

Boyd White

Diary

of an

Ex-Art Teacher

Photo: R. Karam

Monday morning: About 8:15 or so I arrived at the Education Building and began to collect my thoughts for the class at 9:00.

Enthusiasm was generally running high today - everybody working feverishly. I'm sure this is due to the fact that I was quite complimentary towards much of the introductory level work turned out during the past week. This must have been in stark contrast to the rather severe criticisms I made of the same people's work during the previous week. Then the work was cute, anecdotal, clichéd. When I pointed these features out, the students agreed with me - an occurrence which somehow always surprises me. But they know when their work is trite. They just don't know what else to do. It's as if no one has ever told them that they have worthwhile ideas of their own - that they don't have to rely on watered down copies of established ideas. Two of the girls caught on immediately last week and today their work showed that some good honest searching was happening. I think they're beginning to understand that, with an idea in mind, the techniques and solutions more or less suggest themselves as an answer to the problem at hand. All I have to do is urge the students on and pass along the occasional technical information.

Monday afternoon: Today I demonstrated a couple of techniques to my intermediate group in graphics. This group actually consists of a duo. The rest of the class is made up of the students in the introductory

level course. A couple of those students were watching the so-called "more advanced" techniques pretty closely and one of them commented that she could hardly wait to get to that stage. It occurred to me that, as long as these were only techniques, there was no reason why she shouldn't pick up some work at the more advanced level. Techniques, after all, are only isolated bits of knowledge and means to an end. Further, I think if she can handle it, a saturation in the subject should affect even her simplest works. We'll see anyhow.

One of the advanced students mentioned in passing that after my comments concerning her sculpture the other day (I don't even remember what I said), she realised that it was somewhat trite and slick, like her aunt's commercially successful work; that she had known all along that it wasn't as good as some of her other pieces but hadn't quite been able to put her finger on it. I was surprised because I didn't remember being particularly negative about the piece. She, however, was obviously able to guess my feelings; a sensitive girl. And the nicest thing about her discovery was that she was quite happy and relieved to understand her sculpture for what it was, rather than mourn what it wasn't.

I suppose all that this means is that potential artists are basically honest and are aware of the times when their work is a charade. Picasso, of course, said that art is a lie. But Picasso's lies never prevent him from seeing reality. Reality is his plaything and he molds it. Most people are molded by their misunderstanding of reality.

I have one girl in the class who worries me. She works endless hours but doesn't seem to enjoy herself, and tends to question the validity of what she's doing. The closest we have come to communicating was the day I caught her about to spoil a very fine print of hers by adding some trite little flower patterns to it. When I asked her if she liked what she was about to do she said, "No, I like it the way it is; but I thought you would - and you're grading us." A shattering remark! So I gave a ten minute speech on pleasing oneself and trusting one's own sense of composition etc., that art was subjective and that there was no one right answer; but anyway, I liked what she had done and was glad to have caught her before she messed it up. I then went on and, for the umpteenth time so far

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*this year, explained that grades are irrelevant to art and not to be worried about. This girl simply reconfirmed my belief that grades actually interfere with learning. She was willing to go against her own intuition in the hopes of getting a few more marks!*

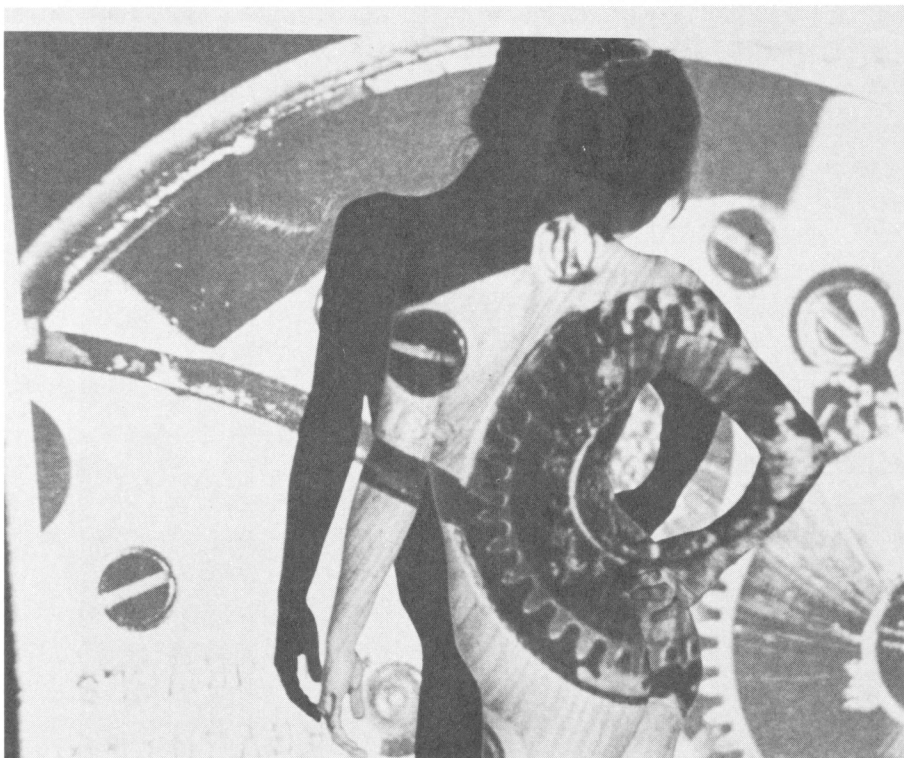
Tuesday evening: *The first of my three evenings of classes each week. I wondered when I offered to teach as many nights as this if they would prove to be just too much. So far, however, I find that I am not particularly tired by the end of the third evening. And it's not because I'm putting less into these courses. If anything, they are a little harder to teach because one cannot assume a fairly similar background amongst the evening students. In my courses at least, this makes a difference as to how they react to the problems set before them. This diversity is probably what makes the courses more entertaining, from my point of view. And when the students get to know one another there is a greater cross-fertilization of ideas. Thus, while they are often slower to catch on in the beginning classes, by the end of the term they're making breakthroughs almost every night; and generally the work is of at least as high a caliber as that of the day students, and frequently better. This evening's is the largest introductory level graphics class I've had and it's really a bit too large. I find myself getting sidetracked numerous times in the course of the evening. I have found myself in the process of going to get paper for a student, stopping en route to answer someone else's question and getting involved in solving the problem - only to realize twenty minutes later that I still haven't got the paper for which I started out. Fortunately the students are patient, tolerant, and good humoured. Once these first few weeks are over they should also be able to answer many of their own questions and things should be less hectic.*

*The nature of the graphics classes leads me to question the issue as to what is teaching and what isn't. To produce a competent print one must have a substantial knowledge of technique. Yet one could spend a lifetime (literally) exploring and perfecting various techniques and still not produce worthwhile art. I know of examples of at least one art teacher like this, who jumps on every band-wagon as it comes along. He's extremely*

knowledgeable but he never produces anything that makes people sit up and take note. So I don't really consider the demonstrating of techniques as teaching. Teaching, for me, takes place simultaneously with learning, on my part. It is a moment when the student and I exchange ideas. Both of us gaining something from the experience. So I don't think art can be taught, that would assume a right answer or a logical conclusion. Such is simply not the case. So I no longer teach art. (Once upon a time I tried to - hence the title of this article.) I simply live and represent a certain life style. I try to make my ideas and life style interact with the students' and thus, when things are going well, we have a "gaining" experience. Demonstrating techniques, on the other hand, is only a "training." When the moment arrives, however, that a student has a piece of work that he has worried over, pushed and played with, and finally wants to discuss - at that moment we can have some kind of meaningful dialogue. I suppose some might call it teaching. Using the work as a catalyst for communication, we will both gain something from the dialogue, my job being to make the dialogue go as deeply as I can; his job, to enhance his next piece of work. So for this year, in spite of the hours, I've had only a few minutes of (?) teaching. The question is, how to get down to business faster?

Wednesday afternoon: My favorite day, my favorite class; advanced painting, so-called. Officially we start at 1:00 but actually we meet at 12:00 for lunch, discussion of problems, ideas and frequent trips to galleries or interesting spots around town. An hour doesn't give us all that much time for visiting places - more like a whirlwind tour. It's invigorating though and does allow food for thought. The reason we have to be back at 1:00 is that I also have a graphics class which runs concurrently and I don't like to leave them alone for too long at the introductory stage. They might get to think that I don't care. So I spend the afternoon running from one studio to the other. But it's working all right. Both groups are very small; and the necessitated self-reliance is doing them all good, forcing them to make decisions which, if I were there constantly, they would tend to rely on me for.

*Last spring I asked those whom I now have in the advanced painting class to make a visual diary. This was to consist of any and all of those things which interested them individually, from actual things or places seen to pictures in magazines, sketches, photographs, sentences, poetry, etc. which they found to be particularly pertinent to the way they felt about their own special interests. The idea was to compile a personal resource centre for each student consisting of information pertinent to him only. I hoped that many of the individuals' articles collected, sketched or whatever, would be quite diverse and that out of this diversity we could compose relationships of ideas that would be unique and personal. Then I would propose individual projects which would be specifically designed to result in paintings exploiting the various unique points of view. I therefore expected all students would be working quite differently, one from the other.*



*It hasn't turned out quite that way. The students made their diaries all right and people were the dominant interest in each case - in one form or another. So we all agreed that figure drawing, as traditional and academic as it can be, was as good a place to start as any. So they've all begun together - and they can well use the time. Their drawings are really showing how much they don't see. The drawings are not good, although I think they are improving; however, the morale of the students is high and our conversations are fun. It is the one class where I feel that I actually get some kind of dialogue going each time. Hopefully, the results will start showing in a few months time.*

*In the meantime, in order to get them thinking of the human form to other aspects of our universe, I last week had the model pose while I flashed a variety of slides across her. The slides were a collection of odds and ends, landscapes, people, junk, sculpture, paintings. The forms and colours fell on the wall, over and around the model, all forms being affected by the others and the new relationships formed by the unlikely union of the two and three dimensional images. The students were enthusiastic, although unsure at first as to what they were supposed to see. Very quickly, however, their compositions were liberated. They began to find relationships between forms which would not normally occur to them. They found that they could produce an interesting drawing even though all of the model could not be seen, that a form becomes interesting for its own sake rather than for its slavish connection with the human body or hillside or car bumper. Technology or hardware can be an aid to artistic development as long as it's not an end in itself, but simply a means to an end.*

Friday afternoon: *Last class of the week. It's a tiny one - three introductory graphics students and a couple at the next level. It is a time, however, when some of the keen students do work on their own. This gives us more chance to talk about their work. There are fewer interruptions and the pace is more relaxed. Today the pace was so relaxed, what with one student having to leave class early and another two not showing up, that I left for an hour and went to check out a new gallery which just opened recently. All in all, it was a drag. Montreal is an awfully long way be-*

*hind Toronto when it comes to offering a stimulating art scene.*

*At any rate, by the time I got back to McGill there were a few more students working around on various projects. They were a lot more stimulating than the gallery and the students were fun to talk to. So, feeling a lot more heartened by the end of the afternoon than at the beginning, I left for home, about 4:30. I hope to get some of my own painting rolling this weekend - had the canvas ready for days now.*



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