

Appendix: Statement from Peter Plagens on his philosophy as an artist

Since I'm the kind of painter—are there many?—who turns work to the wall, face in, when done (I'd rather live with other people's), and has no esthetic or sociopolitical *program* behind my work (although I do like to read about artists who do), my worst fear is that when a bunch of my pictures from over thirty years go up in a gallery at once, I'll stand revealed as scatterbrained to the point of multiple personalities. I'm not that worried about people in general liking my painting (*de gustibus*, what makes horse races, etc.) because I'm more or less used to their not, generally speaking. My abstract paintings are, I think, too craggy or disjointed or garish (although I have gone through a few pisselegant phases) to be generally likeable. Funny things are that if there's any commonality to my work from the beginning to now, it's that I simply want to paint paintings that are *good-looking* (albeit on my terms), and you'd think that somebody who's also been an art critic all this time would have a better idea of what might constitute “good-looking” to people other than himself.

Not that I want to settle, mind you, for my painting being merely good looking. Almost inevitably, it's supposed to express *something*. The problem with the “objective correlative,” as T.S. Eliot called it, is yet another compound matter. First, what the painting expresses should be a little weightier than whether I'd had too much or too little coffee that day. To me, the paintings are, at bottom, all about an existentialist view of the world (awash in absurdity, with no God or spiritual harmonies to offer relief like some sort of metaphysical elevator music, civilization held tenuously together with chewing gum and baling wire, etc.). There are, however, no this-equals-this's of thinly disguised symbolism lurking in their abstractness (at least not as far as I can help it). Even if there were, the last thing I'd want to do is inflict upon the viewer a long exegesis about them. In short, the existentialism is my problem.

Second, there's an obvious tension between the painting actively expressing something—that is, fairly “objectively” constituting a real “correlative”—and being

“good looking.” How much of one does a painter forsake to satisfy the other? With painting, the physical material itself often decides the question: when I just can’t do anything more to the painting without turning it into the beginning of another one, then it’s done. The question then becomes simply whether to chuck the thing or not. (I haven’t deliberately thrown away many because I’ve never been sure what a painting might tell me later, when I got retroactively curious and turned it out from the wall. This habit has its price, though: since most of my work has remained in my own possession, I’ve had to lug all these paintings with me as I’ve moved about the country.)

Finally, painting and art history, painting vs. video and installation art, “painting—see ‘death of,’” and all that stuff. I started out as a painter and, since I possess genetically half of a plodding Teutonic temperament, I’ve stayed one. Connections to perhaps the deepest, richest mode of Western art since the Fall of Rome have sustained satisfaction, yes, but sheer force of habit has played a large part, too. Not to mention circumstance: if I’d been born in 1841 instead of 1941, I’d probably have been a printer’s apprentice; 1981 instead of ’41 and I’d likely be doing digitally interactive whatever. Nevertheless, I really do think that there’s something *there* in painting, especially abstract painting, that one just doesn’t get elsewhere. I only hope that my paintings, whatever their drawbacks, might convince a few susceptible, talented young artists and openminded viewers likewise.