

## **Coping with the Post Exhibition Blues**

Almost everyone has experienced loss in one form or another at some point in his or her lives. After the tragedy on September 11th, most of us don't have to look very far to find someone who has been touched by loss. For artists, learning how to recognize and cope with loss will help them in understanding the common phenomenon known as post exhibition blues.

It is normal to experience the sense of loss that accompanies grief when we are confronted with the death of a relative, friend or even a pet but, artists need to learn how to recognize the importance of grieving, when confronted with loss of an expectation or fantasy. Regardless of how unrealistic we may acknowledge it to be.

I realized after receiving a post-exhibition phone call from a distraught, depressed artist, that what she was experiencing was very similar to the crash I felt 10 days after losing a dear friend. After all, for most artists, an exhibition represents years of hard work, an investment in not only time and money, but also tremendous emotional commitment. Most importantly, to the educated viewer, it provides a glimpse into who you are as a person. This is a pretty scary concept to most people who spend their lives trying to orchestrate the way they are viewed by the world. Whether you are aware of it or not, you carry with you certain expectations in mounting an exhibition. These expectations can range from hoping your mother is proud of you, to getting a good review in the New York Times. Your job, as a mature artist, is to figure out what these expectations are for yourself, how realistic they are to achieve, and what you can do to help yourself get through the mourning process with as little damage as possible.

For me, loss starts with denial. A period of time when I refuse to believe that whatever it is I have lost is really, really gone permanently. Next, comes the anger looking at everyone and everything to blame. Then, one day, without notice, I find myself so depressed I am limp. Next thing I know I'm crying uncontrollably. All I want to do is curl up in bed and disappear. Then, as if some miracle has occurred, after I have given myself the luxury to grieve, (which is really another way of saying "reflect on my loss") I can get up feeling refreshed, whole and healed. These are not secret strategies that I have invented. These are common sense strategies to help deal with your loss by acknowledging it and confronting it. Applying this strategy to artists, during the culmination of an exciting and stressful time in their career, provides a positive way to identify and understand this very common phenomenon.

Artists who are driven to make art are wired differently than the rest of us. Their need for survival is based on food, shelter and their need to create. For many artists I meet, to deprive them of art making would be the equivalent of depriving them of oxygen.

Nothing made this quite so evident, as the movie Quills, when the Marquis de Sade was deprived of a writing utensil. His drive to create was so strong; he pierced his fingers and used his own blood to write. When we learn to recognize that an artist's creative product is borne from such a powerful inner drive, the huge significance of the creative product becomes somewhat easier to understand. Frequently, during the preparations for an exhibition, all the emphasis remains on the product the painting, the book, the play, whatever. Often times the enormous effect mounting an exhibition has on the psyche of the artist is often ignored. But, when an artist's work is held up to public scrutiny, it is in essence, a major loss. The studio is empty, the artwork now out of your control, strangers eyeing it, talking about it maybe even

taking it home! It is virtually impossible not to have fantasies and expectations about people's reactions to the work, as well as the possibility of "getting discovered." It is the part of human nature that makes everyone who buys a lottery ticket feel convinced that they are going to be the next winner. And regardless of whether the exhibition is considered a "success" or not, many artists may experience post exhibition blues and should learn to prepare for it.

This phenomenon becomes even more complicated as we look at how each individual artist defines success. Take a good hard look at your expectations. A good exercise for artists preparing for an exhibition is to create a list of the long term and short-term goals they wish to achieve by having this show. You need to write these down. Writing them and reading them will give you a more accurate sense of reality. You can fantasize about wanting a show at the Whitney Museum and know intellectually that you don't really expect it to come as a result of this show but forcing yourself to write it on your list of long-term goals will give you a more accurate pulse of how realistic your goals really are. These will help you to understand the terms by which you define success for yourself. Allow yourself to go the full spectrum from humble to grandiose. I firmly believe that it is impossible to achieve your goals, if you are unable to visualize them go for the gold! The trick is, keeping everything in perspective. Examples of some common goals may include:

- Seeing your work in a public, professional context
- Pride at having friends and relatives acknowledge an important part of who you are
- Hearing strangers talk about your work (for better or for worse)
- Getting a review
- Having sales, how many?
- Getting important collectors, critics and curators to see the show
- Getting recognized by another gallery

Now, evaluate your list and assign a number value 1-5 that reflects how realistic these goals are for you. 1 being the most realistic, 5 being your best-case scenario. Don't forget to distinguish between those goals that are within your control i.e., sending out press packets to 40 writers and those things, which are out of your control getting a review published. Only those things that are within your control can be 1's. Doing this exercise will help you develop a sense of what is both realistic and within your control.

Although it will help you to understand the underlying cause of the blues, it may not help to prevent them.

Lots of artists have developed different strategies for dealing with the blues you will need to identify your expectations first, then work on finding the tools to deal with them.

Here are a few suggestions that other artists have used. Feel free to use these, or develop your own strategies.

- Hold back the very last painting you have finished. Keep it in your studio as a springboard to future work instead of including it in the show.
- Take a trip/vacation immediately after the opening.

- Schedule meeting times at the gallery with friends, during the course of the exhibition, to allow yourself the opportunity to talk about the work with a receptive listener.
- Put out a guest book and encourage comments
- Start a new series of work before the work for the show is removed from your studio

In any case, your best defense against "Post Exhibition Blues" is your willingness to recognize and accept this very natural step in the creative process.