



Saving the World One Painting at a Time

By Stewart Cubley

We normally don't think of painting as a political act. Unless it's done as a social statement, art is considered a leisure time activity. How can we justify painting – even as a way of working on ourselves - when chaos is gathering in the world like a great thunderhead? Is it obvious that confronting our own personal void in the luxury of the painting studio is meaningful at all? Can we defend making our inner life the recipient of some of our best energies?

What about the shameful state of the political situation and wars raging about us? What about the unprecedented environmental and energy crisis we're facing as a species? What about the human rights abuses and exploitation of the poor? What about the ever-expanding monolith of imperialism and exploitation disguised as freedom that looms over the world? What about the alarming acceleration of weapons production, where more than 75% of our national resources are absorbed by the military-industrial complex and less than 5% goes to educating our children? **How do we respond to the outrage we feel over the lack of integrity in our leaders?** It's become an urgent and pressing question - what can we do as individuals to apply the most leverage and actually have an effect?

It's been said that the root cause of our inability to live together in peace and prosperity is the overwhelming tendency of human nature to put itself first. If indeed we thought of the whole rather than the special privilege of an individual or a group, a much different world would be before us. This is fairly obvious. But the problem goes deeper than that. **It's not just that we 'put ourselves first', but that we 'first put ourselves'.** I don't mean this as a word game. For the order to be questioned, we must confront the 'who' we first put. The constructed 'me' can't help but put itself first – based as it is on insecurity and fear. It's only in authentic transformation that the order can be reversed. Real political action cannot exclude questioning the tenacious and deep habits that form the basis of our identity - personally, culturally and as a species.

The creative act requires placing process before profit. It's a courageous gesture of trusting that we're supported by a reality greater than we personally have control over - that we don't need to fight and fend just for ourselves. This is the only political action that has ever had significance in the world. Whether it's a purely private act or more social in scope, it's the one place where we actually have some leverage - the fulcrum point for real change. And it's not a foreign language we have to learn. The stage is an intimately familiar one - no one alive is exempt from participating in this dialogue whether we engage it or not. We're presented each moment with the challenge of entering fully into the world in which we find ourselves, or of turning away by taking a position that polarizes and isolates. When we embrace our reality to the end and without exclusion, the very notion of who we are is fundamentally altered, and the intelligence lying at the heart of creation flows unimpeded. **This one small step of self-transcendence is a giant step - it ripples out far beyond the seeming insignificance of the action itself.**

It may seem Pollyannaish to imagine that we can effect change in a world that has progressed so far down the road of self-interest. The deeply entrenched systems of greed, coercion and manipulation pervade every conceivable aspect of life. We are swept up in a tide of history that seems to be on a collision course with unprecedented suffering. It's not just changing national or cultural policies that will solve our predicament, but only something as fundamental as a profound shift in our very relationship to life and who we are in it that will allow us to go beyond the limited perspectives of fear, self-concern and domination that are so quickly closing the noose around our necks. The crisis at root is a spiritual crisis. **And it's something only we can address - we can't expect it of the world but not of ourselves.**

This may be one of the finest moments of the human promise, or it may be the end of a grand experiment. The urge to reach for what is highest and best in human experience now coincides with an urgency seemingly imposed from without. There is a longing to drink from a vaster source than the stale pool of self-centered strategies for survival and conquest. **The nourishment that the sacred experience of painting provides is the act of stepping out of the way, of letting life itself be first, rather than ourselves.** And it's the intensity of this longing that will determine how we collectively fare in this transition, and what the face of the next millennium will look like.

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