

Overflow not Overwork

If human behavior is driven by pleasure, as many theorists seem to think, then we will want to avoid doing things that cause pain. In the creative process there are hills and valleys, pleasure and pain. When fears manifest, and deadlines wake me with fright in the night, I wonder why something so beautiful should be so stressful? On occasions I have been asked whether I enjoy what I do. From my point of view I find that a strange question, as I am so obviously passionate about my art but given the time, effort and risk involved in putting myself in front of an audience, I can see this is a valid query.

Time frames can create anxiety and disturb the peace required for successful art production, but forcing work is never successful. Instead there is a need for flow which takes time and requires focus. There is a building up, a repertoire of actions just as actors learn their craft, or musicians learn an instrument. If something is not working, start again, like a movie with many takes. When I allow sufficient time to comply with deadlines and get it right for my own heart, interesting things happen. But actors and musicians often improvise, as do artists. The repeated rehearsals are preparation for the real performance which is unpredictable and open to chance.

Seeking answers and finding out what is missing is part of research. Determining where to go, and what to express, helps fill in the pieces of the puzzle. Overwork is an interesting concept as it has negative connotations, implying that something is being taken beyond its optimum. Taking a work in progress beyond flow to overwork is a form of block, a state of mind. Anxiety left unresolved can cause overworking and not knowing where to stop causes the painting to lose life. Overflow is stepping into another space altogether. Here the brushstrokes are not laboured but fast and exciting.

Overflow is a sensitive state of abundant achievement; an energy that we can all tap into. An experienced artist develops this through years of practice. It is automatic, not unlike driving a car. Australian musician Jim Conway, formerly of the Backsliders band, acknowledged this in an interview recently on Radio National Australia, when he conveyed that it was during performing his ability to create flourished. He tapped into something he didn't quite understand, implying it was almost magical. Although he knew what song he was going to play, he didn't know how he would play it. The manipulation of his musical instruments had become second nature and he did not have conscious awareness of the notes.

Learning to appreciate a state of overflow is also part of familiarity with the process. At the other end of the scale, overwork is the result of over-trying and occurs when dissatisfaction with the outcome provokes repeated attempts to fix the problem, only to make it worse. For some artists, resolution comes from standing the work face into the wall and forgetting about it until a later date. I feel better when I just white out the work. This provides me with a much less cluttered studio and cleaner way of working and I know everything good that happened in the work is not lost. The processes remain in memory to be incorporated at a later stage.

The art studio is a sanctuary, a place where change can occur in private and these processes are encouraged. My own studio is a place of research, and I have the unique task of filtering history and finding my place within it. Yes, there are times when I feel that putting paint to canvas will be futile but feeling flat about working requires me to seek out inspiration from other sources.