



[Contact me...](#)

JAMES CRAIG PHOTOGRAPHY

blog • b&w images • easter island journal

[Home Blog](#) [Folios](#) [About the Images](#) [My Books](#) [About the Artist](#) [Downloads/Links](#) [Pushin' the Rock](#)

Pushin' the Rock

Reviews
How-to's
and Rants



What's Happened to the Outdoor Art Show?

Monday, September 23, 2013

A History of Injury and Insult – a forty year down hill slide and an ultimate slap in the face. Recently, because I put out my book book, I registered for an outdoor “art” show, one of the same shows that were free forty years ago, offered fence for ill equipped artists to hang on and awarded category prizes starting with \$100 for first place. These shows usually sold something, leaving artists to go home tired but not feeling like they came out at the wrong end of a business transaction. It was all about the art.

This show now cost me \$100 to get into – cheap these days when many cost three hundred or more. I proceeded to win a blue ribbon. My take? \$100, of course. The first prize winner pays \$100 to get in, has to expend countless dollars on a tent and rack system, gets a check for \$100 and walks away worse off than the non-winner forty years ago. Add this to the fact that they are letting in so many junk exhibits that people who would really like to look at and purchase real art get fed up with having to wade through so many craft bazaar exhibits to find anything approaching fine art or fine craft. They simply stop showing up.

Actual art buyers, scarce enough as they are, have almost completely abandoned these shows. Ergo, sales have fallen to an all time low, while marketing of flea-market goods has skyrocketed. The better artists, unless desperate, have also left the shows, while for some the outdoor show is virtually the only game in town. Today's prize winner goes home frustrated and feeling used. At the same time he has to weather all those congratulations and kudos for spending maybe ten hours of labor – not doing his art – netting less money than he would have made working at many a weekend job, just because he made a couple of sales and won a prize. Big whoop. And the rest of the poor suckers who put their all into art for art's sake, real art, walk away with nothing. But they're lucky in one sense, they're not expected to feel or express gratitude for being abused and then insulted.

The icing on the cake...

These shows were originally founded to provide a venue for fine art and fine craft. But they've been turned on their head, becoming more the enemy rather than the servant of the artists. Most are now upscale flea markets. And, for the few fine artists and fine craftspersons who remain, the very few who give today's trashy shows the slightest bit of legitimacy, they still offer prize money in amounts that reflect the dollar forty years ago, a ceremonial slap in the face to the artist, the art and everyone involved.

Our local shows, in the name of continuity, decency and respect, should at a MINIMUM, offer first prizes in each category of \$250 + rebate the entry fee, whatever it is. For most events that would be \$350 for first, \$175 for second and at least the \$100 refund for a third or honorable mention. These figures aren't even high enough to reflect inflation – look at what has happened to prices of houses, cars, groceries, etc. in the interim. I trimmed these down from inflationary figures only because most art supplies have “only” tripled in that time. At least a few artists should walk away feeling, if not like winners, at least not feeling thoroughly abused, disrespected and taken advantage of.

An alternative scenario...

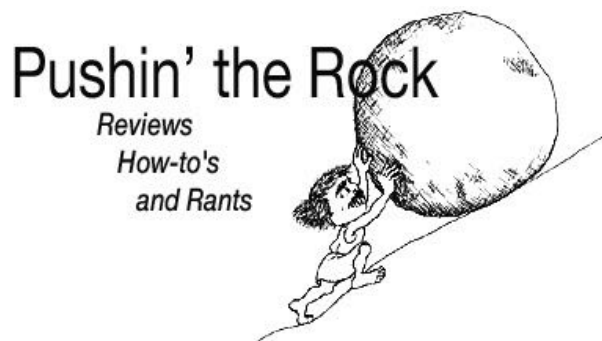
The art-show was at a good point forty years ago – and they, like everything else, needed work to survive in a new world. But they started moving in the wrong direction and just kept going. Don't tell me that there isn't an alternative, a solution though. I know better. Just because shows have almost all gone this direction does not mean they had to. For two hundred years high-jumpers were trained to jump and roll – until Fosbury came along and showed everyone that all you need to do is jump backwards. Now everyone does.

The solution is actually pretty simple – just map out where they should be today, ignoring all the false lessons we have learned, and find a practical way to get there. After over a decade of working with ArtQuest – Mary Woodward's experiment in serving artists first, the last six years of its life leading it, and another decade letting what I learned sit on a back burner and simmer, I believe I pretty much have it figured out. I've recently outlined what I'm certain would take a show there; it would be free to artists, offer great prize money, feature fine art and fine crafts, provide display racks and tent cover for local artists AND, and here's the counterintuitive part, provide upwards of \$15,000 for whatever charities a sponsoring organization wanted to support. OK, that's peanuts compared to the money some shows bring in, but both the artists and community would be big winners. And the sponsoring organization would ride high, enabled by its success to other endeavors. So much in life is like a spider web in that there are a few thread anchors that make the whole thing work, miss those for whatever reason, prejudice or false lessons learned, and everything simply hangs there.

A wise local woman told me thirty years ago that our local problem is that the powers that be in the art community think backwards: the organization comes first, then the community and then the artist. She was so right, and we are paying the price. Her advice: work from the perspective of taking care of the artist first, the community second and the organization will automatically thrive.

My favorite part about my outline, much of it proven in the crucible that was our local ArtQuest show, is that it's not all that complicated or difficult to implement. It just takes recognizing the problem – a biggie for a culture that measures everything in dollars, and a willingness to listen to a marriage of some very old and a few new ideas – while throwing away almost everything in between. Do I entertain any notion that anyone is interested? Heck no – well, maybe in two hundred years.

Am I prepared to provide an outline? Well yes, to anyone who can show me that they are willing to do the work involved.



Pushin' the Rock

Reviews
How-to's
and Rants

Just Asking... A Dozen Simple Questions for Artists

Wednesday, December 18, 2013

I know a lot of artists and see a lot of art. These questions have always lingered in the back of my mind – overflowing and coming out only occasionally, almost always getting me into big trouble with some artists. Anyway, at risk of stepping on a few toes, here they are. And yes, I would love to hear back from anyone who has a response to any of these.

1 – How can you be an artist and not be an art lover? If you don't appreciate other artists work enough to hang it on your own wall or place one on a piece of furniture, why would anyone else see the same work, or yours, as worthy of possessing? What kind of example does this set for either the public or emerging artists? And next time you attend a show, watch to see how many artists take the time to even look at other work in the show. It's astounding how little interest there is.

2 – If artists aren't willing, even anxious, to purchase the work of other artists as Christmas or other special occasion gifts for friends and family, how can they expect the public to go there? Fellow artists are a measurable, almost constant percentage of a show's sales (ok, considering fine art only). Over a number of years of actually running shows and exhibits I noticed that totals seem to go up and down with both groups together. Does that mean artists' response somehow sets a pattern, generate interest, build excitement?

3 – If, as an artist, you aren't curious enough or supportive enough to attend openings and shows held by other artists, why should they attend yours? In a related question, if the greater part of an art community sets an example by all but ignoring openings and shows, why would the public think there is anything worth seeing. Duh, art appreciation begins with artists.

4 – If you are defensive of critique and needy when it comes to kudos, how are you going to grow as an artist? Criticism is the mother of review and rethinking. We learn from our mistakes, not our successes. The only worse teacher than success is the false sense of satisfaction one gets from people more concerned about your feelings than saying what they really think. Have you ever watched early contestants on American Idol who nobody has had the nerve to tell they can't carry a tune in a bucket, let alone sing? Have you seen their utter disbelief when the truth hits home? Being open to negative comments sets you up to think, learn and improve, the few observations that are wrong, at worst, serve only to force one's taking a second, self confirming look. Start seeking truth and reality, and learn. Be grateful for anyone in today's positive reinforcement culture who has the wisdom and chunyas to say what they're thinking.

5 – If you aren't happy with a piece, do you really want it out there? Do you care so little about your body of work that you would add a major detraction to it? Some of the world's greatest painters regularly destroyed their failed works. What is it with this "Well, somebody might eventually buy it" crap? There's an awful lot of garbage out there. Why would anyone want to consciously leave behind a legacy of adding to that? Burn it, paint over it, make it better.

6 – If your work of art is what you want it to be, a finished balanced piece on your easel, why in the world would you alter how it is viewed with a colored mat, or even worse? If a color needs to be "brought out", that mean it obviously wasn't strong enough or used properly for balance within the painting. Put it back on the easel. A complete work's balance is hurt, not helped by a non-neutral mat.

7 – Once your piece is finished, why would you not want to make it so someone can actually enjoy your work? Sloppy presentation like pottery pieces with rough, unsanded bottoms and art crappily framed, etc. show an artist's disrespect for their own work. So why would the public respect it?

8 – Why would you price a work so low as to insult both the art and the effort you put into it? Too low a price announces that the work is almost worthless, whether it is or not. On the other side of the coin, **why would you price your work so high that normal people can't even consider owning one of your pieces?** Isn't art communication? Isn't the main point to get work out there? There is a big, wide gray area in between, however awkward it is to find one's way in it. Simply consider the what the two extremes actually say about you and your art.

9 – What is it with some artists and their reluctance to share their knowledge, tricks and secrets? Do they really believe they are so far ahead of everyone else that the ratio of one to many as far as sharing information and ideas doesn't apply to them? I've found that most artists who obsess about "having their brain picked" don't have all that much fruit in there. It's not lowering oneself to relate as equals to fellow artists, even those not as accomplished. And hey, ever hear of "what goes around comes around"? It's true, only closer to ten fold.

10 – Why would anyone expect others, especially fellow artists, to believe a practiced line of baloney? Yes, there is an almost overwhelming temptation to develop a load of bull relating to your art, the public almost begs for it. And we've all seen so-called successful artists who have this down to an art. Problem is, there seems to be a universal tendency to begin believing one's own crap. Be fake and become a fake. We are what we do. Solution, be real.

11 – Why would I want a painting or other work of art with a signature so large and prominent that it's the first thing I see? I'm not an autograph collector. Make people look for the damn thing. And photographers, why would I want a white, black, silver or even gold signature walking across the image? That's certainly not something I would want to stand and stare at while contemplating the meaning of art and life. So far potters seem to have it right, most simply put a stamp or initials on the bottom. I'm waiting for the first one to think they have to put their name in swirly, bright glaze around the middle in order to be considered a real artist. It's telling that traditionally signatures are removed on prints made from paintings.

12 – Who the heck ever said that sales were the measure of an artist? Whenever you are tempted to somehow measure your artistic worth in sales, look around at what is actually selling. That ought to nip that one in the bud real quick. This kind of thinking leads to letting perceived public wants guide the evolution of one's art. Now there's a horrid thought. The path an artist walks determines where he goes. If you can't sell your work, find a way to give it away. You're an artist, not a car salesman. Taking that more easily traveled fork in the trail, the one drifting away from being an artist, the one with the compromised bevy of commercial hacks on the horizon, is not the answer

Pushin' the Rock

Reviews
How-to's
and Rants



In Defense of Digital Books

Sunday, October 12, 2014

All change has loss and gain. When the gains outweigh the losses, one can choose to live in the past, join the minions of heel-draggers in fighting a losing battle or GET OVER IT and get on with living. I read, ok a lot. And always have. And so does Nan. Our library was so big when we moved that we had to purchase multiple bookcases, after brutally ridding ourselves of over half of our collection. We love our books, appreciate the tactile experience of holding them, turning the pages, sometimes simply picking them up – fondling a favorite. BUT, all that being said, and in spite of, in my mind some very suspect articles bemoaning the death of reading and holding that one learns more from a "real" book, I beg to differ. Here's why:

Leaving those things out of the mix that are germane to individual books, there are a number of elements that directly effect how one reads. One is font – not the irrelevancy one would think at first. Publishers have done their work here. Myriad studies have shown that serif fonts make for more alert reading than sans serif fonts – which tend to make the process too smooth and contribute to zoning out, getting distracted, etc. After all, reading is usually a sedentary endeavor. As a side note to this, I find sans serif fonts much better on the internet.

Font size also effects reading. And I'm not talking about vision impairments that require larger type. Proven by studies on the internet, there are font sizes that make reading smoother and increase comprehension. The problem is that very few books can be printed this way. The publishers have to compromise in order to keep the number of pages within a reasonable range. Put the same book into a reader, which allow font sizes to be increased, and watch what happens. Without knowing it, we've all been straining just a tad, restricting the flow of language, thought and comprehension.

Page size also effects reading. If you don't believe this, simply take any old book, take pages and arrange a few of them one above another and try reading that versus reading them separately. Because of small font size, we have been reading fewer pages, but with more information on them, more thoughts per page than is sometimes a comfort to the way the brain works.

Between font size and page size, the eye and brain can't relax. Split seconds spent absorbing information can lead to completely losing one's place in a morass of words. I recently restarted a 900 page book, but this time as a digital book. One of those works of fiction that simply has to be read almost as if it were non-fiction. The difference was palpable.

Looking up definitions of words – another factor. The book I'm using as an example is *The Luminaries* by Eleanor Catton centers around gold mining in early New Zealand. You can imagine how many references to nineteenth century terms and items I had to look up – as many as in most non-fiction works. Well, simple tap on the word and the reader looks it up in the dictionary. Wow, is that handy. No temptation to just assume one has figured out the meaning from the context – and it's amazing how often I'm wrong about that.

Along the same lines, my complete works of Shakespeare app on my reader has a built in dictionary of any word that might be an issue for anyone. No need for footnotes, etc. Those words are lightly underlined and all one has to do is tap it for the very specific, Shakespearian definition. Right there, quick as all heck, cool. I have never enjoyed reading the plays so much. AND this completely eliminates the need for schools to dumb down Shakespeare in order to teach it. I'm anxiously awaiting a Chaucer app that does the same thing. Wow.

In a classroom, not really a problem. I've heard complaints that digital books couldn't be used in a classroom discussion like at St. John's in Annapolis where I went because it would be impossible to give a meaningful page number. Well, this is kind of a moot point as long as the class is not using mixed paper books and digital books. Simply require everyone to be using the same font and size – after all, this would be considerably larger than that in the paper book.

SO, I find I read digital books more comfortable, smoother and more alert. I retain more. I think more about what I am reading, while I am reading. As a bonus, I can travel with as many books as I want. And the classics are free downloads in many places. I find others have books without the DRM that they can simply email around to friends – formats other than PDF are very, very small files. And there are free converters out there that let you change reader formats on a whim. Yes, because we have let them, digital books have greatly enhanced our lives.

Will paper books go the way of vinyl records? I doubt it, like B&W photography, paper books will always have their place. But I thoroughly expect to soon begin seeing works published as digital only. And certain kinds of books simply do not work all that well as digital, one of the reasons I give away the PDF versions of my books. They are a great way to check out an art book, but if anyone really appreciates the work, they will want the real thing – it's just not the same.

P.S.

I was leafing through – ok, tapping through – the pages of a book I recently finished, ***The Strangest Man***, *the Hidden Life of Paul Dirac, Quantum Genius* by Graham Farmelo. Extremely fascinating and well written biography. I really love some of the quotes the author uses at the beginnings of chapters, especially the two with which he introduces the work:

JOHN STUART MILL, On Liberty, 1869: "The amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time."

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER, *Reith Lecture*, 1953: "We are nothing without the work of others our predecessors, others our teachers, others our contemporaries. Even when, in the measure of our inadequacy and our fullness, new insight and new order are created, we are still nothing without others. Yet we are more."



[Contact me...](#)

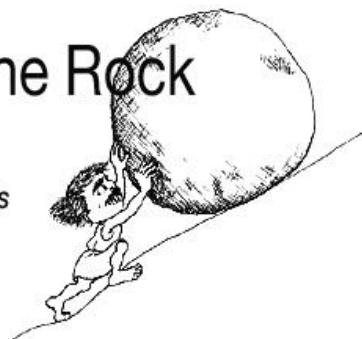
JAMES CRAIG PHOTOGRAPHY

blog • b&w images • easter island journal

[Home Blog](#) [Folios](#) [About the Images](#) [My Books](#) [About the Artist](#) [Downloads/Links](#) [Pushin' the Rock](#)

Pushin' the Rock

Reviews
How-to's
and Rants



Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Thursday, April 30, 2015

A culture of appreciating, buying and displaying art begins within the art community itself and spreads from there. If artists don't appreciate the work of other artists enough to buy it, there's no model, stimulus or reason for anyone else to buy art either. We reside in an area – not unlike many others – that is seen, rightfully, by its artists as not very appreciative of fine art. Galleries for the most part seem to go faster than they come. Sales, even at ridiculously low local prices, are thin at best. Artists complain constantly, completely unaware that they are to a large degree the cause – and the potential solution.

These same artists make up an art community where the vast, vast majority not only do not appreciate art enough to buy and hang it, they don't even bother to show up at one another's openings. They are simply not really interested in art beyond producing it. I see artist after artist walk into a crowded gallery to check out the possibility of being allowed to join – without the least interest in what is on display. There's no walking around just to see what is there. Sometimes not even a glance to the side. Why would the public show more interest? Why would the public show up at openings that even other artists neglect to attend?

I do know a few – I literally mean a few in that three or four is more than a couple – of exceptions to the rule that what area artists hang on their own walls at home is nothing but their own work. When I ask about this I'm met with blank stares and queried as what would they do with their own work if they hung work from others. I just don't get it. A couple of favorite pieces, sure, and a studio jam packed with work. But beyond that it would seem to me akin to, and as obvious as, hanging mirrors everywhere. Impossible to take a step, turn on one's heel without seeing your inner world reflected right back at you. Safe from learning or growing, confronting the art and creativity in others.

We see a lot of exciting, tempting good work out there. And again, local prices are fantastically low. Even some of the more inconsistent artists occasionally come out with something really good. Most people who appreciate the arts have a favorite medium; painting, pottery, watercolors, even B&W photography. Nan and I tend to lean towards pottery and painting. Occasionally we drift to other mediums. We have accumulated a home full of fantastic pieces we would not want to be parted from – in spite of the fact that we are both artists with large portfolios of work on hand at all times. We've found ourselves collecting works of a few artists, anxious to see what they come up with next. And when we have visitors, that's what we proudly show off to anyone interested.

I'm not saying an artist shouldn't want to display his or her work, art is communication after all. We all love those "Look what I did" moments. But at home, alone – do we really have that desperate a need to line the walls with mirrors into our own souls? Mirror, mirror on the wall – did I really do that?

I wouldn't suggest that artists force themselves to show interest they don't feel in the work of others – although, heck, that would help. The problem is that, for whatever reason, far too many just aren't drawn to looking outside themselves. What does this say, if anything, about them? The most charitable conclusion I can draw is that an awful lot of artists, some of them very talented, are missing out on an

awful lot. At the same time they are surrounded by kindred souls who are as disinterested as they are. Hardly an atmosphere in which to generate public interest in art.

We know a local gallery where the woman who runs it likes to ask potential members who and what they collect personally. She's getting very tired of blank stares in return. The problem is that that blank stare is reflected in the lack of interest by much of the public. Stop blaming the schools, the culture, etc.

Wake up artists – the problem is you, and the solution begins right in your own heads.

You want to live in a community, a world where people are interested in fine art – then show some interest. You want the public to purchase, even collect art – then do just that yourself. Take some pointers from the music field, after all it is an art form – one where its artists expend a considerable amount of time and effort telling everyone how good and great each other is – if to the point of convincing a lot of people to purchase some really awful stuff.

Art broadens the mind and soul. I'm just not sure lining one's environment with one's own reflection doesn't do the opposite. I mentioned above that Nan and I have an extensive, eclectic collection of some of the finest pieces from area artists, some of these artists gone at this point. Some of these pieces taking months to pay for. It is our experience that fellow artists, when confronted with them, actually show less interest and fascination than others. Occasionally someone comes along who is really, actually interested in art. Then it's like they're visiting a museum – although we will serve coffee while they look.

I'm no longer surprised by any of this, but remain confused. And I feel the need to remind the artists that a culture of appreciating, buying and displaying art begins within the art community itself and spreads from there. If artists don't appreciate the work of other artists enough to buy it, there's no model, stimulus or reason for anyone else to buy art either.