

Reflection on an Art Lesson

by Thom Whalen



Desert Driver by Thom Whalen. 2016. Vegetable dye on silk.

How would you describe this painting?

“Crude,” “amateurish,” even “childish,” would be likely responses from most people.

I, as the artist, would use a different word: “Failed,” because this painting fails to accomplish my artistic vision.

To understand why this painting fails, I have to begin by discussing what it was trying to accomplish.

Let’s put the painting in context. This is the second time that I have tried painting on silk. Both times were under the tutelage of Holly Carr, a Nova Scotia artist who specializes in painting on silk and has exhibited and sold internationally.

Painting on silk is unforgiving. Unlike oil or acrylic, there is no way to cover mistakes with more paint. It is more akin to painting with watercolours. Whenever the dye is applied to the silk, it makes a permanent mark that can never be erased. Furthermore, the dye flows through the silk until it encounters a line of resist – the black lines that outline the basic areas in the design. The resist is not applied with a brush or pen, but is squeezed from a tube directly onto the silk. A smooth line requires a steady hand.

This medium lends itself to bold, bright graphic images. It does not allow for fine detail or complex texturing.

Knowing this, I designed a simple graphic on paper and transferred it to the silk.

The image consists of two parts, as indicated by the title, “Desert Driver”. Each part is shown in its own perspective. The desert is depicted above the line of the convertible windshield. The

driver is shown twice below the line of the windshield: the back of his head is shown directly and one eye is shown reflected in the rearview mirror.

If a single perspective had been used, then I would have had to show the desert through the windshield. The driver and rearview mirror would have been much larger and the desert much smaller. The driver's head would have blocked the view and the desert would have lost its visual importance.

I elected to use multiple perspectives to avoid that compromise and show the desert and the driver with equal prominence. The ancient Egyptians showed the human body with multiple perspectives. The American primitivist, Grandma Moses, used the technique to good advantage. As did cubists such as Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso.

I had reason to hope that I could be forgiven for doing the same.

The consequence of using two perspectives was that the painting has two distinct focal points to draw the eye.

First, the viewer's gaze will be drawn to the vanishing point of the road at the base of the mountains, so distant that they appear as a purple haze. He will be immersed in the vast distances that characterize the desert, awed by the stark, serene landscape that is suggested by the few lonely cacti in the foreground and the reflections from the gold highlights in the sand.

Then, the viewer's eye will be drawn down below the line of the windshield to the driver, beginning with the mass of sun-streaked hair and inevitably to the single lens of the aviator-style sunglasses reflected in the rearview mirror. This is the true focal point of the picture, far from the middle of the canvas, tucked down in the lower right corner. This is where the viewer's eye will dwell the longest, contemplating the young man, free and alone, driving for the sake of driving, speeding toward some far, undefined place that cannot be seen from the floor of the desert.

This is where the viewer will find the emotional contrast between the hot desert landscape and the cool young man driving his sports car. This contrast between hot and cool is not a contradiction; rather it is entirely appropriate that both emotional poles be found in the same painting, each shown in its own unique perspective.

The painting is essentially a diptych – two paintings – on a single canvas. They are tied together by the road – the only element that is visible both over the top of the convertible and through the windshield. This road, white in the glare of the sun, is asymmetrical. The driver's lane looms wide and straight ahead of the hood of the car. The other lane is diminished in size and importance. There is no oncoming traffic; the driver is alone in the world.

That is what this painting tried to accomplish.

So why did it fail?

I lacked skill with the medium. The lines that needed to be smooth and flowing to show the speed and the power of the machine are shaky and uncertain. The resist is thick and clotted at the vanishing point in the road where it should be thin and subtle. In places around the frame of the windshield, gaps in the line of resist allowed the dye to leak through.

I lacked the necessary subtlety of color. The distant mountains should not only have been much smaller, they should have been much bluer and lighter, fading into the sky. The desert floor is too orange. It should have been bleached almost white by the glare of the sun.

This was the wrong concept for the medium. This image should have been painted in acrylic so that it could have been repainted and the flaws corrected. And in acrylic, fine details could have been added. The lens of the sunglasses could have reflected the road ahead – a reflection within a reflection that gave us insight into the driver by showing us what he sees of the road ahead.

It is said that we learn more from our failures than from our successes. I can admit that I learned much from Holly's lesson. Next time, and there will be a next time, I will try again. Next time, I will choose a subject that is not only more appropriate to the medium but to my artistic talent.