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Seeking and finding: Creative processes of 21st century painters



Janet Chan ^{a,*}, Jasmine Bruce ^a, Roanna Gonsalves ^b

^a Law School, UNSW Australia, NSW, Sydney 2052, Australia

^b School of the Arts and Media, UNSW Australia, NSW, Sydney 2052, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on empirical data from a 2004–2007 study of Australian art students and professional artists who specialised in drawing and painting to understand their work processes. Making use of Galenson's typology of 'seekers' and 'finders', the study discovered that 'seeking' rather than 'finding' was the dominant approach used by the vast majority of artists. To explain the predominance of seeking processes, the paper argues that Galenson's typology is best understood in the context of the field of artistic production in the 21st century and the habitus operating among painters. Creative processes of contemporary art are thus inseparable from artists' strategies for surviving in the artwork.

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1. Introduction

The creative process of artists has long been a popular topic for philosophical writing, historical investigation, psychological research and, to a lesser extent, sociological inquiries. Some researchers have argued that there is a basic pattern in common to all creative processes (Koestler, 1981:1). A dominant approach has been to conceptualise the creative process in terms of cognitive processes that generate, select, assess, elaborate and (perhaps even) transform ideas. For example, the creative process has been analysed in terms of *stages*, e.g. conception, idea development, production and resolution (Mace and Ward, 2002) or problem identification, preparation, response generation, and response validation and communication (Amabile, 1996). However, it has been recognised that

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 2 9385 2753; fax: +61 2 9385 1175.

E-mail addresses: j.chan@unsw.edu.au (J. Chan), jasminethea@gmail.com (J. Bruce), roanna@unsw.edu.au (R. Gonsalves).

creative processes are rarely linear but often cyclical and cumulative (Sawyer, 2012) where the phases ‘interpenetrate’ (Baxandall, 1985:39). Some have suggested that there is a degree of controlled unpredictability in the creative process. Artists exercise ‘critical judgment’ to direct their creative activities, so that they are able to tell that ‘certain directions are not right’ (Tomas, 1958:3). Often, artists are reliant on their ‘fallible intuitions’ to take ‘a leap in the dark’: the creative process is one in which ‘intellectual illumination and emotional catharsis are complementary aspects of an indivisible process’ (Koestler, 1981:15–16).

Another distinction researchers have drawn is the extent to which the creative process of artists is similar to other problem solving processes. In their landmark study of visual artists, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) have argued that *problem finding* is more important than problem solving in artistic creativity, since fine artists are less likely to be presented with a problem that ‘has a known formulation, a routine method of solution, and a recognized solution’; rather they are more likely to find themselves in a situation where ‘the problem does not yet have a known formulation, a routine method of solution, or a recognized solution’ (1976:79).

In a series of influential publications, Galenson (2001, 2006) has proposed a typology that connects problem solving/problem finding with the work processes of artists. To explain the relationship between artists’ age and the quality of their work,¹ Galenson establishes a typology of ‘seekers’ and ‘finders’ to describe two different methods of producing art. Seekers are similar to problem solvers: their work is based on *perception*, they are engaged in an ‘extended process of searching for the elusive best means’ of presenting visual sensations (2001:169). Finders, on the other hand, are similar to problem finders: their work is based on *conception*, their goal being ‘to communicate their ideas or emotions’ and they engage in presenting ‘a series of statements’ (2001:169). Artists are classified as finders or seekers by referring to historical accounts (e.g. personal letters, writings of critics and art historians) of their practice methods. For example, Cézanne was categorised as a typical seeker and Picasso a typical finder. The two types of artists tend to work very differently: seekers (the ‘experimental’ artists) rarely make detailed plans and leave the most important decisions to the working stage, whereas for finders (the ‘conceptual’ artists), detailed planning and preparatory studies are more important than the execution of the plans (2001:65). These differences in approach mean that experimental innovations often occur late in an artist’s career, whereas conceptual innovations can occur at any age. This is illustrated by the career paths of the two painters: the ‘late peak’ in the quality of Cézanne’s work and the ‘early peak’ in the quality of Picasso’s work (2001:67). In his later work, Galenson (2006) has extended this typology of seekers and finders to other creative artists including early painters, modern sculptors, poets, novelists and film directors.

Galenson’s typology has been used to study the career paths of artists and scientists. For example, his distinction between conceptual and experimental innovation has been used to understand the ‘shape’ of scholars’ careers in the information sciences (Cronin and Meho, 2007). Similarly, Galenson’s analysis has informed studies of the careers and works of Japanese ukiyo-e printmakers and western artists (Kozbelt and Durmysheva, 2007) and those of classical music composers (Kozbelt, 2008a). Galenson’s typology of finders and seekers is also cited in a ‘cognitive-historical’ study of the work of the art historian E.H. Gombrich (Kozbelt, 2008b). The typology has proved useful for understanding the processes of Old Masters in painting (Jensen, 2004).

Some critics have, however, cast doubt on the validity of Galenson’s typology for understanding both the careers and the processes of artists. Ginsburgh and Weyers (2006), for example, provide evidence from historical accounts of artists such as Matisse, Picasso, Mondrian and Michelangelo that could have been used to change Galenson’s classification of these artists in the finder/seeker dichotomy. Ekelund (2002) similarly points to the possibility of Galenson’s model being biased by the omission of variables (such as the lifespan of artists and the demand for art and innovation) that could

¹ Galenson’s (2001) study focuses on two groups of artists—50 painters (born 1796–1900) who lived and worked in France and 75 American painters (born 1870–1940). These painters include all the artists ‘whom art historians consider to have been the most important figures in two key periods in the history of modern art’ (2001:5). Using auction data (sale prices of paintings, the support, size and date of sale), Galenson shows that age ‘had a statistically significant impact on the value of an artist’s work’ for the vast majority of these artists (2001:14). He also demonstrates using quantitative analyses of art history textbooks and retrospective exhibitions that ‘an artist’s most valuable work is usually also that which experts consider his most important’ (2001:31).

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