

{FAILURE}

Story Steve Lopes

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Is fear of failure the enemy of creativity?

Nobody ever intentionally sets out to fail. No matter whether you're a savvy artworld insider or an earnest newcomer, in every creative endeavour artists genuinely want the best for their work. How that work develops depends on a whole raft of variables. Talent, experience, subject matter, timing and connections will see the work either take off or fall flat.

Sometimes it's good to fail, but an unflinching sense of professionalism or careerism can often (unconsciously) muzzle an artist's urge to try something different or take some risks. The pressure to maintain an image of success can weigh heavily on younger artists looking to extend their practice, just as established artists wonder if their dream run of popularity could come to an end. Self-conscious strategies will only work to a certain point. Inevitably, your work will hit a brick wall—within yourself and out in the community. Part of being a good artist is being prepared to take risks—to tear down that wall—and deal with potential failure or rejection in a practical and positive way. To do this, artists need time, or sheltered periods, in which they can learn from mistakes and let their work evolve.

For any individual (not just an artist) to develop as a person it is important to explore notions of truth—what is fed to us, freedoms, fears and anxieties. Wisdom can follow our mistakes. Art is the same. Nowadays suffering for your art is probably considered too romantic—professionalism, careerism, getting 'smarter' with your art, can take away from what is truly meaningful. Each generation of young artists faces a totally different art world, but what stays the same is that artists need to focus their ideas and make their art. We have to protect our inner feelings and visions despite the movements around us. There is no encompassing order that can describe and direct how our imaginations work.

It is all too common to see premature exposure of unresolved works, tentative art that hasn't been pushed to the next level, all in the mad rush to be accepted, acknowledged or to enter the most recent popular art award. One has to allow time and experience to shape a body of work and not force it. These failed speed bumps are part of the drive. At the least, these risks allow for excitement, chemistry and magical elements that can't be produced by theory.

Young Australian artist Tom Polo recently organised the inaugural B.E.S.T. (Because Everybody Still Tries) Contemporary Art Prize For Painting, a fake painting prize, which he was the only contestant allowed to enter and he, of course, won. It cleverly highlighted the notion of success and failure in art. Polo said in an interview on *The Art Life* blog: "I decided to stage this art prize as a way of discussing ideas of competition in contemporary society as I am interested in what it means to be a winner—and by association, what it means to be a loser. The art prize ran like the many art prizes that exist—with entry forms, press releases, advertisements and, of course, an exhibition of finalists' works at the end with an announcement and awarding of the big prize. One exception, as stated in the entry form, was that the only eligible entrants were artists born on the 1st February, 1985, and named as 'Tommaso Polo' on their birth certificates. This factor meant that anybody else who entered received a stock-standard rejection letter from the B.E.S.T. prize panel. My rationale behind this part of the project was that sometimes in order to be successful, or rather, be considered successful, people go to extreme lengths to exclude every other contender. It is also a little bit of a healthy 'stick it to the man' on behalf of artists to art prizes and institutions. They dictate who the 'the winner' is, which can equate to who is important and what is of value. There is often a push and pull effect with prizes that determines who artists are eligible to be compared to, who is in who's league..."



Going through a period of 'failure', when your art doesn't quite hit the mark (the "billabong years" as artist John Olsen describes them), is something we all have to deal with at some stage. And hopefully getting through them will ultimately make us all better artists. Be prepared for a long journey with twists and turns.

In many art schools, there seems to be a transformative phase underway, driven by globalisation and technology, and tied in with the explosion of the contemporary art scene. We are entering a new era when art schools promote a more self-directed approach to studying, as opposed to the European beaux-arts model dominated by exclusive studio-based skills teaching—an era of engaging with the art rather than disciplined mastering. It is important that young artists stay vigilant and work hard to avoid formulaic training which can breed formulaic art.

Robert Storr, Dean of Yale School of Art, recently wrote: "At the moment, scholastic obscurantism is more of a threat to sharp critical thinking inside art schools than the 'dumbing down' going on outside them. And it's a huge barrier between people within the art system and those at its peripheries and beyond with whom young artists might want to communicate. Plain speaking about complex matters is not anti-intellectual, it is the achieved result of sustained intellectual labour. Moreover, poetic expression in the service of critical speculation is not the 'soft' alternative to 'hard' thinking. Rigour is demanded in both, but if you examine the shelves in most studios these days you will find shockingly few books of poetry or fiction."

One has to be attuned to one's own discoveries and if ever there was a time to stuff up privately then it has to be those years at art school. Likewise, practising artists need to find their own period of redress to move forward—perhaps a time when there are no exhibition pressures looming, away from the public gaze. It can be

easier said than done with a busy artist's schedule but try to close yourself off somehow—so you're not churning it out. Only through trying bravely and failing will artists eventually find their rightful voice and mediums as experience dictates.

What better way to prepare during these developmental periods than to test yourself. When it comes down to it, you have to be guided individually and work out your own context, what advice or encouragement needs to be ignored or acted upon. A lot of artists are interested in experimentation and finding out where their work could go but it can be a big step to get started. They simply need to give their work time, and find a space to fail where they can be protected.

Art is a struggle between self-doubts and high confidence. To have a productive creative life one has to respond to failure. It makes us question what we thought we knew, it allows us to invigorate different ways of thinking, problem-solving, solutions and alternative ways to making art. The desire to learn is important and can get lost amid the hubbub of the contemporary art scene. Imagination can be quashed by 'idea' and inspiration replaced by 'referencing'. Step outside your comfort zone and your subjective views in order to understand how they can trap you. Be willing to take risks. It's one of the few ways to succeed and kick start your own artistic growth. ■

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