

TEN TIPS FOR FINDING YOUR OWN VOICE

Eric Maisel

OVERVIEW

Artists may work for a very long time, even a lifetime, and never quite find their artistic voice. They may know that their work isn't really that fresh or interesting but not seem to possess the wherewithal to break through into deeply felt, personalized work. Here are ten tips for doing just that: for finding your voice as an artist.

TIP ONE: DETACHING FROM YOUR VISUAL LIBRARY

A very common problem, and almost always an unconscious one, is the need an artist feels to make his work look like something he holds as “good art” or “real art”—very often Old Master art. Because he possesses an internal library of the successful artworks of well-known artists, without realizing that he is doing it he aims his art in the direction of those successes. It is vital that an artist detach from that visual library—extinguish it, as it were—so that his own imagery has a chance to appear.

TIP TWO: NOT RESTING ON SKILLS AND TALENT

Maybe you excel at producing dynamic-looking cats or turning a patch of yellow into a convincing sun. That you have these talents doesn't mean that you ought to be producing lifelike cats or brilliant suns. Your strongest subject matter and style choices are dependent on what you want to say rather than on what you are good at producing. By all means parlay your skills and talents—but don't rely on them so completely that you effectively silence yourself.

TIP THREE: ALLOWING RISK-TAKING TO FEEL RISKY

Very often the personal work you want to do feels risky to undertake. Intellectually, you may find the way to convince yourself that the risk is worth taking—but when you try to take the risk you balk because you suddenly feel anxiety welling up. Remember that a risk is likely to *feel risky*. Get ready for that reality by practicing and owning one or two anxiety management strategies that allow you reduce your experience of anxiety.

TIP FOUR: COMPLETING FOR THE SAKE OF PROGRESS

When you make new work that you think is aiming you in the direction of your genuine voice, try to complete that work rather than stopping midway because “it doesn’t look right” or “it isn’t working out.” You will make more progress if you push through those feelings, complete things, and only then appraise them. It is natural that work that is new to you and a stretch for you may provoke all sorts of uncomfortable feelings as you attempt it. Help yourself tolerate those feelings by reminding yourself that finishing is a key to progress.

TIP FIVE: THINKING ABOUT POSITIONING

You may want to develop your voice independent of art trends and say exactly what you want to say in exactly the ways that you want to say it. Or it may serve you to take an interest in what’s going on and make strategic decisions about how you want to position yourself vis-à-vis the world of “hot artists,” galleries, collectors, exhibitions, auctions, movements, and so on. It isn’t so much that one way is right and the other wrong but rather that some marriage of the two, if you can pull it off, may serve you best: some marriage, that is, of the intensely personal and marketplace strategizing.

TIP SIX: ARTICULATING WHAT YOU’RE ATTEMPTING

Artists are often of two minds as to whether they want to verbally describe what they’re visually attempting. The paraphrase of a visual experience into a verbal “artist’s statement” often feels unconvincing and beside the point. On the other hand, it can prove quite useful to announce to yourself what you hope to accomplish with your new work. By trying to put your next efforts into

words, you may clarify your intentions and as a consequence more strongly value your efforts.

TIP SEVEN: NOT REPEATING YOURSELF FOR THE SAKE OF REPEATING

Repeating successful work has a way of reducing our experience of anxiety and can bring financial rewards as well. But it may also prevent us from moving forward and from discovering what we hope to say. A balance to strike might be to do a certain amount of repeat work, for the sake of calmness and for the sake of your bank account, and to also add the reality of new work to your agenda.

TIP EIGHT: REVISITING YOUR EARLIEST PASSIONS

Life has a way of causing us to forget where our genuine passions reside. You may have spent decades in a big city and completely forgotten how much the desert means to you. You may have been so busy painting and parenting that your burning passion for creating a series of cityscapes fell off the map somewhere along the line. Finding your voice may involve something as simple and straightforward as making a list of your loves and starring those that still energize you.

TIP NINE: INTEGRATING YOUR DIFFERENT THREADS

Maybe you make two sorts of art, abstract relief paintings and realistic flat paintings. This division may have occurred at some point when, perhaps without consciously thinking the matter through, you decided that the one painting style allowed you do something that the other didn't. It may pay you to revisit this question and see if the two styles can be integrated into some third style that allows the best of both current styles to come together. Whatever you discover from that investigation—whether it's to move forward in a new way or recommit to your current methods—you will have helped yourself better understand your artistic intentions.

TIP TEN: ACCEPTING NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN RESULTS

It can feel odd to speak in your own voice and then not recognize the results. Because what you've created may be genuinely new—and completely new to you—it may look like nothing you've ever seen before. That can prove disconcerting! Don't rush to judge it as too odd, a mess or a mistake, or not what you'd intended. Give it some time to grow on you and speak to you. Your own voice may sound unfamiliar to you if you've never heard it before!

ABOUT ERIC MAISEL

Eric Maisel is the author of more than 30 books. His recent books include *Brainstorm: Harnessing the Power of Productive Obsessions*, *Mastering Creative Anxiety*, and *Rethinking Depression: Shed the Label, Reclaim Your Power* (2012).

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