

## GESTALT PRACTICE AND THE PRACTICE OF PAINTING

As therapist, supervisor and teacher of Gestalt therapy, I have always been aware of how Gestalt theory and practice inform and encourage clinical creativity. For example, we all know the experience of helping clients “go with their resistance.” In simply assuming that stance, we let go of our own proscriptive thinking and then make possible the exploration and creation of new ways of being or dealing in the world. And in supervision we intentionally play with the issues before us (“Be the worst therapist you can,” “Show us how the client sits,”). In so doing, we access extra-cognitive information, melding feeling, sensory data, and imagination with thought into new ways of being. Gestalt therapy’s respect for images, dreams, nightmares, and humor is legendary, so it is no surprise to me that in my work as a clinician and in my life as a painter, I find much that overlaps.

### MY PAINTING LIFE:

In 1987 I returned from the Polsters’ training in San Diego with an expanded sense of myself and a keen appreciation for my good fortune. Soon after, I took my first painting class. Three hours later, I realized I had thought of nothing else. My “chicken brain” (peck peck peck peck peck) had had a good rest. I have been painting ever since and find repeatedly that concepts from Gestalt therapy and good painting practice overlap and intertwine to inform my painting, my life, and my clinical practice. The following account is intended to describe one aspect of my life as a painter. I invite you to consider your own creative processes and, in the spirit of those puzzles for kids in the funny papers, see if you can find your own favorite Gestalt concepts embedded in what I’ve described here and in what you know about how you work.

### THE FERTILE VOID: JOURNAL ENTRY, MAY, 2005:

Here I am again in the fertile void. This void doesn’t feel fertile at all. It just feels void with only old voices whispering or shouting their time-tested messages: “This is/you are/ stupid. You don’t even know what you’re doing. Nobody will like, much less buy, this stuff. Why don’t you paint like Deibenkorn or Matisse or Francine or Justin.” They ride roughshod over me, leaving me sad and immobilized. So what do I do? I’ve learned a trick or two by now. First I recognize them for who and what they are. I know I can break the paralysis by some directed action.

First I clean my studio. I clear the decks of old stuff on the walls and surfaces -- paintings, sketches, photos, inscriptions I’ve used before to urge myself on, such as Robert Frost’s “trust impulse despite the evidence.” I leave visible only whatever really speaks to me at the moment. I gesso over paint splatters on the wall, scrape my glass palettes and knives, sharpen pencils, rearrange jars of paint, fill water tubs, empty the trash. I line up my favorite brushes and push my paint tables to their places in front of the wall where I hang a new canvas.

While I'm doing this, I often find myself singing. My energy is rising. The fresh white canvas gleams at me. In case it's too intimidating with its demands for something pure and good and true, I know I have stacked up against the back wall old canvases to paint over, rich grounds for new figures.

So now I've accomplished the real discipline for me in painting. I've shown up and I've set up my tools in the ways I like them to be. In the course of it, I've had some involvement with the materials. I love the brilliant white gesso. I re-acquaint myself with charcoal and my favorite number 6 pencils and the richly black marks they can make for me. The jars of paint-- two blues, black, white, sienna, umber, yellow--sit there waiting. I like the varying weights of brushes as I line them up -- favorite flat heads, round bushy ones without their handles, and skinny long ones for exploring lines.

Now I can begin. Aaargh! I can't. I'm not ready. I sit at a table and write, intending to just fill three pages with whatever has been on my mind or pops into it as I look out the window or browse through books of painters who interest me. DeKoonig's wild line, William Scott's beautiful simplicity, the lushness of Richard Deibenkorn. I remind myself of the times in my life when I was most able to play without any consciousness of anyone else's opinion, when I just invented games and actions to please myself. I feel that sense of quiet freedom.

Ideas, wishes, interests start to emerge. I begin to see how to go: begin a painting about x; start with y. I can feel my excitement rise. Then suddenly I am incredibly tired. Surely I need a nap. My eyes are heavy and even my knees have that weak liquidy feeling they get just before I fall asleep. Yes, a nap would be just the thing. But ah. Memory and cognition save me. I know this ruse. It's fear! I can identify it, laugh at myself, and write it out.

Here are some tricks. I promise myself no one else will ever see what I paint today. I'll use a canvas so large it's unthinkable that anyone would ever possibly consider buying it. And here's the most effective one: I take the voice that is whispering to my knees "This is ridiculous. You have no talent. Nobody will want a painting of an empty table." I take that message and work with it.

First I acknowledge what's true. Right. I don't have a great talent. I just have what I have. It is my own interest and impulses towards painting that I have and like to use. And true, some people, lots of people, probably most people will think it's ridiculous that I spend time painting and especially painting a bunch of table tops (my current theme). That's true and maybe it is really a ridiculous thing to be doing, but there is in me now a little voice saying, "Do it anyway." That little voice is moving me towards drawing and painting just for its sake. So I stand up, open my paint tubs, grab two pencils in my left hand, rub my hands and arms all over the empty white canvas and begin.

In the best of such times, conscious thought disappears. My hands move quickly, wordlessly, responding, just responding to what is emerging from the paint and the line and the canvas and from parts of me I hadn't quite known were there. At other times, awkwardness and fear creep back in all too soon, and I have to start all over, to push

through again, hoping to land in the present and into those delicious moments where it is just me and the paint and the canvas. Then time disappears and any sense of myself does, too. I am just there doing what I'm doing and when I am done, I am done, happy and not caring very much about anything else. I know that tomorrow what I've painted may or may not please me as much as the doing of it has, but that doesn't matter much either.

My painting is itself, not a Matisse, a Deibenkorn, or a Justin or a Francine. And we – Gestalt therapists/clients/humans--are ourselves, not ideal fully actualized prototypes but living changing beings, taking in the world and responding to it as richly as we can. I take this experience back home with me into my life and into my practice, noticing how at the best of times they can all enrich and inform one another.