

YOU HAVE TO START SOMEWHERE

Handmark emerging artists talk

Andrew Harper

Let us talk, you and I.

Time is short and we have much to get through, and given that time is a resource we may not stockpile or hoard, we must do our best.

Art is terribly old and always new, and no one knows where it came from, although it might have been something that our vanished cousins the Neanderthals did before those very early humans did, and the oldest known images are about 65000 years old. There's art in this country that a bit over 17000 years old, and there's art in other places, including what is the oldest actual painting which is in Indonesia, and is 45000 years old, and is rapidly deteriorating due to climate change

We paint and we make marks on things and it's part of who we are as living things.

We know we do it; but we don't know why.

Well.

That's not quite right, but it's hard to say what art is for, and that's a complex question, but I'm a person who does something complicated, which is write about art and talk about art and ask what art is for.

I think art is a form of communication. Now, I'm going to have to tease that idea out a bit.

I don't think art is something we do to attract a mate; I think it's a way we share ideas and ask questions and tell stories.

I think art is really good at being really specific to a person, because words, which I'm using now, are things everyone has to understand, and that's how language works and why it works: we can write poetry and give directions to the shop with words, and we can write them on paper and they will go across the world and we share them on these ridiculous devices we have and words are incredible, but words are general. They have to be, to perform their function.

Art is really good at being specific, and communicating a really particular personal concern which might be "how I think the Glenorchy Pool has value to a community", or "how I think bees are incredibly important", or more "how I want to understand what this tone of paint will look like if I do this with it", or "how I can want to make a picture that kind of shows the complex mental mechanisms of a troubled person" and I can say that, but this painting is what I think it looks like, and when you look at this painting, you might understand my point in a better way.

Doing this is hopefully communication, and invitation, and it's asking you what you think about this, or just telling you that "I saw the light come in through the art school roof and it was so weird and gorgeous" so I made this image.

You, that artist, did make that. You made it, and I thought of something of when I looked at it, and we shared an idea.

Now, I might have thought of something you didn't when you made that artwork, and that's really interesting as well, because if it was words I would have simply misunderstood you, but because it's art it means that you included more than you thought you did. That's quite an amazing thing, and it's why art survives. When we look at really old art it still has its power to tell us something, to bring us something which lasts, lasts beyond far beyond the world it emerged from. I look at a religious icon that's four hundred years old, and it moves me, despite me being so removed from it in time and context – it still can touch us.

Art is very big sometimes.

There's lots of art here, which is normal, we are in a gallery. This is an interesting show though, from my perspective, because I'm a person who does something complicated, which is write about art and talk about art and ask what art is for. Someone has to tell people that there is art and they should look at it, then have a moment of considering and look again. This exhibition is particularly fun because there's a lot of artists here, cripes. Look at you all.

There's too many of you to say something about each of your works, although I could, because I'm a person who writes about art and talks about art and asks what art is for, but we can do that later, if you're keen.

What I can do is say I have an innate level of respect for the fact that you made the art, did the work, put the hours in.

I can't look at some work without going how. Long. Did. That. Take. There's so much care here: the care taken in the works and the things the artists care about, their singular interests and their obsessive fascinations.

Alright. I have some work to do here. That was the preamble.

Hello.

Hello, emerging artists. Here you are, blinking from being in a burrow, wet from crawling from an egg, your feathers and fur drying and becoming bright. You did it; you made something, you showed someone, you asked questions, you pushed away nagging and gnawing self-doubt, didn't listen to the voice in your head that says you have no talent and you have no right to be here, or you did and you ignored it and you decided that your art was worth at least trying to do something with, and here it is.

Here you are.

This is a good bit, isn't it? You're in a gallery, with fresh white walls, there's proper lights and everything is straight. That's hard, that bit, getting all the lines straight.

It's not something you think about all that much when you're consumed by making a work of art, but in this moment, here, now at the opening event in a gallery, if your particular work of art is tilted even the slightest half a millimetre, you'll know - and it might make you

shrink. It would seem like the biggest tilt, but no, not today, some people who know what they're doing made the work sit on the walls.

It looks great. It's your art, and it looks so good right now.

Make sure you take that in.

Make sure you drink in the context of being in this space and know this: you were asked to be here, you're welcome here and you are all artists.

Here is a lovely scrap of evidence you can hold onto in moments of doubt. You will have them throughout your career as an artist. They are not bad things; it's good to doubt yourself and think again; think harder, read more, see more and then return to your medium. There are artists in this room who took huge breaks or who started – look I was going to say late but this quite wrong, art comes and finds you when you need it, because art can happen in many ways.

I love in particular artists who came to art after they did other things in their lives. Those artists, you bring the wisdom of life to what you make, and your vision is wonderful.

I love in particular artists who came to art as soon as they could and they are filled with a desire to explore and be consumed by art, who go to all the talks and all the events and all the openings, partly because they have time and partly because they want to drink every scrap they can. Hello.

I love in particular artists who have day jobs and young children, who organise their time and find every precious fine moment to add a line, make a daub, do nothing and think, just think about what it is for that captured skerrick of time

I love in particular artists who have made art their job and it's all they do, who work and organise and make space for other artists.

I love in particular, over time, how anyone here might be all of those artists. It grows and it changes over time, and this is what keeps art itself relevant

I might note as well that I love artists, but you probably got that. I mean I am one, at times, but I think the idea of an artist is good one. I'm gratified to see more women making art and for that art to be seen in gallery spaces. It could be better but a show like this is part of how it gets better.

I also am incredibly fond of people who collect art, and if that's you, let us acknowledge that you are really wonderful and super important, because without you, artists must subsist on cheese and box wine, paint with food colouring and live nowhere at all, which doesn't work all that well for making more art. When you are captured enough by a work of art to take it back to your house and live with it, this is quite a thing, and it's where you get intimate with art.

Actually, I should tell you about this – there's something that happens when you live with art. A particular problem I have is the overall pace of modern existence and how little time we get to stare at something, and wonder about it. Some art is shy; and it needs a bit more.

All art needs you, really: if it's in a box and no one sees it, it barely exists: when we look at something, we wake it up, have a chat with it. When it's on your wall you can have a cuppa with it, move it around and discover it looks different in the upstairs corner, and start your wondering anew. When you live with art in your spaces and dwellings, you will see it change as you change, you will get intimately involved, you will discover every nuance and that takes time.

I know this story of a survey in New York – where apparently there is a lot of really exciting art – and this survey happened in a big museum, and it timed how long people look at art and it's an average of about seventeen seconds, if I recall correctly.

Look, I might be getting pushy here but you know, I think, I think, most paintings might need more than seventeen seconds, even ones that you wished you really only spent ten seconds with, even those, they all need a bit of time. I know time is short and we have a lot to get through, but maybe think about what might happen when you get to know something; when it becomes part of your story, and you part of its, and how that adds to what a work of art might mean.

Hello to the people who work here. You do a good thing by having shows like this, and that thing is representing the community. A community has lots of different people in it who do different things, and there's a lot of that here. Bringing people together like this is a celebratory thing, and galleries are places for people as well as for art. Someone needs to look at the art, wake it up, have a chat with it.

Okay, I want to tell you a story now. I know I've gone on a bit, and I thank you for your indulgence.

I'll tell the story of my favourite artist.

He's called Roman Opalka. He was a Polish artist. He woke up one day with an idea. He would count, and that would be his art. He got a canvas, and he mixed a background and painted it, and then he started. He got a fine brush and painted "One". Then "Two". Three. Four.

The numeral, not the word.

Five, six, seven, and he kept going.

He kept going until he covered the canvas. Then he got another canvas, and he kept going. He mixed a background, and then kept going with the numbers.

He started reading out all the numbers he painted on his canvas in one day and recording that.

He started taking pictures of himself. One at the beginning of each working day, one at the end. He went to his studio every day, and he painted numbers, in order, never deviating.

He kept doing it. He kept painting, and reading out the numbers, and taking photographs of himself.

He did it until he died, on the 6th of August 2011.

He had started the project in 1965.

He reached Five million, six hundred thousand, seven thousand two hundred and forty-nine.

He started with one.

You have to start somewhere.

I congratulate everyone here on this show, and I congratulate all the artists on having started, I hope you keep going, and I hope to see shows from everyone here with more art. I know it's a lot of work. That's alright.

Just remember that time is actually short, and that we all have a lot to get through, and all we can do is our best.

Andrew Harper,

3rd May 2024