

## REGARDING ARTIST'S STATEMENTS

It seems as if there is no straight forward answer to the question; is an artist's statement necessary? Opinions on both sides waver and there is no widely agreed upon consensus on the statement's place, placement, inclusion/exclusion and contribution to an artist's work. What is certain is that every artist putting their work out there for public scrutiny must take a stab at it at one time or another. Whether it is for personal clarification of ideas regarding one's work, for admission to school or an exhibition every artist will attempt to describe their work in textual form. "Many, though certainly not all, working artists just aren't that good with words. It's as if we're hard-wired from birth to think visually instead of verbally, and not all of us travel easily between the two" (Esaak, 2006, para. 1).

So, what causes us to be deeply suspicious of language, one of our fundamental connections to being human?

The answer, in part, relates to a fatal combination of art critics and education. Art critics use language as scepters of judgment. If words are the messengers that determine our self-worth, then by all means, kill the messenger. Formal education uses language as bastions of control. If we are told when, where and how we can, or cannot, use which words, we grow to mistrust our relationship to language. The mistrust smolders underground, mostly unnoticed, until our words are thrust into a container, like the artist statement. (Goodwin, 2010, para. 4).

As soon as you begin to define your art you have to defend it! Grant (2010) at the Huffington post suggests, contrary to popular belief, that it isn't collectors and galleries that are asking for them, in fact he claims that many of them state a poorly written artist's statement can have the opposite effect it was created for and completely turn people off an artist.

Ernie Kroger(2007) repeatedly remarks that he didn't (doesn't) like developing an artist's statement. It appears to be something he 'had' to do. He makes a point of saying there is an important decision to be made that either, "The image is an illustration for the text or the text is a caption for the image" (2007, track 1). So it sometimes comes down to which is more important, the meaning gained from research and reflection on your imagery or the imagery itself.

Kroger describes his work as pictographs and petro-glyphs made from the process of beetles burrowing underneath tree bark; he comments (jokingly) it may be some form of primitive writing predating humans calling them beetle letters. It is here that I can find links to my own work, while I do not specifically look for narratives, there always seems to be some sort of story or meaning that emerges from viewing the work. It is a certain moment in time where you capture part of a process of transformation and if you arrive there at the right time what you capture can convey some meaning to the viewer through its shape and line, contrast and colour.

Eileen Leier (2007) comments that the artist's statement adds an integral piece of information to understanding an exhibition or body of work as a whole. Yet when trying to adequately describe its purpose and importance she struggles for words, reiterating the

same sort of difficulty expressed by Kroger. She talks about the statement leading the viewer towards a conclusion instead of giving them the autonomy to come to a conclusion on their own. This is one of the issues I have with the artist's statement, because it seems counterintuitive to what I want the viewer to experience and the fact that I leave my work untitled. I leave it as such because I do not want to impose my interpretations on the viewer. The artist's statement imposes things, it leads and directs the viewer towards different conclusions than they would reach on their own, however it also has the possibility of clarifying things or answering questions that may arise during the viewing of the work. It is impossible to make a statement that conveys accurately one hundred percent of your intentions as well as make it appealing and understood by the majority of viewers, it all depends on the subjectivity of the individual viewer and in that sense the overall interpretation is still left slightly to chance.

Michael Jarrett notes that, "The artist inquires. He is similarly arrested by and, thereby, selects (or conversely, is selected by) elements to include in his aesthetic (work or practice)" (2007, p. 81). I find this statement holds a great deal of truth concerning my work as I sometimes feel very deliberated in the choice of my subjects, seeking out neighbourhoods that are more likely to contain the sorts of materials I look for and other times something will just jump out at me, or just catch the edge of my peripheral then after a closer inspection I make a note to return and photograph it. So what drives me to photograph these subjects? Where did it all start and what kinds of connections can be made with the past after over a decade of pursuing these subjects of artistic inquiry?

## INFLUENCES AND CONFLUENCES

I have never fully explored the associations and influences of other artist's work, direct or indirect, on my own practice. In the past I have been content to search and find few artists producing similar work to my own and felt that originality was a key element in successful bodies of work. Now in the context of my re-entry into a graduate school of art and a closer examination of my work through my peers, I can no longer stand by and passively continue my work without more consideration and a deeper exploration of the fundamental aspects of my studio practice.

The area or movement which I most readily identify with is that of the abstract expressionists, mainly painters such as the colour-field works of Mark Rothco. I have always admired Rothco's juxtaposition of various elements of colour gradually melting (blending) into one another. My works are also colour studies in a way, but I do not choose the original colours or how they interact, they have been chosen, purposefully or not by an unknown person and blended by time, use, nature and the elements of weather. In 1998 when I visited the Tate's Rothco Room in London I felt a serenity and saturation of my visual field of sight which I also experience during my photographic process. As I approach my subjects I identify areas of interest within piles of machinery, metal panels of fencing, and towers of recycling and then isolate pockets of colour and texture sometimes spending long periods of time on one small area, trying to decide on how to approach and capture it, becoming lost in the intersection of manmade marks, rust and colour.

There are definitely some shared similarities in both the formal aspects of my work and the sometimes childlike simplicity or primitiveness of the work of the abstract painter

like Rothco (Wikipedia, 2010) and occasionally my photos resemble petroglyphs or cave painting ravaged by time. The influences of time and its effect on the subjects of my work is one of the unifying themes throughout my photography. In a sense there is a certain folklore or storytelling characteristic associated with my photos but it is not something I wish to personally attach to the work through a 'title' stating my beliefs rather it is something which the viewer brings to interpret the work, identifying recognizable symbols or motifs, finding stories and landscapes where none existed.

Researching deeper into abstract art and expressionism I was astonished at the similarities I found in some of my work and a particular piece by Whistler "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket" (1874). It has the rusty character and textural mixing (in brushstrokes) of colours that I am so often attracted to in my subjects.



Figure 1: 'Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket' (1874) by James Whistler and 'Untitled' (2010) by Scott McMaster

These similarities can also be found in the works of Ronnie Landfield, where primary and pastel colours playfully mix creating a landscape like feel. Inherent in each of these comparisons or relational similarities are colour, line, form and composition. The more I search through the works of abstract expressionists the more commonalities I find. Although all of the works I feel drawn to or want to associate with my own are those of painters, which has never been my medium but has always been a source of enjoyment for the richness of colours and their interactions on a 2-D plane.

So what about the influence of photographers one might be asking? The first period that I can think of when a single photographer made a deep impression on me was when I first became aware of the photos of Ansel Adams. The rich black and white photos of breathtaking landscapes with endless depth of field and flawless reproduction appealed to me greatly. So too did the works of Edward Weston, from beautiful nudes to oddly shaped vegetables and plants he creates landscapes from our bodies and with our foods. Both share a richness in detail which I wished to emulate in my own photos, whether I consciously recognized this at that time is unclear. I began shooting anything and everything from close-ups to nightscapes of the everyday, mundane or commonplace objects which composed my surroundings, but in a new light. The pulp and paper mill in my hometown became a focal point of my nightscapes, the light grey smoke that billowed out and was pushed and pulled by the wind off the bay, sometimes enveloping the streets in a thick fog. Sometime later there were significant renovations on the mill; massive pipes, machines and whole sections were excavated and left outside in a scrap pile. I photographed as much as I could before the debris was trucked away a few days later for

recycling. The wear and tear, scouring, rust and unique colours, all fascinated me and has henceforth been a prominent focus of my photographs. Industry, urbanization, consumerism all begin in some sort of factory and before that factory everything came out of the earth, many of my photos capture part of the journey of these unknown objects on their return to the earth as they slowly degenerate, degrade and decompose.

More recently (a few years ago) searching for modern photographers who worked with comparable themes, I found the work of Edward Burtynsky, who works with a lot of the same sorts of materials as I do but in a very grand scale. While his major theme is of nature transformed by industry, part of my theme borders more on industry (or products of industry) being transformed by nature. Both of our themes share common elements of consumption and the beauty found within our refuse and waste. Earlier in this term I searched for abstract expressionist photographers and the results were quite scarce, except for the mention of a man named Aaron Siskind. At first I quickly browsed his work and seeing nothing that visually linked with my own I moved on until very recently I read the following quote, "Move on objects with your eye straight on," Siskind wrote in his 1945 essay "The Drama of Objects," "to the left, around to the right. Watch them grow large as you approach, group and regroup themselves as you shift your position. Relationships gradually emerge and sometimes assume themselves with finality. And that's your picture" (as cited by Meyers, 2008, para. 3). It is so simple yet describes what it is I do, or rather all photographers, with such accuracy. Taking a second look I found that although Siskind worked entirely in black and white there are still the same formal elements present that I admire in the other abstract artists so it was no surprise to find out his association with

Barnet Newman who had recommended Siskind to show at the Charles Egan Gallery, famous for its showcasing of the abstract expressionists (Meyer, 2008).

As a result of all this research and reflection what have I discovered? Have all these artists and their works directly or consciously influenced my own? The short answer is no. I have not consciously thought on these works or these artists during the production, dissemination or exhibition of my photographs or while writing my artist's statement. However it is difficult to deny the same appreciation of formal artistic elements. And while I say that I have not referenced these artists' works (or movements) in the production or reflection of my photo practice, studying them in my earlier art education must have surely (unconsciously) influenced my choices, compositions and the aesthetic appeal which I feel compelled to create. Now endowed with these new found relationships between my work and so many others it is time to revisit the artist's statement, armed with this new knowledge and approach things from a new perspective.

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#### FURTHER READINGS & RESOURCES

Abstract Expressionism: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract\\_expressionism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract_expressionism)

Abstract art: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract\\_art](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract_art)

Ronnie Landfield: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronnie\\_Landfield](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronnie_Landfield)

Mark Rothko: <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/>

[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_bio\\_138.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_138.html)

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ArtistWorks?cgroupid=999999961&artistid=1875&page=1>

Aaron Siskind: <http://www.aaronsiskind.org/images.html>

<http://www.artslant.com/no/artists/show/6290-aaron-siskind>

Clyfford Still : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clyfford\\_Still](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clyfford_Still)

James Abbott McNeill

Whistler: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_McNeill\\_Whistler#cite\\_ref-77](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_McNeill_Whistler#cite_ref-77)

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