

Aesthetics and photography
-- Part ten --

Being an Artist

by
Alain Briot



www.beautiful-landscape.com

Table of Contents

- 1-Introduction
- 2-Freedom of expression: let us be artists
- 3- Being an artist is a lifestyle, not a temporary situation.
- 4- Being an artist does not mean making an income from your art
- 5- Being an artist does not mean exhibiting or publishing your work
- 6- Being an artist means having an audience
- 7- Being an artist means having an appreciation for the arts
- 8- Being an artist is knowing how to react when you are told that “Artists are Lucky!”
- 9- Being an artist does not mean being an art critic
- 10- What about talent?
- 11- Skill enhancement exercises
- 12- Conclusion

*If you ask me what I came to do in this world, I, an artist, will
answer you: I am here to live out loud.*

Emile Zola

Aesthetics and photography

-- Part Ten --

Being an Artist

1-Introduction

This has to be the most difficult essay I have written so far. Not to say the previous ones were easy. Truth is, each essay has become increasingly difficult to write as I progressed towards the end of this series on Photography and Aesthetics and moved from technical considerations, such as *Exposure*, *Film Choice* or even *Seeing Photographically* to more elusive and personality-based aspects of photography such as *Selecting Keepers*, *Creating a Portfolio*, and most recently *Developing a Personal Style*.

As I progressed towards completion of this series I managed to keep in balance the “perilous” act of presenting information coming from personal experience in such a way that this information was useful to those who do not have direct experience with the subject. I feel I succeeded in this endeavor even when discussing something as private as personal style. It was a difficult act, somewhat akin to walking a tight rope, but it was feasible.

When it came to describing what *Being an Artist* is the difficulty increased ten fold. At first I assumed that I was facing the same difficulties I faced with the previous essays: that I was covering a subject on which little had been written about and for which I had to create nearly all new material. But as I toiled down the road trying to complete this essay I realized that the problem of describing what Being an Artist is was more complex. Why? For 3 main reasons.

First because defining what being an artist is, is a difficult endeavor. By definition artists are difficult to categorize and often defy classification altogether. Therefore any attempt to define what it means to be an artist is bound to be challenging at least and problematic at worst. Eventually there are just as many “definitions” of what Being an Artist is as there are artists. While we may agree on some main common characteristics, how these characteristics are implemented in our lives, the importance we place on one characteristic versus another and what we consider of primary or secondary importance depends on each of us. It varies according to our unique situation, on our personality and on our previous experience. Someone who has been an artist all his or her life does not see being an artist the same way than someone who is just becoming aware that being an artist is a possibility. In the end all artists are unique individuals and each of them has a different idea of what being an artist is.

Second because being an Artist is not an activity one can do on the side. It is a lifestyle and a profession. While anyone can, to various extent, learn how to see photographically, select keepers, create a portfolio or develop a personal style to name but a few of the aspects involved in doing photography as an art form, being an artist is a choice one cannot make “in passing” so to speak. Being (or becoming) an artist is a decision that requires a high level of commitment.

Third because when I tackled this subject I did not realize how hard it would be to describe what I do on a daily basis. I now know that doing something intuitively and being able to describe it accurately are two entirely different things. I also know, from having written this article, that one can be an artist without being able to precisely describe what being an artist is.

These three difficulties, which I need to point out did not become clear to me until I had been working on this

article for several months, troubled me to no end. They troubled me because this whole series is based on the premise that readers will be able to do what the articles describe. It is built on the guiding principle that readers, while maybe new to the concepts introduced in each successive essay, will be able to successfully implement the contents of each essay if they spend the necessary time and effort.

Yet, I had to complete this article and to do so I had to find the necessary freedom to express myself and say what I had to say. To gain access to this freedom I concluded that there was no way I could cover the subject in such a way as to avoid making this article anything else but an educated statement about what being an artist is. I therefore say it loud and clear, right here right now before we delve into the heart of the heart of Being an Artist: this essay represents my opinion of what being an artist is. Your opinion might differ. My way is not the only way and your opinion may be just as valid.



Antelope Canyon Panorama 1
Fuji 617, Fujinon 90mm, Provia 100F

However I place one additional comment on the recognition that I can only write about my own personal experience of being an artist: I have extensive experience being an artist. I have thought about the issues that follow long and hard. I have considered the many aspects of each issue with great care. I have spent a lot of time, years in some instances, weighting the pros and cons of taking a specific position in regards to each of these aspects. Not knowing what those issues are yet you may find this last comment somewhat superfluous. It isn't but if it so appears at this time I invite you to re-read this introduction after you have completed your first reading of this essay.

Before I conclude this introduction let me say that as you read this essay you need to keep in mind that it was written by an artist. Maybe better than any of what I actually say in it, maybe more important than any of the actual contents I make in this text, is the fact that this essay is an embodiment of the concepts I describe below, an enactment of what I consider to be the main characteristics of an Artist.

What follows are therefore my views of what being an artist is. These views are based upon my personal experience and reflections as well as upon discussions I have had with artists and friends. As you read through it keep in mind that this essay, while a stand alone article, is actually part one of a two part essay. For reasons that I describe below I decided to separate *Being an Artist* from *Being an Artist in Business*. This article is the first of these two essays.

Let us now go where few have gone before and dive right into my opinion of what being an artist is all about.

2-Freedom of expression: let us be artists

There is no must in art because art is free.
Wassily Kandinsky

In my previous essay, *Personal Style*, we saw that personal style is about personality. In this essay we are going to see that *Being an artist* is directly related to personality because Being an Artist is about expressing your personality. To put it in a concise manner:

Personal Style is about personality.
Being an artist is about being free to express your personality through art.

Feeling free to express what you want to express is central to being an artist and we are going to look at what this means and at how you can find space for creative freedom in your life.



Antelope Glow
Canon 300D, 17-40 F4 L

I consider Antelope Canyon to be one of the areas most conducive to photographic creativity anywhere. Each time I go there I find myself creating new photographs. This image is no exception as I had never seen this particular composition and light glow before.

Being an artist is about being free to express your personality through art. Clearly, one can express himself or herself in numerous ways but to be considered an artist one needs to express himself or herself through an artistic endeavor. At this point some of you may remark that this leads to the question “What is art?” It certainly does. However, answering this question is the subject of a completely different essay and I will not tackle it in this article. Let us just say for the present time that photography is an art form and that we will consider photography as the medium of choice for the purpose of this essay. Clearly, artists can express themselves in a variety of medium so we will also take it as point of departure that while photography is our primary concern we may very well, as artists, be creative in other mediums as well.

This being said the main difficulty of being an artist, in my estimate, is first feeling free to express yourself and second being free to express more and more of your personality, of your character. Why? Because there are a number of things that stand in the way of achieving this. Let’s look at what those are right away.

People often tell me they want to become artists. However the next thing they say after that is list all the things they feel they cannot do. The conversation often goes something like this: “I want to be an artist. But, of course, I can’t do this, I won’t do that, I certainly do not intend to go that way” and so on. The problem with this attitude is that even before they actually start on the path towards becoming artists most people limit what they will be able to do as artists. They start their artistic career by limiting their artistic freedom.

Art is about freedom and creative expression. Being an artist is first and foremost about feeling free to create. It is about expressing what is in you, expressing something that potentially others have not expressed before or have expressed in a different way. It is about expressing what you want and maybe even need to express. If you start your artistic career by listing all the things you cannot do you reduce your creative freedom while you really need to expand it.

I certainly understand that there are subjects that you truly, and for reasons unrelated to creative freedom, do not want to address. I do to. For example, I made the decision a number of years ago to not express negativity in my photographs. However, this does not limit my freedom. Instead, it defines my personality. When I talk about this subject I do not say “I cannot photograph this.” Instead I say “I chose not to photograph this.” In other words I feel perfectly free to photograph negative subjects but I have decided not to cover such subjects at this time. I remain free to change my mind in the future if I chose to. And I know that should I decide to cover these subjects I may create excellent photographs. In other words, and to conclude on this aspect of being an artist, what is at work here is nothing but a personal moral decision not to photograph certain subjects.

As an artist you may make similar decisions in regards to subjects that you find objectionable, styles that you dislike or types of images that you object to. Doing so is normal and expectable as long as it is part of your character.

What is not normal or expectable is to rule out certain things as not feasible because you believe that “only the masters can photograph them,” or because “you are not good enough” or do not have “the proper style for that” or even rule out certain achievements because “you will never get there.” In other words before limiting what you do ask yourself why you are limiting what you can do. Is it because A-you morally object to photographing certain subjects, or is it because B-you feel inexperienced, insecure about your abilities or unsure of the outcome of your efforts? In my estimate reason A is perfectly understandable while reason B needs to be studied carefully. The underlying motivations for reason B need to be exposed and then discarded on the pile of “creative freedom reducing obstacles” that all artists have to contend with.

3- Being an artist is a lifestyle, not a temporary situation.

At different moments you see with different eyes. You see differently in the morning than you do in the evening. In addition, how you see is also dependent on your emotional state. Because of this, a motif can be seen in many different ways, and this is what makes art interesting.

Edvard Munch

Art is a lifestyle not just an activity. One's art and one's life are eventually inseparable. One cannot be an artist without living a lifestyle which is conducive to being an artist:

*Being an artist means having a lifestyle
that makes creativity and art part of your everyday life*

One cannot be creative 8 hrs a day, from 9 to 5. Similarly one cannot schedule "creative time" say from 4 to 5 p.m. every Thursday. While you can certainly write this down in your planner, or in your PDA, whether you will feel inspired on that particular day at that specific time remains to be seen.



Celestial Star Trails

Linhof Master Technica, Rodenstock 210mm, Provia 100F

There is no limit to the number of possible images one can create from any given subject. I had never seen this composition before and responded only to my own creativity when I decided to do a star trail composition at this location.

Fact is, the muses visit whenever they please and not necessarily during “business hours.” It is therefore very difficult to schedule creative time the way one would schedule a business appointment. Certainly, it can be done. But there are no guarantees that you will feel creative during that time. To guarantee success in your creative endeavors you have to be aware of your creative impulses and design a schedule that works around them, not a schedule that demands that you be creative from 3 to 4 then do paperwork from 4 to 5 and so on.

Being an artist therefore means implementing a lifestyle that favors creativity, impulsion and freedom. Because this may conflict with other activities being an artist means learning how to organize your life so that you can handle these potential conflicts successfully.

Today, and specifically with landscape photography, workshops and photographic expeditions are an excellent way to schedule creative opportunities. A workshop is time you set aside to do just photography, usually in a place away from where you live and with like-minded people who share similar goals and interests. Workshop time is creative time, free from the constraints of everyday life. It is time during which you can focus solely on photography and on creating art. The first and foremost goal of a workshop schedule is to offer as much creative time as possible to the participants.

4- Being an artist does not mean making an income from your art

Your pictures would have been finished a long time ago if I were not forced every day to do something to earn money.

Edgar Degas in a Letter to Jean-Baptiste Faure,
contemporary art collector, 1877.

There is a widespread belief that a “real” artist must make a living from his art.

In my view being an artist does not imply making an income from your art. Making an income from any activity, art or other, is being an entrepreneur, a business person, etc. It is not being an artist. In my view, as I said earlier:

Being an artist is about being free to express your personality through art.

You can very well achieve this without selling your art because according to my definition being an artist and making an income from your art are not directly related. One is not a requirement for the other.

Personally I was an artist long before I was making an income from my art and I will still be an artist if I stop making an income from my work. This situation is very common. Children create art without any idea that art can be sold. As they grow up and discover the income potential in their art people make a choice to create and sell their art or to continue creating art without trying to sell their work.

I so firmly believe that making art and selling art are two different activities that, as I also mentioned earlier, I decided to write two articles on the subject of being an artist: *Being an Artist*, which you are currently reading, and *Being an artist in Business*, which will be the next article in this series, #11. I made this decision because I needed to separate *creating art* from *selling art*.

This understanding came to me because of a question that I am asked quite often: “How can I make it as an artist?” It took me years to realize that this question actually consists of two questions into one. The first question is “How can I be an artist?” The second question is “How can I make an income from selling my art?” These two questions are unrelated. The first question is the subject of this article. The second question, which

can be translated as “Am I a business person able to market art?” is the subject of my next article.

Very often, people take the decision to create art and to sell art at the same time. Such a decision makes things twice as difficult because it means learning two professions at once: the profession of Artist and the profession of Art Marketer. I recommend you start by creating art and that later, once you have assembled a portfolio, you decide if you also want to sell art. While doing both at once is possible it will make things twice as difficult and potentially create an extremely stressful situation.

Being able to make a living from selling your art is not what defines you as an artist. It’s what defines you as a business person. Too often the two are considered together. The true test of whether you are an artist or not is not here. The true test of being an artist is finding out if you feel free to express your personality through your art.



Round Rock Clouds, Navajoland
Linhof Master Technika, Fuji 90mm, Provia 100F

Part of my Navajoland Portfolio, and created in 2004, the original idea for this image first came to me in 1987. At the time I only had a 35mm with me when I saw similar clouds hovering over this rock formation. I had to wait 9 years to witness and photograph a similar scene, this time with large format.

5- Being an artist does not mean exhibiting or publishing your work

I hear that my friends are preparing another exhibition this year but I must discount the possibility of participating in it since I have nothing worth showing.

Claude Monet

Just like being an artist does not mean making an income from your work, being an artist does not mean exhibiting or publishing your work. Granted, many artists, if not most, do publish and exhibit their work. However doing so is not a requirement for being an artist. It is a frequent outcome for many, but it is not a requirement.

This is especially important to understand if you are just starting a career as an artist or if you find yourself unable or unwilling to exhibit your work for whatever reason. Pressing the issue, by trying to get a show of your work at all costs in a gallery or a museum, and encountering tremendous difficulties while trying to achieve this goal, can be very discouraging and may erroneously lead you to conclude that doing art is not for you.

I say “erroneously” because what you are experiencing is lack of success in organizing a show of your work. It is not lack of success in creating art. Since we have seen that creating art is central to being an artist your success at being an artist is actually quite high since, supposedly, by the time you are trying to have a show of your work you should have created enough artwork to fill the exhibition space you have in mind.

You may argue that the reason why you are not successful at having people agree to show your work is because your work is not good enough. This may or may not be true. There are numerous reasons why a gallery, a museum, or other exhibition space may not want to organize a show of your work. These reasons include, in no particular order, the fact that your work may not be the kind of work they usually exhibit, the fact that their exhibition calendar is filled several years in advance, the fact that they only exhibit artists whose name is already well known, the fact that your work is not matted and framed and that they do not want to cover this expense, the fact that they believe, rightly or wrongly, that your work will not sell, and so on. Note that these reasons have nothing to do with the actual artistic quality of your work. Instead, they have everything to do with either the business side of photography, something we will address in the next article, or with the concept of audience, something we will address right away in the section below.



Monument Valley Shadows
Linhof Master Technica, Rodenstock 150mm, Provia 100F

This lighting situation occurs only twice a year and can only be witnessed and photographed if there are no clouds. I have seen other photographs showing only the Left Mitten but I wanted to photograph both together to show the cause and effect behind this light phenomena.

6- Being an artist means having an audience

There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer.
Ansel Adams

The concept of audience is problematic to many students. When I taught English 101, at NAU in Arizona and MTU in Michigan, I had the hardest time in the world getting students to understand that they needed to write for a specific audience. When asked who was going to read their papers they inevitably answered “anyone who feels like reading it.” What they meant was that I, as the teacher, was their reader. Who else was going to find and read their papers? Since this was not the answer I wanted to hear I had them describe a specific reader as closely as possible, down to the clothes this reader wore, the job this person had, the car that person drove, the house... you get the point. Yet, they continued to write for me because, eventually, I was the one who they believed had control over their grade.

We are now past English 101 and it is tempting to find this story amusing. However, let me ask you this question: who is your audience? Who do you photograph for, who do you want to look at your photographs? Often, when I ask this question during a workshop, participants tell me that they photograph just for themselves. They tell me that they enjoy the photographs they create and that they are not concerned with what anyone else thinks. Yet, invariably, those who give me this answer bring prints to the print review for me, and all other participants, to look at and comment upon.

Conflict often indicates problems and there clearly is conflict in the above account. If you only create work for your own enjoyment then why wonder what others think of it? Personally, I don't have a problem with any photographer creating work just for themselves and never showing their work to anyone else. But, I do have a problem with someone making this statement then asking for feedback from people, be they workshop participants or other.

I also have on occasion photographers who tell me, just like my English 101 students, that they photograph for whomever wants to look at their work. Just like my 101 students, they are at a loss when asked to define a specific audience and retract to the position that they are not discriminative, don't try to rule any one out, and that they photograph for all those who may find their work interesting. Yet, when asked who they show their work to, or who has a chance to see their work, it turns out that their audience is severely limited to either family members, other photographers, or a small group of individuals accessible because of their profession.

In regards to the above account here is what Al Weber, personal friend and long time workshop assistant to Ansel Adams, has to say about the subject. I think Al's statement says it as well as can be said:

No artist can reach every person out there. It is common knowledge that the most successful artists are those who have a known audience and can communicate directly. Trying to please or talk to everyone would be the same as making post cards to look at while eating a TV dinner.

Al Weber

in Photographic Novels, the work of Martin Blume. May 2000

I also see a problem with photographers claiming to be artists yet saying they do not need an audience. Why, because, in my view, in addition to the previous partial definition of what being an artist is,

Being an Artist is sharing your view of the world with a specific audience.

This is true even if you are sharing it with an audience of one. Why? Because being an artist is *sharing* your vision with others. You can argue that you are your own audience, that you only aim at pleasing yourself

and that you do not care if anyone else sees your work. That is fine and I don't have a problem with it. But according to my view—that being an artist is, among other things, *sharing your view of the world*—then if you are your own audience, and you do not show your work to anyone else whatsoever, you are not an artist, i.e. someone who makes art. If you think about this carefully you will find out that there few people actually fit in this category. Virtually all of us show our work to other people, no matter how few. You will also realize that in fact, when someone says they are their own audience and do not want to know what others think of their work, what they are really saying is that they are either afraid of what others might say or not willing at this time to face comments about their work.

Eventually as artists we are indebted to our audience because we need an audience to *communicate* with. Being an artist is about sharing and having an audience is being able to share our work with others. As such we are indebted to our audience for giving us the opportunity to share our work and our endeavors, for being willing to listen to us and for engaging in the dialog that we engage in through art. But above all, and with all due respect to our audience, artists eventually owe their loyalty to the pursuit of their vision. It is therefore important to remember that, as you pursue your vision, your audience can and may change to reflect your own changes in style, approach, presentation, etc.

7- Being an artist means having an appreciation for the arts

Without poets, without artists, men would soon weary of nature's monotony.

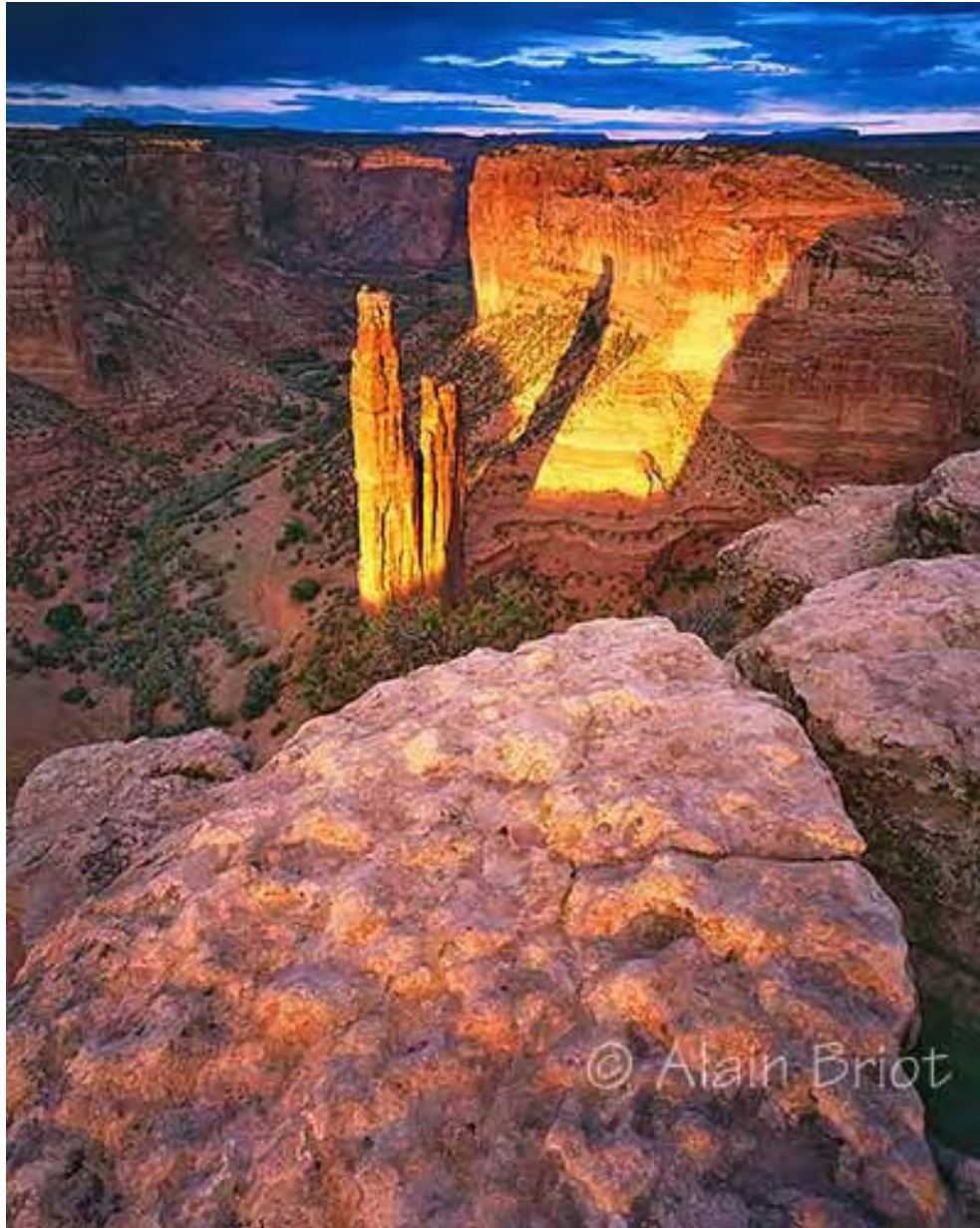
Guillaume Apollinaire

There is a widespread belief in our society that being an artist is not having a real job and that there is no real use for artists in society as opposed to doctors, lawyers, engineers, or any other “accepted” profession.

One of the purposes of this essay is to challenge this belief. First, as we have seen, being an artist does not imply making a living from your art. This negates the belief that artists need to get a real job. They may already have a real job! Second, we need to acknowledge the fact that art is just as important as any other aspect of our lives. What would our lives be without art? What would our existence be if we did not have music, if we did not have movies or theater plays, if our walls were bare of any paintings, drawings, photographs, or any other type of décor, if our public parks or private gardens were devoid of landscaping and outdoor sculptures, or if wearing jewelry was not an option, to name but a few of the instances in which art is present in our lives. Clearly, art is as important as any other aspect of our lives. The first step towards being an artist is to understand this. You cannot be an artist unless you value art and the importance art plays in everyday life.

To me being a professional is being able to follow the standards required by a specific profession. In other words, and to take examples from professions other than art, it would be preposterous for one to say “I am an engineer” without having the education, the training, the experience, the job position, the responsibilities, etc. that are expected of an engineer. In other words, being an engineer is more than just saying that you are an engineer. Being an engineer is being able to prove, through your actions, performance and professional conduct that you have the required knowledge, experience, abilities, training, etc. to do the work expected of an engineer. The same applies to any other profession.

Interestingly expectations are different when it comes to artists. Why? Because most people are unclear about what the requirements, the training, the education, the experience, the job position, and the other responsibilities of an artist are. They are unclear about it because the professional responsibilities of an artist are rarely discussed, because artists represent a minority and because what *being an artist* entails is something that few people are familiar with. They are also unsure of what makes an artist a *professional* because this is rarely discussed even less listed as a set of rules.



Spiderrock Sunset

Linhof Master Technica, Schneider 75mm, Provia 100F

The first time I saw the unique lighting situation depicted in this image I did so only seconds before the sun disappeared below the horizon. As a result I could not capture it except as a snapshot using a handheld digital camera. I returned 6 months later, knowing the lighting conditions would be similar, and had my 4x5 setup and ready although the weather was overcast. Seconds before sunset the sun came out then disappeared after a minute or two. This image shows what happened while the sun was shining that evening.

Let's outline several things that make an artist a *professional* artist, in no particular order:

- Education
- Training
- Dedication
- Skills
- Achievements
- Responsibilities
- Professional position
- Integrity

When looking at this list it becomes clear that these requirements, in their general nature, are no different than the requirements of any other profession. What is different is not the fundamental requirements that are asked of an artist. What is different is how people perceive what being an artist is all about.

In the light of the above remark it becomes important to make sure that people take you, as an artist, seriously. If people do not consider being an artist a legitimate activity, and therefore do not take you seriously, they will not respect you, will not respect your work and will therefore not enable you to succeed. Instead they will undermine what you do and work against you. If you cannot change the mind of such people get away from them as fast as you can. Don't push the issue, just let them be. Seek people who understand what being an artist is about, people who respect you, take you seriously and are willing to help you.

It is also important that you do not feel guilty about being an artist, about your creative freedom, or about doing what you like instead of getting a "real" job. Being an artist is just as difficult as any other occupation, if not more difficult. There is nothing about it that makes one more privileged, or more fortunate, than if one had chosen another occupation. When someone tries to make you feel guilty it is nearly always because they are not happy doing what they are doing and hence jealous that you are doing what you like. This is a reflection of their choices, not of yours. There is no reason to feel guilty about having made the right choices for yourself. If anything, tell them to make different choices, to change their lives so they stop resenting what you do and start doing what they like, so they let you live your life without feeling the need to make you feel guilty about it.

8- Being an artist is knowing how to react when you are told that "Artists are Lucky!"

It is essential to do the same subject over again, ten times, a hundred times.

Nothing in art must seem to be chance, not even movement.

Edgar Degas

The belief that those who are successful are lucky is quite widespread and artists are particularly plagued by it. I have yet to find an engineer being regularly accused of "being lucky" with his or her engineering. Bridges, cars, buildings, power plants, machines, computers, software, etc. are rarely said to be the result of plain luck. Most people realize, without being experts, that a lot of thinking, knowledge, training, effort, know how, planning, money and more are behind any successful engineering endeavor.

However, when it comes to art in general and to photography in particular, luck is very often cited as the reason behind the existence of a particularly stunning image or series of images. At shows and exhibitions, or during personal conversations, I regularly hear statements such as: "I guess you just hang out at [place your favorite location here, let's say for now the Grand Canyon] and get lucky." Or, "You can't plan that [meaning a rainbow, lightning strike, snowstorm, etc.]. You just have to be lucky to be there and have everything work right for you." Or, "Luck plays a big part in what you do, doesn't it?"

By extension the belief that “luck does it for artists” extends beyond the artists’ creations and right into the artist’s life. In this regard it is common for me to be told: “You are lucky to be doing what you like. I, on the other hand have to ...” or, “You are lucky to make a living doing what you like. I on the other hand, have to ...”

I used to argue endlessly about the lack of validity of the comments above. In fact, I built a library of quotes, remarks and smart comments about the uncanny nature of luck such as “luck favors the prepared mind”, “luck is preparedness in the face of expectation”, “The older I get the more lucky I seem to become”, “I wonder why I am so lucky and you are not” and so on.

Last year I finally saw the light, so to speak, and made a decision which transformed my existence. I decided, quite simply, that in regards to luck resistance was futile and that it was better to subsume rather than eternally argue a moot point. I therefore gave up my arsenal of counterpoint quotes about the nature of luck and adopted a very simple response to any and all statements about me being lucky in any and all aspects of my life: “yes”. Today, when I hear any of the above statements my answer is automatically a resounding “yes.” “Luck plays a big part in what you do, doesn’t it?” “Yes.” “You can’t plan that, you just have to be lucky. Right?” “Yes.” “You are lucky to do what you like, me, on the other hand...” “Yes.” “You are lucky making a living doing what you like, most people have to...” “Yes.”

Two things happened after I switched to “yes” as the answer to the assumption that success as an artist is the result of plain luck. First, I freed myself from the desire to argue the point. When you agree 100% to something there is no argument possible. I agree, therefore you are right, case closed. Second, these conversations now end just as fast as they start. Obviously those who make such comments about luck are interested in seeing what my reaction will be and when they realize that I agree with them they lose interest.

But something else happened which I find to be the most interesting consequence. After hearing me say yes a number of people go back on their initial statement and start to say things such as “Well, I guess it’s not that simple.” Or “Luck is only part of it, you have to know what you are doing.” In other words, they make the case I used to make themselves. From my unwavering “Yes” answer, my lack of concern for arguing the point, my agreement to their preposterous statements, they deduct –rightfully so- that something is up and they go back on their statement, amending it ever so slightly.

My point is that if someone is willing to believe that the results of a lifetime of study, passion, devotion, efforts and much more are caused by pure and simple luck there is nothing I can do about it. To destabilize such a belief will take more time and effort than I am willing to spend. I much prefer to save my energy to create art. Laughter, in this instance, is the best remedy. Let’s laugh at the preposterousness of this statement, and let’s laugh by agreeing with it.

And then, after all, maybe I am lucky? Who knows and who cares. Does that change anything? No! I still have to know what I am doing, I still have to do everything I was doing so far, I still have to have the knowledge, experience, passion, devotion, drive etc. that I need to have in order to do what I do. Maybe I am lucky? Well, if so, great. I’ll take it because it can’t hurt. Why fight it? Why not free myself from the belief that my art has to be the result of hard work? If certain people want my work to be the result of luck I see nothing wrong with it. After all, luck maybe just another term for *inspiration*.

The final point in this regard is that it doesn’t really matter to me, as an artist, how good art comes about. What matters is that it does come about and that it exists. That some people explain the creation of art through luck is fine with me. That others explain art as being the result of talent is fine with me. That others explain it as being the result of fortuitous situations is equally fine with me. That others say that thanks to my parents I led a sheltered life and therefore was able to preserve my artistic sensibility is similarly fine with me. And if some want to believe that it is the result of years of training designed to foster an inherent talent, that is also fine with

me. In short, any and all explanations about how art comes about are fine with me. Why? Because I am an artist, not an art critic. How this position plays out is the subject of the next section in this essay.



Antelope Arch Light Shaft
Linhof Master Technica, Schneider 75mm, Provia 100F

I have photographed this arch in numerous different lighting conditions but this is my first successful image with the light shaft going through the arch. The creative possibilities offered by Antelope Canyon are endless and the technical difficulties offered by this location offer a true challenge to any artist.

9- Being an artist does not mean being an art critic

*The painter must enclose himself within his work;
he must respond not with words, but with paintings.*

Paul Cezanne

Being an artist and being an art critic are two different professions. When you are an artist and show your work to your audience, people will write, talk and make comments about your work. Don't fear this, welcome it. Avoid labeling your work or explaining it too much for in doing so you remove the mystery that others perceive in your work. Allow the viewer to interpret and discover the work for themselves. Provide an open door through which people can look at your work in different ways. Keep the window open for your audience to interpret your work. It goes along with claiming one's freedom and with providing this freedom to your audience as well.

As we have seen being an artist is defined by the ability to create art and live a lifestyle conducive to art. Now what defines being an art critic? For me being an art critic, when looked at as a whole and from a distance, is having an opinion about what is good and bad art. In some ways, being a critic is seeing the world in black and white, as a dichotomy, in terms of what the critic likes –and is therefore “good”- and what the critic dislikes – and is therefore “bad.” Being a critic is not about shades of grey, about nuances, about slight variations between tones. It is about sharp demarcations, about taking sides... about being *critical*.

Certainly, being an art critic is also, and ideally, being knowledgeable about the history of art, about art theory and, in respect to the visual arts, about visual art theory. A good art critic will be intimately familiar with the writings of Roland Barthes, John Berger, Walter Benjamin, Edwin Panovsky and many others. But one can have read all these authors and not necessarily be a critic, as we are going to see.

At this point you may want to say “I can do both. I have knowledge of art history and theory, I have an opinion about what art I like and dislike. I like to share my opinion with others and I think that all this is part of being a well-rounded artist.” You can say that and if you do you are 100% right. All this is true.

However what matters is who you are. Are you first and foremost an artist, or are you first and foremost an art critic? That is the real question and it is for you to answer, not for me. I know that, personally, I am first and foremost an artist. However, as I just said, I am very well read in art theory having worked on a PhD. in Visual Theory, having a comprehensive knowledge of both the history of art and the history of photography and having spent countless hours reflecting upon what is art as well as studying the work of many other artists in numerous mediums.

I also have an opinion regarding what art I like and don't like. Notice that I don't say “an opinion about which art is good or bad.” To me, that is for the critics to decide. Personally, I know what I like and don't like. That is all.

Finally I have a desire to share my opinion in these matters. However, I don't do this as a critic either. I do this as a teacher and as an artist who wants to share his knowledge. Again, I am first and foremost an artist, then a teacher knowledgeable about art theory and history. What I am not is a critic. As I said who you are is for you to decide. My goal is to help you make the distinction between artist and art critic, not decide which one you are.

Now you may add that many artists are highly critical of their work. And you may ask “does that make them art critics?” My answer would be that it depends how their critical outlook on their work manifests itself, what shape this outlook takes, what appearance it presents.

Let me explain. It is normal, expected and encouraged for an artist to reflect on his or her work. After all, this is how we progress, evolve, and move forward in general. We need to be able to say “If I did this again I would do things differently. I would try this other approach for example.” Or we need to be able to say, “I wish this cliff wasn’t so red, or this water so blue, and I intend to change that.” But notice that we make these comments to ourselves or to others only in passing, as if we were thinking aloud. This is part of the process of growth that all artists experience.

It becomes a different matter when such comments about one’s work are made in public. Imagine an artist giving a talk at the opening of a gallery show of his work and imagine hearing this artist say that his work isn’t very good because he wishes he had done this and that differently, that the work would be better if he had got the foreground sharp instead of blurry, that he would have a much better print quality if he had used ImagePrint instead of the Epson print driver and so on. This attitude, which it turns out is rather commonplace, is not part of being an artist. Instead, such an attitude is indicative of an artist who has become his own critic. My point is: do your art and leave the critique to the critics! Don’t do their job for them. If your points are valid, if the “flaws” you are concerned with are indeed visible in your work, let the critics find out about it. They should be able to see them. If they don’t see them your concerns are most likely to be due to fears rather than to actual shortcomings in your work.

The point is that what you are so concerned about may not matter at all to your audience. These “defects” that you are pointing out may be more the result of your own lack of confidence, your own insecurity, than the result of actual shortcomings on your part. The thing is that no matter where we are from a technical or artistic standpoint, we can all improve and get better. In that sense there is always something that needs improving, something that is not working as well as we wish. Let it be and let the critics find out about it. It is their job. Your job, as an artist, is to create art. The job of a critic is to critique art. While you may be aware of your own shortcomings, keep them to yourself. Why? Not because doing so is “hiding the truth” or being dishonest about your art. It is not. After all, what you have done is visible to all in your work. It is hard to hide the contents of visual arts since by definition it is after all, visual! No. Keep it to yourself because bringing attention to what you perceive as “defects” will in turn bring your audience’s attention to that aspect of your work and very possibly reduce their enjoyment of your work. You see, they may never have seen it if you hadn’t mentioned it, but now that you did they can’t think of anything else.

I recommend you let the audience, and the critics, be the judge. I also recommend that when you talk about your work you focus on positive things and not on what you think you did wrong or what you think doesn’t work. When you listen to what people have to say about your work you will be surprised at how few actually share your concerns. You will also be surprised at what else they see that you didn’t notice, probably because you were so absorbed in finding out all of your “mistakes.” Don’t forget that mistakes are the foundation of art. As Picasso said the goal is not to prevent mistakes but to foster them.

10- What about talent?

Genius is the ability to renew one’s emotions in daily experience.

Paul Cezanne

I once had a discussion with two friends. One said “Art cannot be taught.” The other said “Art can be taught.” They asked me my opinion. I said they were both right because while talent cannot be taught there is a lot one needs to learn about art before one can make use of their potential talent. Granted, talent may arguably be responsible for making a huge difference in the final outcome, in the creation (or lack of) of a masterpiece. However, without the required artistic knowledge on which to base one’s potential talent no work of artistic value will be created.

So what is talent? In a way talent can be defined as being:

The ability to make the best artistic use of the resources available to you at a specific time.

Talent by definition involves competition. Why? Because how can you tell you are talented without comparing yourself with those you believe are not talented? Similarly, how can you be more talented than others if you do not compare yourself to others? Mozart was, or so we are told, more talented than Salieri. Dali offered himself as the leading painter of the Surrealist movement and as, or so we were asked to believe, the one whose talent was showing the way. Others, such as Magritte, followed suit. Ansel Adams and Edward Weston “traded paint”, so to speak, with the generally accepted conclusion that while Weston was unquestionably a pure artist, Adams had a more well-rounded set of skills which eventually allowed him to gain fame and fortune while the later eluded Weston all his life.

Was Mozart more talented than Salieri, Dali more talented than Magritte, Adams more talented than Weston, or vice versa, for each of these three pairs of artists? Fact is, we don't know, can't tell and are left with personal opinions about which artist(s) we like or dislike. Talent cannot be quantified. One has it or not, it is about that simple. Any discussion of talent, when it comes to comparing artists of a certain caliber, is eventually an exchange of opinions and not a scientific conversation.



Antelope Canyon Panorama 2
Fuji 617, Fujinon 90mm, Provia 100F

Another example of how Antelope Canyon can be continuously rediscovered if one visits this incredible place with fresh eyes and an open mind. For this essay I have purposefully selected a large number of photographs from Antelope Canyon to illustrate the fact that certain places foster creativity more than others.

Talent is present in all disciplines, not only in art. Talent is eventually that “spark” that some have and others don't. It is this elusive quality that makes all the difference between something good and something great. It is the ability to use available resources in a way that no one else has thought of, whether that use is more creative, more all-inclusive, more thorough or something else altogether. Talent has different names in different disciplines. For speakers and writers it is eloquence. The story of Demosthenes, a gifted orator in Ancient Greece who learned to overcome stuttering by practicing speaking with pebbles in his mouth, shows perhaps better than any other story the relative importance of talent versus physical limitations as well as the importance of talent versus training. Cyrano de Bergerac, whose eloquence is at the epicenter of Edmond Rostand's story, overcame a physical malformation, namely a huge nasal appendage, by learning to make fun of himself better

than any of those who were trying to ridicule him.

In many disciplines talented practitioners are simply referred to as *gifted*, or as *brilliant*, or again as *geniuses*. What is similar in all professions is the lack of a specific definition, the absence of a consensus of what this gift, this brilliance, this genius actually consists of. Talent, eventually, is a mystery. While we enjoy its presence and its outcome we can say but little about its implementation.

But what are those “resources” that talented individuals make better use of than common mortals? It depends of the field you are involved in since talent is present in any discipline. There are talented engineers, talented accountants, talented racecar drivers, pharmacists, masons, mechanics, etc. And of course there are talented artists, working in all artistic mediums.

So what makes a talented photographer? Well, for one, as the story I first told shows, talent is but little without technical excellence. Why? Because talent cannot make up a lack of knowledge. If talent is being able to best use the resources available to you at a given time, then you have to learn exactly what those resources are made of and how they can best be used. You have to become the expert in what those resources consists of. Then, and only then, can you go above and beyond what anyone else has done so far with those resources.

What is too often the case in art is believing that talent alone will make up for any and all shortcomings. It will not. Talent is not a remedy for lack of knowledge, lack of study, lack of work, lack of passion and so on. Talent is the icing on the cake so to speak. You have to have a “cake” for talent to shine. Talent is inspiration, imagination, thinking out of the box (or inside if you drive a Scion ; -) , etc. Talent is the ability to exceed your limitations and those of your equipment, within limits. If you follow Formula One racing you know that no amount of talent on the part of a driver will allow that driver to turn a Minardi into a Ferrari. One may become the best Minardi there is only to be outdone (greatly) by a less talented driver in a Ferrari. That’s just the way things are. It is not necessarily fair, but it needs to be understood for what it is.



Antelope Canyon Panorama 3
Fuji 617, Fujinon 90mm, Provia 100F

I have been asked why I photograph Antelope Canyon so much and not other comparable places such as, say, The Wave, a favorite of many photographers. I do so simply because I see no end to creativity in Antelope Canyon while I find other locations more limiting, at least at this time.

11- Skill enhancement exercises

Exercises for this article are somewhat more challenging than for the previous articles in this series. This is because, as I explained in the introduction, this subject requires a more important commitment on your part.

Nevertheless I planned the exercises below so they prove helpful towards helping you discover if you are an artist or help you become a more well-rounded artist, whichever your situation may be.

A-Write an artist statement.

There is nothing quite as useful as explaining why you do what you do, how you got to be where you are, and where you plan to go from here.

B-write a history of you as an artist

Do a “history” of your life as an artist. Find old drawings, photographs, sculptures, paintings or any other artwork that you did over the years, from the time you were a child until today, and put them together in a collection. If you no longer have these drawings describe them in writing as well as you can, on a page of paper, and add this page to the collection in place of the original. Better, re-create the missing piece now, as best as you can. It will be different from the original but this re-creation may lead to some interesting artistic breakthroughs.

C-Portrait of the artist as a young man (or woman)

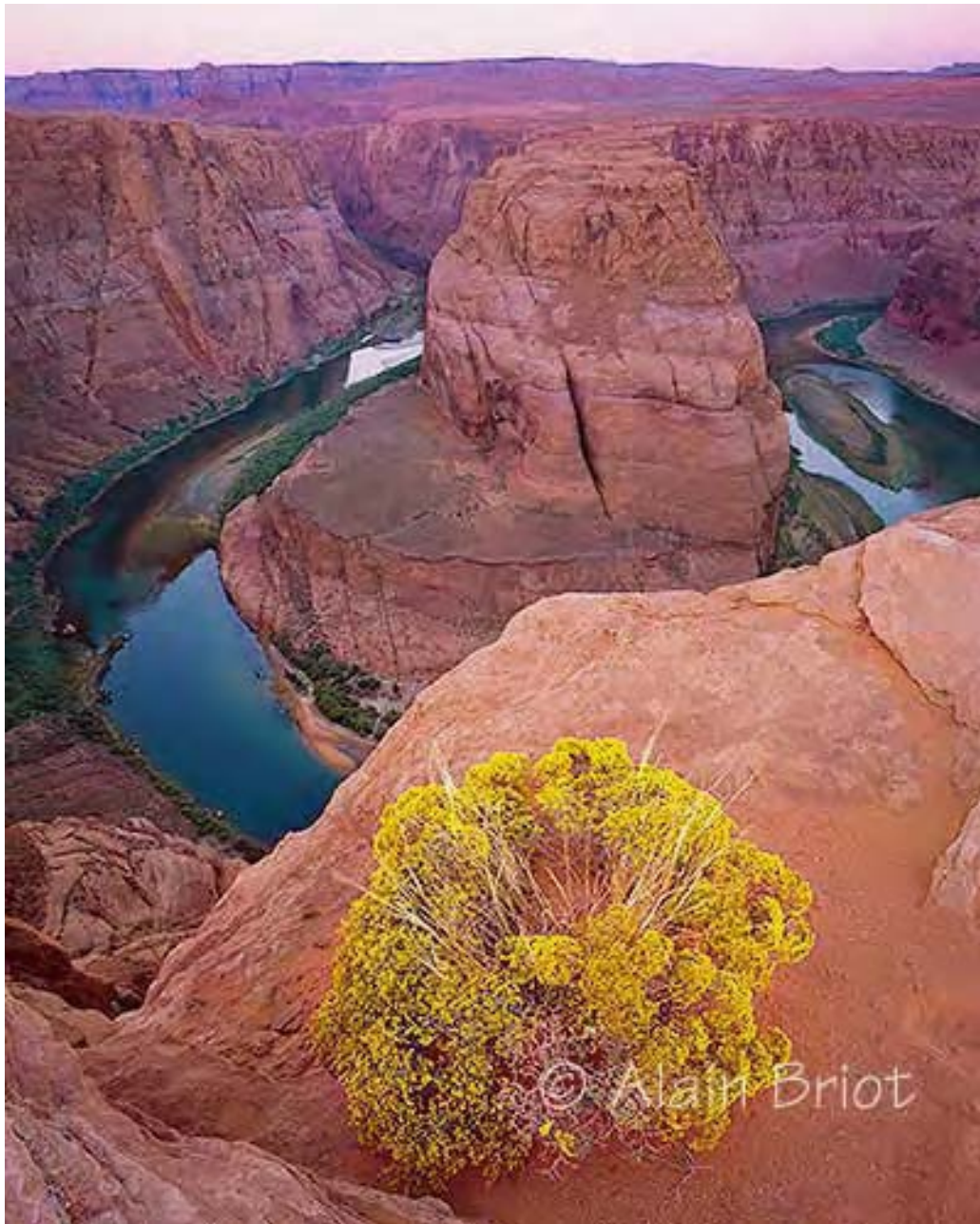
Describe yourself as you were (or as you remember yourself) when you just started your artistic career. The exact age you were at that time will vary from one person to the next. This may be you as a young child, or you as a young adult, or you at middle age, or later, or earlier, or at some other time. This is personal, but what matters is that you describe yourself as precisely as you can – the way you looked, what you thought, what your dreams were, your goals were, your aspiration were at that time. This is a sort of “resurfacing” process, a sort of going back to the source, of remembering what things were like back then, before the baggage of life accumulated upon you, upon your goals, your aspirations, your dreams, etc. It is a return to the source, to the spring of inspiration, and the key to this return is your memories of this past time. Make these memories as vivid as possible in your description. If you do not feel like writing then draw, or paint, or create a musical piece, or a sculpture, or anything else that embodies your memories. Do not let the disappointments of life, the many turns and twists that your existence took between then and now, prevent you from making as complete a description as you can. You need to return to the state in which you were back then.

D- Make a list of the misconceptions you had about art before reading this article.

E- Do you hesitate about whether to be an artist or not? If yes, what stops you from becoming an artist? Make a list of what stands in the way.

F- What is your position in regards to *Being Lucky*? Have you been told by other people that you are lucky in regards to your photography? Do you think you are lucky? Take time to reflect upon this issue. Specifically, consider how your position in regards to luck influences first your own work and second the way you look at the work of other artists.

G- Go out and create the photograph(s) you have always wanted to create. Do it right now! We all have photographs, or artwork, that we have wanted to create for a long time but have been waiting until “we get better at it” to create. With this exercise I ask you to *wait no longer* and instead go out and create this artwork or photograph right now. Don’t hurt yourself and don’t do anything silly, but do face your fears and the reasons you haven’t created these images yet. In my estimate the only true manner to face these fears is to go out and do it. Art is about creating, not about thinking when we are going to create. So go out and create the one image, or the images, you have wanted to create for years. I know it isn’t easy but if not now, then when?



Horseshoe Bend with Flowers
Linhof Master Technica, Schneider 75mm, Provia 100F

This is my most creative photograph of a location I visit just as often as Antelope Canyon. It is also the least “classical” in the sense that to include the flowering bush I had to hide half of the Horseshoe Bend. However, in doing so I created tension and conflict in the image while inviting a visual comparison of circular shapes: the flowers in the foreground and the Horseshoe Bend in the background.

12- Conclusion

We live in a world that fosters the technical rather than the artistic, the mechanical rather than the organic and a financial rather than a mecenistic approach. Art goes against all of that. While it can have a technical aspect, such as digital photography has, art is eventually about expressing yourself, about what inspires you, about sharing your view of the world with others. What medium you use, as well as all the technical intricacies of this medium, eventually fade away when compared with the message expressed in your work. Who knows the size of the chisels used by Michael Angelo and whether they were made of hardened steel, Damascus steel, or some other metal. Only experts know which film Ansel Adams used to create Moonrise, Hernandez, NM. I am sure you can find additional examples to further this argument. If you can you know how little people will care 10 years from now about whether you used Microdrives or Compact Flash cards to store your Raw files. Case closed.

We also live in a world that loves placing boundaries on what we do. By definition being an artist is not having boundaries about what we can create. However, this is less and less the case these days due to the limitations that artists impose or see imposed upon them. During a recent workshop, while talking about my Paris photographs, I was asked what was my definition of landscape photography. My answer was “just about any subject that is found outdoors.” This question surprised me until I realized that it emerged out of the perceived conflict between my wilderness landscape photographs and my Paris (or other cities) landscape photographs. I had never perceived this as a conflict as I consider the Natural Landscape and the Urban Landscape (to simplify) as being both Landscape photography. However, to a “purist” I suppose there can be a difference. Not to me though, and that is my freedom to decide. A lot of photographers feel bound by similar limitations. If you are not free to create how can you be creative? And if you are not creative how can you be an artist?

On a different level art cannot be judged by how much money it brings back to you. Whether you make no money at all, or make an obscene amount through the sale of your art, are not accurate commentaries on the actual artistic quality of your work. I have experienced both, and I know that neither situation was generated by the quality of my work. The artistic quality of your work, and the amount (or lack) of money your work generates, are two separate things.

Finally art is by nature a mecenistic activity. I believe one doesn't choose art as a career. Instead, art chooses us, for better or for worse as they say. In this regard you have to make the best of a difficult situation and in this endeavor several options are open to you. You can decide to try and make a living with art. Some are very successful at this, and in this respect I can only send you back to paragraph two, above, of this conclusion.

You can also decide that art is something you want to do for yourself and for a limited audience, without trying to make money with it. That is a fair decision, one that will go a long way towards protecting your artistic sensitivity from the school of hard knocks that you will be forced to attend should you want to make an income from your art. That decision will also go a long way towards freeing a lot of your time from activities such as marketing, salesmanship, show attendance, record keeping, taxes, and other activities that are required of you as an *artist in business*.

You can also decide that art is art, that it is your “sacred haven” the part of you no one but a select few will ever get to see. You can decide to shun the public spotlight, the *ten minutes of fame* promised by the media that lure many of us towards creating a public identity and presence. This last choice, which in a sense is at the opposite extreme of the “art for riches” approach, is maybe the one that will give you the most creative freedom. Whether the results of this choice are worth it or not is for you to decide.

Finally, keep in mind that art is supposed to be a fun and creative endeavor. If doing art is stressful, problematic, gives you headaches and keeps you awake at night you are definitely not doing it right. You need to free yourself from what is stressing you out when you are trying to be creative.

I mentioned the expression *artist in business* and in this essay I made a sharp distinction between being an artist and making a living from your art. This is because I truly believe that those are two entirely different activities. The former involves being an artist while the later involves being a businessman. I therefore decided, as I mentioned previously, that the 11th article in this series will be *Being an Artist in Business*. If this sounds like something you want to read, or if you have any comments about the present essay, make sure to drop me a line at alain@beautiful-landscape.com

In the meantime, as all the other installments so far, this series continues to be *a suivre*.

Alain Briot
Peoria, Arizona
April 2005

Text & Photographs
Copyright © Alain Briot 2005
All rights reserved worldwide

alain@beautiful-landscape.com
www.beautiful-landscape.com
800-949-7983 (USA) - 623-561-1641 (International)