



THE ENSO CIRCLE

an invitational online artists' residency created and led by michelle belto and lyn belisle

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Creating the Enso Statement Step by Step

For most artists, creating the work is hard enough, but *“Than you have to WRITE about it,”* one student once told me. I’ve since learned that many artists feel similar fears with describing their work and their process. Probably, that is because that most of us have read long treatises with high sounding sentences that we can’t understand. We blame ourselves. *If we had an art degree or were making “real” art, we could somehow write like a “real” artist.* I am here to tell you that your best statement is actually already written! It has been in your mind, in your journal notes, in your conversations with family and friends all during the creating process. Most of us just need a way to put the pieces together. Here is a format that I have used. It’s definitely not the *only* way to create an artist statement, but if you find anything helpful here, you have my full permission to ***Steal Like an Artist.***

Capturing Your Thoughts

Most artist are circular thinkers, so if the act of writing is blocking you from getting started, use your phone to tape your response. You’d be surprised how free that makes you. If you are a good typist and you find the speed of typing the best way to keep the thoughts flowing, use a computer. If your thoughts are scattered and you find the slower pace of hand writing helpful toward more thoughtful composing, than by all means, write. But no matter the vehicle you choose, imagine yourself talking to a non-judgmental friend or colleague. In this first exercise, don’t worry about sentence structure or spelling. Just capture your thoughts. You will probably write a lot here. That’s OK. Editing is the easier part.

Step One

Imagine that you are speaking to a supportive artist friend. He or she is standing in front of your new work and loving what you have done. Your friend asks: “How did you do that?”

(WRITE. RECORD. TYPE)

This is a question about materials and process. You won’t want this as your first paragraph, but this is usually the easiest for us to write. If your materials or art medium is unusual, you might want to elaborate. For example, if you work in encaustic, you will want to talk about how you paint with wax but that it has to first be melted, cools quickly and needs to be “burned in” layer by layer. If you are a painter that uses more traditional materials, you might want to talk about your process—where you start on the canvas and how you proceed. For example, you might like to scribble on the canvas to get things started or block out your shapes. You might do a lot of sketches or color studies before you even start.

Step Two

Your friend says, “Wow that is really interesting. How do you get your ideas?”

(WRITE. RECORD. TYPE)

This is a question about inspiration and content. If your work is inspired by big subjects, such as “nature or climate change” say that but add something personal about how or why this interests you. Was there an experience or something in your background that led you to focus on this subject? If there is an idea that you have been intrigued by or something you have been exploring or thinking about, say something about that. If this is a new direction for you, or an early exploration of some new medium, say something about why you chose to go in this direction now and, possibly, how it connects with your prior work.

Organizing and Writing the First Draft

Step One:

Now that you have the basics of your ideas down in some format that you can see, it is time to select the main ideas. If you used the conversation-with-a-friend approach, you probably have more ideas, some back story and non-related content. Start with your written or transcribed words from step two (above). Which image or element is the most compelling? Is the link between your personal experience and the focus of your work direct and clear? This becomes the first sentence and the body of the first paragraph of your statement.

Here are some examples of starts and wording that you can steal from:

- **(For an influence of location)** *Growing up in Alaska where much of the winter was spent in darkness, I became obsessed with creating light in my paintings.*
- **(For content inspired by an event)** *From my first experience with a Jackson Pollock painting at the age of ten, I knew that when I became an artist, I would surround myself in color.*
- **(For content/process influenced by memory)** *In the Catholic School of my childhood, we were given images of saints as prizes for good behavior. In my mind I associated these prayer cards with a tangible spiritual energy. It is no wonder that Spirit Dolls became my means of artistic expression.*

A good first sentence sets the reader on an adventure. It will intrigue, invite other questions and compel the reader to want to read on. I put myself in the place of the reader of your statement in the scenarios above. Here are my questions.

- **(location)** As a reader, I might want to go to Google to research something about how long the Alaska winter nights are. If the artist is there, I would want to know how it feels to live in darkness for so much of the year. That would also lead me to look for the light in the work... and possibly to look more closely at HOW the artist created light. *In this example, the artist would use additional sentences in her statement to help the reader connect emotionally to being a child in the Alaskan winter. In the statement there would be sentences explaining why the artist uses light as a subject matter or a painting element.*
- **(event)** If I knew something about the work of Jackson Pollock, I would want to look more closely at the artwork to see how this artist used bright, almost primary, colors. I would wonder if the artist also chose to mimic the famous artist’s process of using drips and spatters to make paintings. *The statement would go on to make connections between the artist’s work and Pollock’s work explaining why some elements were chosen and some were not. The statement would also want to say something about how your work as the artist is unique.*
- **(memory)** As a reader of this opening to the statement. I would want to know how the artist made a transition from the 2-D work of the images on the prayer cards to the 3-D work of the spirit dolls. I would want to know how the artist imbues these sculptures with energy that takes them to the level of the spiritual. *The statement would go on to describe perhaps how the artist made the leap into Spirit Dolls and something about her process of how spiritual energy is added into the creating process.*

Step Two:

The starter sentence leads naturally to answering questions a viewer might have when they see your work in the catalogue or in a gallery. Most of the time, you won't be in a position to explain your work or your statement. Writing in the first person provides an intimacy that helps the viewer feel the presence of the artist.

If the first part of your statement answers some of the immediate questions that arise, other questions of how the work was created is a natural next step. In writing about your process of how YOU make this work and the MEDIUM of what you use and how that works, you will want to keep in mind that **simpler is better**. Your viewer wants to get an imaginative glimpse of you in the studio through your words. They don't need a full tutorial on how to actually create a spirit doll, for example. Based on the three scenarios above, here is what some of that next paragraph might look like.

- **(location)** *In order to create that intense night that I remember, I usually begin my paintings with a dark ground as a first step. As I build layers of paint and image, I add colors to my pallet that are warmer and more intense. I usually paint bright white highlights as a last step to mimic sunshine hitting the surface. While I have worked in many paint mediums, I prefer to use oils for its ability to provide transparent coats of color as I build up paint.*
- **(event)** *Although I tried using Pollock's process of drips and splatters early on in my work, I realized that it was his use of bright bits of color that I was most attracted to. I found my own way by using a grid as a way to organize my ideas on the canvas. Like Pollock, I use shapes of overlapping color to tell my stories. I usually begin with random shapes of differing size, with muted colors. These same shapes are repeated in layers gradually becoming larger and more colorful. I sometimes work in watercolor on paper because I like the transparency of that medium. The paintings in this series are created with acrylic. I had been looking for a medium that lends itself to a larger canvas. Since acrylic dries quickly, I can work on several areas of the same canvas in one sitting.*
- **(memory)** *I make my work using fabric and stitching, sometimes creating pillow like bodies from hand-dyed materials. Other times, I fashion the bodies from aluminum foil and paper clay. I always incorporate something from nature as part of the work because like the Indigenous people in my area of the Southwest, I believe that there is a spiritual quality to natural elements. When I am beginning a new work, I open myself to materials that feel right in the moment, collecting and bringing to the table only what I need for this one doll. Following an intuitive process is an important element in my work.*

Editing and Refining

If you came to this exercise with the goal in mind to write a rough draft that has content that resonates with your work and your process, you are at the right place. All or most of the important elements of what you want to say is already down on paper. It is time to edit the first draft and to refine your statement for prime time.

Editing is mostly about removing unnecessary wording, strengthening sentences that are confusing and making the language flow. Refining applies to word choice, grammar correction, and punctuation accuracy. Not all of us are good editors or polished writers. That is OK. We make art. There are others who can help with the editing process. Here are a couple of steps to make our words sound as good as our work looks.

Step One:

It is harder to **see** awkward sentence structure than it is the **hear** it. Your first step is to read your words aloud several times. The first time, I like to read the material aloud all the way through without stopping. I am listening to see if the content feels complete and resonates with my work and my ideas. I also notice where my attention wanders as I read and note that area. Usually that means that something doesn't flow or there is a gap in the development of thought.

The next couple of times, I read through the words, I stop to take out unnecessary phrasing, as I ask myself if I can say the same thing in fewer words. I move phrases around to make my meaning clear. I notice when I am repeating a descriptive word more than once. If so, I go to an online Thesaurus to search for another word to use. When I get this

draft to a place where the words seem to flow and I find myself really following along with the development, then I move on to step 2.

Step Two:

I have a couple of good writer friends whom I often count on to be a last line of review. We have a pact that I will review their work when needed if they review mine. We have agreed, though, that we will each get our draft as near to perfect in our own mind as possible. No one wants to become the teacher with the red pencil. Most of the time they point out a missing or unclear idea that requires me to add in a sentence or two. Sometimes my editor will ask a question that is unclear in her mind that leads me to more development of a concept.

If you put your final draft in a Word document, the grammar and spell check is pretty good about catching most of those issues. With its own built in red marking system, it is easy to spot and fix issues in the document.

Submitting Your Statement

Don't throw away any of your statements! Instead, put them in a folder on your computer even the ones that didn't get fully developed. I have a folder titled STATEMENTS with sub folders for specific bodies of work. These documents that describe my process and my work are invaluable. I often reuse elements in new statements. More importantly, I can see my own artistic development over the years. And that is a good feeling.

If you are submitting work for a show or catalogue, you will have some restrictions as to numbers of words. If you have written your statement in Word, you can use the REVIEW label at the top of your screen to get an instant word count. To do this, click on the tab, REVIEW. Highlight the entire statement and click on WORD COUNT. You will be able to see how many words are in your document.

If your statement is 500 words, for example, but you are only allowed 150 words, you will need to edit down to essential content. Keep the 500-word statement intact in your folder. You may need a more developed artist statement when you are submitting to a gallery with a larger body of work. Once you have edited your statement to 150 words or less, label it as such and file it with statements of this work so that you will be able to use it again.