

PHILOSOPHY AND PRINCIPLES

When I started out on the writing of the Philosophy and Principles section for the John Sherwood Art Information website I subconsciously assumed that I'd have to craft it somewhat for it to be palatable to those who read it, with it being my official website and thus my 'shop window' of sorts. However, as I wrote the piece I found myself being very direct in my expression, using the language of my everyday speech. Fresh detail and ideas remembered kept coming to me as I wrote; they also surfaced in the gaps between word processing sessions. Indeed, when I started writing in what must have been a rather banal mind-set I realised that "we have a 'defining moment' here!" and even felt the process to be a "cathartic" one! And then I decided that here was an appropriate time to compile the accumulated thoughts of my lifetime of working as a serious artist. If anyone has to be true to their experience it has surely to be the artist... I decided to retain the informal, commonplace phrases I used at times, to keep the natural, almost spoken flow of expression, and to speak to the reader more spontaneously.

Please note: The John Sherwood Art Information website has been created to work like a reference book: the viewer can look at specific parts of it, and they can take from it what they will. So this section isn't intended necessarily to be read from beginning to end. It covers all aspects of my thought about living as an artist; and the different parts are divided up under convenient headings, and are

intended to be read almost in the spirit of quotes. I intend to modify what's here and shall also add to this column of thoughts as fresh ones surface...

My work is what I do while I'm trying to work out what it is that I'm doing.

I'm not sure how much of an over-reaching philosophy there has been to what I do. This art-making has been an unfolding journey in which the nature of what I'm doing has gradually revealed itself. So, as time has gone by my view of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it has changed. Although my current 'philosophy' (whatever it is) seems to be the best one I can have, I'm sure it shall change again, just as it always has done. Doing this would be less interesting if I had it pinned down. It'll never be pinned down, and that's how it should be, because that is the nature of the activity: seek and you shall never quite find it, so keep on looking... Polymath Don Van Vliet, better-known perhaps as musician Captain Beefheart once said that if you say 'This is what I do' then you aren't a real artist. That seems close to it but I wouldn't want to dismiss others so readily. I find that almost everybody has something positive to offer.

Some life tools may be not regarded as being art, and some are, but for me there is no meaningful boundary to be found in terms of importance between one activity and another per se. They all enhance life.

We ruminate, write notes, draw maps, and use spanners. We use technology as an extension of our natural abilities to help us in life. I see what we call art as being another tool, one to enhance and deepen our subjective experience. It develops my innate abilities: I better understand the world by observing the appearance and structure of things through drawing. By using my memory and imaginative faculties in art-making, it enhances them. Art interacts with my knowledge; and also my thoughts, feelings, beliefs, opinions, dreams, fantasies, and sensations – any aspect of my subjective life. Its verbal aspect is a tool that incorporates and interfaces for example with the notes that I write to help with everyday life: the shopping lists that bring me food, my memos and calendars developed as I plan; the diary and journal that record and reflect upon what has happened. Diabetes notebooks (I regard as being sketchbooks of a sort) have helped me to overcome the condition; the data from these shall be transferred into image and text art. Anything from everyday life can be collected for any reason. I take photographs to make me more observant of my surroundings. A

collection of photographs of access points in the pavement are a recent example of this. The data and detritus of everyday life – snatches of speech, collage items such as leaves - are a part of my lived experience and make their way into my art. Memories and imaginings can all make their way in. The notes and sketches made, the photographs can then be taken further, enhanced, and combined as progression makes itself apparent. The art, the journal, the poetry enhance my subjective life. I see no compelling reason why I should confine myself to what is recognisable as fine art; or painting. Working with words provides an outlet for other aspects of experience. Sculpture is another, as is performance: The means of expression are potentially infinite.

My art-making continues to serve more conventional purposes

Although my art is contemporary I still get from art-making what I believe has always been rewarding for art-makers. I make art for 'ordinary reasons'. I enjoy the process of making art, before I seek to make it serve a more 'useful purpose'. I enjoy the process of creating a reality, which I think picture-making essentially is. I enjoy problem-solving, as well as the process of structuring and making. I like the feel of the materials. I enjoy the difficulty involved in making art. I like to meet a challenge when I encounter something new. There is the satisfaction that comes from improving on what I've done. It is a lifelong habit that feeds itself. It gives me something to do, to pass the time, and it gives me a sense of purpose. It gives me an interesting life. On one level, it could be described as fulfilling the role of a 'hobby'; much as I dislike the use of an economics-defined word for a preoccupation which I have monetised; at which I am highly-qualified as a practitioner, and that qualified me to teach it as a profession. Art can indeed be play and fun and a pastime, but on the other hand it can be highly intellectual and serious.

There are more advanced, profound and abstract reasons for making art:

It is extremely difficult in Western culture for conscientious and deserving qualified practitioners to make a living as fine artists, unless perhaps they are one of the chosen few with a legend attached to them – such as Damien Hurst or Tracey Emin in the UK - or on the other hand, they are, for instance, a painter of portraits of pets for living room walls. You just have to look at just how many artists there are on Twitter and weigh them against how few people there are who are likely to be wanting to buy art at any one time, and out of those, how few potential customers would be keen to choose

that particular artist's work, and for the price that's being asked for, with materials being so expensive, notwithstanding the need for the artist to make a living, and the odds stacked against the artist become obvious*. In the light of that, the absurdity of wanting to make work primarily to serve others (who are not obliged to like, appreciate or want what I do anyway), and especially when I invest so much of myself into it, leads me to focus all the more on what else is there for me in doing it. And yes, there is a great deal more for me to gain from making art beyond the simpler pleasures described in the previous section. Indeed, I think about virtually everything in life through the variety of creative activities that I put under a broad definition of the word 'art', or that at least go hand-in-hand with it. Little things in the everyday are akin to art: Jokes, hairstyles, choosing wallpaper, giving greetings cards and gifts, making a speech, keeping a diary: these are all creative to some degree. To me they can be grouped together with painting, drawing and so on: these too interact with my life in their own way. I want these all, art included, to be natural processes that do not have to be forced.

*The 'market' for most of us: those people the artist knows or who cross their path and want to possess something they make for some subjective reason, humanises the entire art-making and sharing process. Those are amongst the most valued recipients of my work...

I use art for many purposes. These include problem-solving; meditation; self-expression; enquiry, recording; the deepening and confirmation of my experience; Artworks can be souvenirs and mementoes; as well as snapshots taken from experience. They can fix ideas and feelings through processes and procedures that are sometimes akin to religious ritual.

Art is an outlet for my agitated response to the mystery of being alive and how to live. I don't know whether life has any real purpose higher than that of sustaining DNA, but making art at least resembles one in that it is a direct response, having been dreaming, to waking up every morning and living in the world.

Making art provides emotional benefits. It gives my ordinary experience a feeling of specialness and significance. It gives me a sense of control and autonomy over my circumstances. Making art can be an escape from life, and a barrier against the world. And it can amount to therapy and yes: catharsis.

On working with the nature of the materials:

I agree with painter LS Lowry's assertion that an artist should work with regard to the nature of the materials. But I regard this idea as being something of a truism. Any aware approach is working with regard to the nature of the materials. What really counts is the quality of the vision and mentality behind the work. I choose to use the materials in any way that suits what I'm doing. Sometimes I may paint 'slickly' whereas at other times, I may enjoy the way that transfer lettering crumbles on application and is inclined to go on crookedly. And it is important for me to point out here that the variety of available media with their differing languages will take me down different lines of enquiry and into different states of mind.

On the other hand, I am interested in what is called conceptual art, where perhaps the message is the medium. Indeed, this is where my art blends into everyday accounting and problem-solving activities and my 'word work'.

Continuous Inspiration...

When I was an art student I was told that 'hard work is what it's all about' and that it is '99% perspiration 1% inspiration'. But as a more mature artist I have moved away from the habit of being the hard working (obsessively and all of the time if possible) perfectionist practitioner, striving to be a leader in my field. Instead, I work to the principle of Continuous Inspiration, my subjective mind mined and enhanced, striving to live in and create in response to the moment. To achieve this is to make the art a fully living process, rather than a hard labour. Those brushstrokes that are the product of 'chipping away at it' can't be any more alive than the gouging marks of a machine digging a tunnel through a mountain. I do not work initially with the intention of working all the time. Trying to make this a natural process does not have to be forced. Potentially I could be in a situation where I am prevented from painting, or do not have the opportunity to be especially creative, but still I could scrawl in the sand or make an imaginative remark in response to the moment. Sometimes hours

spent somewhere else can appear in a line in my diary or as a small sketch. It turns out that my inspiration is indeed continuous and self-perpetuating. What counts is that the creative act, however large or small, interweaves harmoniously with life. This is creativity as a part of life. If I am diligent and prolific then it is because I have been continuously inspired and able to work, and this is what normally happens. It is important to garner benefit from the art while I make it, rather than living always for future 'successes' that are never fully achieved. Every day is to be appreciated through creativity rather than hindered by trying to fit creativity in. I do not strive to be the best artist. I strive to be true to myself and my life. This principle holds true whether I am in a positive mind-set or am working through psychological difficulties or conceptual problems. The art helps me primarily to live in the present. And if the art I produce through that turns out to be good, then that's a bonus.

My diverse art reflects the variety of my experience.

Paul Klee quote: "I am my style"

My 'style' is the appearance of the statements I make as a reflection of my overall experience. I pursue what presents itself. This is true both in what comes from life as well as from the process. I let the creations flow; and they can interact amongst themselves; developing as they will.

These creations inevitably come therefore from 'all possibility' and fit together logically, however eccentric they may be. I am the agency for what is presented while, in a sense, the work can portentously and perhaps pretentiously be said to be the product of a self-ordering cosmos beyond me. And with possibility literally being infinite, and with happenstance governing my progression, my voice is defined ultimately by what I wouldn't 'choose' to do, or perhaps what I don't happen to do.

But I feel that what I call my 'psychic fingerprint' does unify different items from my multifarious output, even if they be as differing as a painting, a photograph and a poem. It all feels like me.

Sometimes, though, I find that a 'style' of sorts emerges within a group of works without my being conscious of it. This has been especially true of some of my oil paintings in which certain motifs have appeared across different works without my intending for it to happen. Precisely why I use these devices is not clear, and they are certainly included subconsciously.

Starting point material sets a piece off on its own unique trajectory. Additional material affects the piece's direction again. So there is no single pre-determined style as such: no 'this is how I show the sun; and this is one of my trees done in that squiggly way of mine'. I work without strict rules, though sometimes working within set parameters is productive. My only real limitations are practical ones, such as the availability of materials and storage space. The diverse products ensuing from my process are a slipstream from my life. They are an imprint from my experience. They represent a journey overall but each statement, every piece has its own journey. And a piece takes as long as it takes, and I work by the maxim of "I've started so I'll finish".

My Pictures Tell Me Stories

When I look back at my work, I remember things that happened around the time of its making, or events that occurred around it later. So a piece of art can act as a reminder - or perhaps a memento: when the memory is a good one.

Holistic Art as Magic Tricks

Art pieces are meaningful constructs of one kind or another. Looking back on earlier work can provide me with fresh perspectives on both life and art through the re-examination of earlier statements. But it does not matter if the written information I try to decipher is obscured by further statements, because each finished piece is an overall statement, and is greater than the sum of its parts. Synergy, where the combined visual effect is greater than the sum of the separate effects, is brought about in another way. It is brought about through 'trickery': Meaningful contrasts and harmonies between elements of the visual language - hues, tones, textures, spaces, and forms and so on - are arranged to work

together as a dynamic reality. This 'wizardry' is employed, however, to form expressions that are meant sincerely in the expression of things that are psychologically true.

Furthermore, I regard my creative self-expression as a whole, especially the artefacts that survive, as a holistic artwork. If my extant work was collected together to be shown in one place (The John Sherwood Art Museum perhaps!) to be viewed in its entirety, that would be ideal.

Science versus Art

I believe most definitely in a science-based approach to the structure and running of everyday and communal life. Such an approach would meet most of our needs and would solve most of our problems. Moreover, scientific enquiry shows us things as they really are. Observation is a part of the scientific method; it is also at the heart of art. However, I see art and science as being dovetailed or interlocked in a sort of 'yin and yang'. I see them as being complementary opposites; left brain/right brain etc. to use another popular notion to illustrate the idea. And art shows us our subjective response to the world that is described by science.

I am back to where I was at 18, but in a more sophisticated form.

At eighteen and about to go to art school, I was already quite well-formed as an artist. I worked from observation, memory and imagination in a variety of media – most of the media I work with now – and used art as a means of expressing my observations, feelings and opinions. It was a reflection of my subjective life at that time. My teenage hobby art was being fused with what I was learning at school, where I was introduced to a range of new media and acquired the beginnings of a deeper cultural and art historical knowledge. I wrote poems from time to time and kept a diary. I dabbled with music-making and bought recordings.

Then I went to art school, where it all became more difficult. They told us to forget what we'd done at school. They gave the impression that it had been valueless. They took our school folders from us and failed to return them. They subjected us to exercises that were alien to what I was used to. Art was broken down and preconceptions about it were destroyed. They

introduced us to sterile-sounding terms such as 'design' and 'good image'. The atmosphere on that Pre-Diploma also known as a Foundation Course was one of cynicism and criticism. Very little was good enough for them. We were after all the 'visual spastics' that they told us we were. We were introduced to art history and culture. On the Fine Art degree course I discovered canvas and oil paint, and working in a series. The talk was of 'making it' as we were influenced by and copying the fashionable art of the time. My earlier interests were still there but were subsumed by the need to be a 'proper artist', when in a sense I was a proper artist in the first place – until it was largely knocked out of me.

And the desire to be that proper artist I was conditioned to be continued into life beyond college. I had to use the correct methods and materials, find recognition and critical acclaim, sell work, and make reference to the greats. I had to work out where I was in relation to those around me, and what my status was. Art in the media became important. Attitudes towards and critiques of art encountered on TV and in the newspapers had an impact. I'd attend art exhibitions and absorb lessons from there. My intention was to make money at a day job until I was 'discovered'. The feeling was always one of struggle and stress in pursuit of at what seemed increasingly to be an unattainable goal. I even felt 'conned' or at least given a false impression of what the future would be by those teachers and so on who had encouraged me.

Eventually I began to realise that both I and the society largely had it the wrong way round. At eighteen I was saying what was important to me: I was speaking for and to myself. By the time I was twenty two, fresh out of college, and without realising it, it was as though I was laying something on for others to consume or approve of. The voices of all those teachers telling me what the right and wrong kinds of art were, continued to whisper maliciously in my ear. But as I matured, the voice of my inner self became louder and kept on reminding me there was another way: my own way. What other way can there be? Both philistine and culturally elitist commentators and critics in the media continued to bombard me with their views on art, and certainly for a while, they were inhibiting. They had made it more difficult – but not impossible - for me to be myself. And I did continue to be true to myself. And I am very much that way now, and I care very little for the opinions of those whose criticisms I disagree with, and I care not at all in the first place for working to produce things for others to consume. What counts most is what I'm working through within myself.

On Criticism

Criticism comes with the territory. Even those non-art activities with which I choose to group art – jokes for example – can fall flat or offend someone, or be defined as ‘bad jokes’ and so on. If you choose to share your art with others you have to accept that they will judge it, and if they find fault with it they are likely to tell you. They may want to help you. Judging work is a part of the viewing process. It’s almost unavoidable. I think of myself as being quite generous in my appraisals, but in reality I find fault too, and sometimes find myself doing it quite fiercely. But I’m hurt just as easily by criticism as others can be. However, I have tried to find a rational approach to criticism when it happens to me. By adopting these attitudes I wish to find a healthy response to criticism. The approach I’m talking about is bullet-pointed here:

- It’s helpful to know something about the personality of the critic. What kind of person are they? What are their values?
- Where is their desire to criticize coming from? Are they envious? Jealous? Are they upset with you about something else? Are they trying to help?
- Does praise feel right? Does it sometimes seem excessive? Why are they being so nice?
- Does the criticism bear scrutiny in itself? Is it accurate and true? If it isn’t then it doesn’t matter; and if it is then it’s probably better to know about it, so something can be done to remedy the situation.
- If the criticism is true, then perhaps so what? I must be mad if I assume myself to be faultless. I’ll never be perfect, and I can still enjoy myself even if I’m not 100% great!

And I’m sure I can think up numerous other ways of handling criticism when it comes my way...

The ideal outcome for me in sharing my work with others is, in a way, if it opens up a positive discussion around its content and therefore what it says about what is going on in our minds. And if we can identify a way to a better understanding through a more accomplished expression in the work, then that must be a good thing. And the way into knowing how to go about attaining that improved performance would be through further constructive dialogue.

Fill a giant room with all the portraits ever painted by anybody, and it would be hard to spot any obvious originality among them.

When I started out after college one of my bugbears was that of 'originality': how to do something new and different. This, however, was another case of the tail wagging the dog, and laying something on for others to approve of. Nowadays I neither care nor worry about originality. It is almost impossible to be original anyway, as people normally acquire their 'identity' from others, and learn most aspects of their artistic practice from them too. 'Giants' in the field stand on the shoulders of giants that went before them. Major artists such as Frank Auerbach and Francis Bacon base many of their compositions on artists such as Van Gogh, Rembrandt and Velasquez. No, it is enough for me to be true to myself (whatever 'myself' really is), and if I find someone else who is doing something similar to me it would be interesting to compare our work.

A thing takes as long as it takes, and lasts as long as it lasts:

Some of my things may be ephemeral in nature. They may be intended to last for no more than an instant. At the extremities, the conventional notions of what constitutes a work of art break down. Those notions are what the conceptual artists have been challenging for a hundred years. A joke, a witticism, some other remark; or a sand painting, smoke sculpture or an altar may be made instantly and won't last. Another piece: a painting, say, may take years to complete and may last for hundreds of years. It doesn't matter. A thing takes as long as it takes, and lasts for as long as it lasts.

Art for Art's Sake

Circumstances mould what I do. The availability of resources: working space; materials; storage space have a direct and unavoidable influence upon what I can do. Money of course is a resource and to some extent has an unavoidable impact too. Indeed, the finely-crafted detailed but cheaply-made nature of my early paintings was partially a reflection of my lack of funding at that time. But it is quite easy to have the resources to be sufficiently productive, without the attaining of money becoming the main goal. When payment becomes the prime motive for making art, then the process has been distorted. And the extent of my audience has to be on my terms. In a sense it shall be a reflection of the nature of what I

do. I shall publicise it as widely as I am able as I think it has to be given its best chance and the world has to be given its best chance of finding it; but just as the work itself ultimately is a product of nature, so is whatever relationship it has with the world.

“Where the hell are you going to put them all?”

While those activities with which I choose to group art may well have a social dimension, my artwork is primarily a project of and for myself. The things I do matter to me during my lifetime because they are a part of my life. So I don't necessarily mind if they stay with me because this allows me to study them at first hand and get something from them as a viewer. I prefer that normally they function out in the world, but they don't have to. This preference of mine is why I'm publicising what I've been doing through this website and other outlets. When the art and I do part company and it goes into the ownership of others it becomes useful to those people through their relationship with and interpretation of it. I feel that it may be interesting for others to see the outcomes of what I do. But the viewer makes of it what they will: the artefacts take on a life of their own once they go out into the world, not only because they aren't in my ownership anymore, but also because people take their own experience, preconceptions and values to the work. Furthermore, I am aware that they may ignore, misunderstand or dislike what I do. So I don't try to second guess what 'the public' wants when I'm making work. In most cases, I have to express what is of interest to me. And if that sets off a positive response in others, then that's probably a good thing. The piece does generate a power beyond what I originally put into it.

Who it is that sees the work and where it is seen varies. Visitors to my house – friends, relatives, hired workers – comprise much of my first hand audience and market: they often view the work in my studio, on the walls in my house, and then in their houses. Temporary exhibitions that run for a day to a month or more may be held for example in my house which therefore becomes a pop-up gallery. I have also exhibited in other venues including public libraries, cafes, theatre foyers, and conventional art galleries. Work, especially digital work, which is viewed on the internet, has a massive audience. Social media, such as Twitter and Instagram is important. I use Facebook as an online database of my work. Relationships with other artists are developed there as well. I am present on many online galleries, including Saatchi and have work on

Ebay and Etsy too. Prestigious venues with an 'arty' clientele of higher social status aren't necessarily especially interesting or relevant to me. The ideal for me is for art to be equally accessible to all.

The availability of materials and storage space do influence the nature of the work produced, as I've indicated. The making large chunky oil paintings on heavy canvas stretchers won't have much of a future with me if I have nowhere to put them, or don't have the money to pay for the materials. The same goes for sculpture of any size.

(NB: Anxiety Dream Confession - I had a nightmare in which 'some fat, lazy and ignorant woman from Dagenham wearing slacks and winged 1960s spectacles' threw my inconvenient remaining stock of vulnerable unsold works into a skip after I had died; there was no-one else around to stop her doing it. My spirit looked on aghast... Gosh! I must have awoken hoping that the bad dream wasn't prescient! But in reality it wouldn't matter I guess, because I don't suppose a dead artist's pictures are especially significant to him any longer. Mine are definitely most significant to me in relation to the life I'm living in the now.

On working with and for others:

My art-making isn't necessarily a solo enterprise. It can involve collaboration with others and working for them through commissions, making art as personal gifts and so on. And I do acknowledge that there are many who in effect provide me with the 'infrastructure' within which I work. There are, for instance, those who make my materials, provide me with platforms etc. and those who assist me with the presentation of work. There have also been those who have encouraged, advised and criticised me in my efforts over the years.

Although I work primarily for myself, my attitude is not entirely selfish, and the 'spiritual' benefits to be gained from it aren't entirely all for me. My practice doesn't necessarily preclude a relationship with anybody else, and needn't be self-indulgent. My life experience and self-development are certainly most of the project, but it can involve interplay with others. I make art for any subjective purpose and can make it in any way available, so I can project a message if I choose

to. The subject matter of my work can express concern for others and social issues. Indeed, my human values and relationships with others can be dealt with, developed and put into action through the work.

The experience of selling has shown that there is often a personal element in the decision to buy my work. Often I have known or have met the buyer in person. They may be friends or relatives. I enjoy this because it retains the humanity of the art-making process. I'm happy, of course, to sell work to people I don't know especially as the piece may have touched them in some way, leading to their wanting to buy it. And the work when displayed may contribute to the atmosphere of their everyday environment, and may become something of sentimental importance to them or someone else they share the work with.

Furthermore, I regularly interact with the work of others at first hand. I often travel into London to view major art exhibitions. And I have in my collection pieces by many different artists. These include the work of Shelly Wyn-de-Bank, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Ian Goodrich, John Farrington, David Jones, Anthony Green and Eileen Cooper. I know Shelly-Wyn-De-Bank, Ian Goodrich and Eileen Cooper RA personally and have met Anthony Green. Moreover, I attended Loughborough College of Art with Welsh painter Shani Rhys-James MBE, and became re-acquainted with her and her work recently.

John Sherwood