete slabs from the molds. So the crack would repeat over and over, except that I cast each slab at a different angle. These were arranged end to end to form a new crack, a line drawing that could have spelled out my name had I wanted it to. I also found conceptually interesting the idea of displacement—of a crack in the art studio floor becoming an overlay on the gallery floor. Many strange stories and further work may grow out of this kind of transposition and overlay from one place to another. So this is the very good news, that analysis can deepen appreciation.

Sometimes when students truly look closer, I can tell from their journal entries that acts of discovery are occurring. I see what they see: the slow motion explosion of cream being poured in coffee, the white shirt on the floor taking on ten different shades of white and whose folds look like sand dunes, the frozen flow of wood grain, the feeling of history when looking at the ghost-like erasing on a chalk board, constellations and other patterns emerging from popcorn ceilings (though these are mostly visual examples, they become poetically slippery, mixing seamlessly with concepts and content). The world opens up because of their seeing, their analysis, and this is the power of art and of analysis—of seeing more than what you thought was there, that things are not what they seem at first blush. This kind of closer noticing is its own reward, but also can be a doorway to content-driven work, as well as to tapping your own aesthetic and your own voice.

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