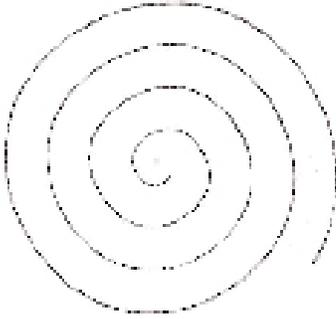


Musings on No Fear: The Artist as Explorer

by Catherine Nash



Exploring as an artist...on how many levels could that be? With every brushstroke or line of a pencil, an artist explores. Media, idea, content, expression.... It means journeying into unknown domains: from envisioning the inner to observing the outer; while contemplating in one's own yard or while meandering in a distant country. Exploring connotes growth, inciting a deeper curiosity, discovering connections and inspiring new creative surges. Exploring as an artist is as much about discovering about one's self as it is about another. I think we are kind of talking about an onion of sorts, a layering.

*Spiraling through ideas
Excavation of the essential
Mapping uncharted territory...
an artistic alchemy
a personal geography
an inner astronomy*



Meriwether Lewis, Journal Entry,
February 24, 1806

I think about artists who physically traveled into unexplored geography to discover the unknown. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark embarked in 1804 on what would become a two year journey of discovery from St. Louis across the northern states, through the northwest territories and finally to the Pacific coast. As they made their way slowly, averaging about 10 miles a day, they turned sharpened eyes into this new landscape, journaling every detail, mapping the land. They sketched their discoveries of new species of plants and animals, new tribal cultures, new geology.¹ Imagine the courage of these two artist explorers and their team as they embarked into the complete unknown without a pre-existing map, trusting that they would be able to find food and water to survive.



Meriwether Lewis, Map:
Great Rapids (Cascades) of
the Columbia River, Wash-
ington and Oregon, October
30–November 2, 1805

I have a confession. I used to hate the art of Picasso, except for his rose and blue periods. In 1980, fresh out of my undergraduate art studies, I caught the Picasso retrospective at MOMA in New York City, and gained a much deeper respect for his accomplishments, leaving with an understanding of the indebtedness contemporary artists owe to his work. Although I don't still "like" all of his varied styles, I am in most definitely awe of his prolific output, his ability to translate an always evolving treasurehouse of ideas...without hesitation or fear.



Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937

One of my personal favorite artists is the late Morris Graves (1910-2001) who is associated with such north-western mystical painters as Guy Anderson and Mark Tobey. His artwork was inspired by an inner spiritual exploration and reflects his lifelong study of Buddhism, his travels to India, Japan and Ireland. Arriving in Japan



Morris Graves, *Bird Singing in the Moonlight*, 1938-39

for the first time, he wrote, "... I at once had the feeling that this was the right way to do everything. It was the acceptance of nature not the resistance to it." ² Painting elements of the natural world imbued with ethereal essence became his lifelong focus...a consistent need to trust and not resist his inner visions.

I recently read a wonderful pertinent book that I would highly recommend. *The Creative Habit* by Twyla Tharp, a preeminent American choreographer helped me refocus and get inspired. This is a book not just for dancers. Tharp aptly writes about the creative act, universalizing the journey one travels to include musicians and visual artists and writers. How does one dig and explore to find ideas? She writes, "Scratching is what you do when you can't wait for the thunderbolt to hit you...When I'm scratching I'm improvising....To generate ideas, I had to move.

It's the same if you're a painter: You can't imagine the work, you can only generate ideas when you put pencil to paper, brush to canvas - when you actually do something physical."³ There are a lot of "self help" books on creativity out there, but I found *The Creative Habit's* narrative, questions and exercises to be uniquely fresh and helpful.

In my own creative life, I have found that navigating into the unknown as an artist requires not only fearless improvisation, but a gathering and cultivating of some helpful tools:

- an inquisitive and courageous nature
- a deeply thinking, poetic mind
- keen observation skills
- a love of beauty and the desire to seek and express it
- a deep, empathetic understanding of one's subject whether it emanates from inner or outer
- the ability to contour and utilize one's available time
- emphasis on the journey rather than the destination
- flexibility as the artwork evolves
- absolute trust in the infinite wealth of ideas

So one could travel as far away as India or Morocco to find inspiration or stay home and contemplate the blooming cacti in one's own backyard, but ultimately, the bottom line is that the real exploration begins when one enters the studio, takes time in quietude to ponder.. and finally, trusting in the potential of the *tabula rasa*, the blank slate, the white sheet of paper, just dives in.

¹ <<http://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/index.html>> accessed May 1, 2009.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morris_Graves>, accessed May 1, 2009.

³ Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*. (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2003) 98-99.

BIO

A long time resident of Tucson, artist Catherine Nash, M.F.A., specializes in Japanese and Western hand papermaking, artist books and mixed media drawing/painting and has exhibited internationally. She teaches in the schools for the AZ Commission on the Arts and to adults at the AZ Sonoran Desert Museum Art Institute and her newly opened teaching studio *Desert Paper, Book and Wax* <<http://www.papermakingresources.com>>. Her love of travel and different cultures has inspired her to live, research and teach on four continents.

<<http://www.catherinenash.com>>

