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Thoughts on Reflection and Critique

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Thoughts on Reflection and Critique

Reflection is a means to consider both the work of others and one's own work. We use the term reflection for beginning and intermediate classes, introducing the idea of critique in more advanced classes and workshops. Our goal with reflection is to support understandings of art and the idea that a work of art can have multiple meanings, but that the meanings grow out of the piece itself. The objective of critique for experienced artists is to discover what works in the piece, to mine cultural, art historical, and other references as well as emotional or psychological resonance.

1) *Begin with description.* What do you see? Encourage neutral responses. "I see a red square." Vs "The shape represents the mind." This will take some practice and is worth the effort as both an intellectual exercise and a way to slow down looking at art.

2) *Identify the shift from description to interpretation.* Usually, this will happen organically. You can support learning by pointing out to participants when that happens and encouraging them, over time, to recognize the distinction in these interrelated responses to art. (For example, "I notice that you said the square was blood red. How does the use of that word begin to shift our response from description to interpretation?")

3) *Move into Interpretation.* Consider what the piece might mean. Let this meaning construction grow out of the discussing or interpretation. Considerations might include: cultural or contextual cues, art historical references, style, media, size, etc.

Two valuable phrases that Terry Bartlett offers are: collective interpretation and range of interpretations. A **collective interpretation** means the sum of our voices. It's a rich and inspiring way to learn about art for people of all levels and works well in our classes. A **range of interpretations** refers to the given range any particular work of art suggests. For example, if you go to a gallery hungry, see a painting of a red square in a desert, and say it reminds you of an ice cream sundae. That might not be in the range of interpretations of the piece so much as in your range of experience. Support participants in accessing a work's range of interpretations by guiding them through the steps above.

On an individual level you will experience the profound satisfaction of witnessing firsthand as participants feel the positive power of the enrichment of art. They realize they have learned how to recreate that sense of magic in their own lives even while in prison. This is a teacher's ultimate reward and is all the more meaningful when it occurs within institutions mostly devoid of aesthetic enrichment.

— Price Hall, *Teaching Artist, CIM*