

How We Communicate with Art

Cathy Carey

I believe everyone is communicating with their art, it may not be or need to be real deep, but that is a primal function of art - it is a revealing form of communication , even if what you are saying is “I think this is pretty.”

When we look back at artists from other time periods, we read things into their work from the subject matter and color usage, we know something about those people and their lives by what they have chosen or been paid to paint and the way they painted it. Part of the artist comes through in all your choices, subject, medium, style, - are all ways of communicating. All colors have an unspoken meaning, next time you go shopping notice how the colors on the packaging are “communicating” something about the product and how the producer wants you to feel about the product. Even the composition of a painting tells you something about how you are going to feel about the piece, the way it is cropped, whether it is close up or far away, at the top or bottom of the surface, or off to the side. The texture of the paint also reveals something about the subject and the artist. How they move as they paint, how fast or slow they paint can sometimes be obvious from the way it is painted. Does a Jackson Pollack have a different feeling from an Andrew Wyeth? A painter may not know all these things as they paint, but just the same as a book can be analyzed for themes and how it relates to its time period and what it says about life at that time and the writer, so does a painting. Often the artist may have no idea what they are communicating but that does not mean they are not communicating. In fact if you were to analyze what you see in their use of color and composition, medium and style, they may not like what they are communicating. If you only know 10 vocabulary words but you know the meaning of them all and you write a story that uses all the words properly, it may end up being simplistic, but it is true to what you were trying to say because you understood the words you were using. If you write a story using a thousand words but only really understand 100 of them, and you misuse the rest, substituting delighted for angry because you don't know what you are saying, you will confuse your audience and not communicate your intent.

Many artists intuitively know the meaning of the color, composition and styles they are using. So they are not confusing the audience, but they may not be able to articulate what the communicated effect of their painting is, that might not be part of their gift - to see into the painting for meaning. For them not to know that does not take away from the power of the painting or its affect on people. What does make a difference is when an artist does not know the meaning of the things they are using, when the color, texture, images or composition is not done with purpose, but is arbitrarily laid down, usually those artists have hit and miss sessions. Sometimes it all lines up and sometimes , they don't know why , but it falls flat. Knowing something about what you are communicating helps with the way you are delivering the message.

It is a critic 's or art historian's job to find the communication or meaning in a painting, to analyze “what the artist is trying to say”, to tie it into its time period and allow it to reflect meaning. So for many artists being asked, “what does your painting mean ?” , a good response would be “that's for the art historians to decide.”

Cathy Carey was born in Washington, DC. and grew up in Alexandria, VA. She was educated at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington DC, and received a BFA in Painting from VCU in Richmond, Virginia. She currently maintains a studio and teaches workshops in San Diego, CA and Santa Fe, NM. In 2004 she published *The Philosophy of Color* and her articles on art are regularly printed in the *Rancho Santa Fe Review*. She is well known for her use of color. “My purpose is to capture a sense of magic about reality by describing the color and drama of a story in the same way as a fairy tale or play. I call my style Magic Realism.” View her work at: www.artstudiosandiego.com.