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Critiquing Your Work: *It's All About the B's*

You are alone in your studio. The work had been going well and then you hit a wall. You are tempted to cover it up and start over. Hold on! Walls are good. It usually means that the work is on the brink of a transformative direction. While our frustration might tell us to give up, our better angels tell us to **Stop. Wait. Breathe.**

I don't know if this pattern is familiar to you, but I have been here countless times. Yes, I have covered over paintings, but more often I find that something amazing will happen if I don't give up. The trick, for me, is to first identify what is going wrong in the painting. If I can identify the issue early enough, than I have a good chance of solving the problem. If I continue to muddle around with the work, *meaning I take a trial-and-error approach*, I usually make a mess.

What is wrong with the work is often not clear. It just *looks* wrong, and I don't know why. Sometimes others can see what is off sooner than I can because I am too close to the work. But I don't always have the luxury of available artists to offer critique or suggestions when I am stuck. I had to develop a simple and quick way to take me beyond impasse to improvement in critiquing my work. I use a formula that helps me target the three most common issues that I find in my work. I call it the **3-B's**.

Start with a Good Look

When coming to that impasse in the studio, it is important to take a fresh look at the work, so you need to step away-- get some perspective, have a snack, take a walk. I usually take a good long look at what is on my table, place a snapshot in my mind and get out of the studio into the neighborhood. I am not thinking about my art, but I am letting it gently sit on the back burner of my mind and simmer. Research shows that exercise may stimulate the production of good brain chemicals, such as norepinephrine and dopamine. It also shifts our energy and often our perspective. Taking a walk always helps me.

When I return to the studio, I am able to look at the work with fresh eyes, trying to see this piece as if for the first time. That's when I use my simple three B's approach to evaluation and assessment.

Assessment Leads to Solutions

“It’s too Boggy!”

Assessment: The painting might appear dull or lifeless. Those inner words signal to me that the issue is one of **VALUE**. A quick “squint” will let me know if I am on the right track. Taking a photo of the work and transferring it to grey scale will let me know with greater certainty if my values are too similar to one another. Using a value scale—either one you create for yourself from your own favorite colors—or something commercial like [Magic Palette®](#) can help with expanding a vocabulary of darks and lights.

Solutions:

- For two-dimensional work, try adding a glaze of a complement for pushing back an area of the work.
- If you are working in wax, sometimes scraping will bring out an area that has become muted with a too heavy layer of medium.
- Adding an element of bright white or strong dark may be just enough to fill out the mid-values that we often find ourselves using.

“It’s too Busy!”

Assessment: If you find yourself being *overwhelmed* when you look at your work, it might mean that you have too many high **CONTRAST** or eye-catching areas that are competing for attention.

If you find yourself *underwhelmed* when you look at the work, it might mean that there is a lack of variety in the elements you are using. Take some time to look critically at the work through the lens of SHAPES, SIZE of featured elements, COLORS, PATTERNS and DIRECTION of brush strokes, lines, etc. You might discover that all of the shapes you are using are curvilinear or your brushstrokes or lines are horizontal, for example.

Sometimes, for me, it means I have been trying to protect some pretty bits and have lost sight of the whole painting. Going back to photos you have taken during the development of the work will help you see the precious areas that might have overstayed their welcome.

Solutions:

- If all colors or most of your colors are at full value or all of your shapes a solid, for example, than the solution is to modify the colors by pushing some back or toning them down with a glaze.
- Create some breathing space in the work by simplifying and selecting images or elements to highlight and masking out others.
- Make sure that you have a contrast in line, shape, and pattern. Size of those elements are often the most glaring issue. Increasing the size of just one or two elements by taking them partially off the picture plane makes a difference.

“It’s too Boring!”

Assessment: If the work appears too symmetrical, overly balanced or the design structure is in-your-face glaring, this is often a composition issue.

Solutions:

- To fix this, it usually requires that you revisit your original intention to make needed adjustments.
- If the underlying compositional structure is off, it might take something big like masking out an area or adding a strong element to offset the eye. Throw in a splash of a complementary color to make the painting sing.

Having a quick **3-B’s** template to assess work at several stages of development can be a handy tool for your work and possibly save you an experimentation approach that often leads to even larger issues. Identifying what is wrong is the first step to devising a plan to adjust the direction and move forward.

Additional Tips for Critiquing Your Own Work

1. *Take a photo of the work at the end of every work period. You will be able to catch issues that develop. A series of photos will also point out areas that you might be protecting as they will show up again and again, even as the work continues to grow around them. You will be surprised at reducing the work to a small thumbnail image on your camera will tell you a lot about the painting.*
2. *Take breaks. Even when we are in the zone, there is a natural rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. Learn to listen to your body and your spirit. You will find you actually get more done with fewer mistakes.*
3. *Use the best materials you can afford for your work. Also, use the correct tool for your work. If what you are using to scrape or paint is causing you frustration, then assess your tools and plan for adjusting to what will best serve you.*
4. *Turn your work often. View your work from differing distances. Place your work in different positions to see it in different lights. Use a large mirror to see your work in a new way. Changing your perspective will often be all you need to assess an issue that needs addressing.*
5. *Realize and accept that all of us, artists, make mistakes and come to dead ends. It is part of the process. Creating art is a journey, not a destination. To be an artist means we commit to the long haul of that relationship.*