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## The Painting Experience

### Who's Painting This Painting?

*Man can do what he wants,  
but he cannot will what he wants.*

~ Schopenhauer

As I became more comfortable standing in the unknown with people in front of their paintings, I was struck by how hard it is to accept the imagery that's born from under our brush. There's a deeply ingrained voice that continually questions whatever we do. Even in moments of elation when we're content with the painting, the judgment resides in the background as 'yes-but'....

"Yes, I'm feeling good, but the cartoon-like nature of my images is so sophomoric."

"Yes, I like the image I'm working on, but it's very naive."

"I loved painting this, but I'm not fooled - look around, I'll never paint as well as others."

"The painting came easily, but it's so contrived, nothing I do is real."

Once, when someone was stuck in heavy judgment of their painting and unable to move forward, I playfully asked: "What if I hired one of the other painters in this room to come work on your painting? What would they do?"

"Well, they would add black here and put a person at the bottom. And the sky needs a rainbow," the previously blocked painter playfully exclaimed, almost as if it were obvious. I replied, "Notice how easy it was for you to know what they would do, but not what you yourself would do. What's the difference?"

The difference, of course, is in the perceived ownership of the painting. As soon as possession is assumed, a veil descends. When we attach the burden of proprietorship, we also invoke the onus of responsibility, and soon we feel blocked and empty. But when we relax our identification with the result, it becomes clear that the paintings are just happening through us and there's an energetic shift, along with a physical lightness and a reinvigorated imagination.

Sometimes this leap can be too much to make, and we object. "Why would I put that image in my painting? What if that's not what I want?" But I have a better question. What if the forms appearing in your painting were as much a force of nature as the weather outside your window? When we remember how the images came to be, it's not as if you can claim responsibility for them. First, something arose in your imagination. Certainly, you're not in control of that source. Secondly, it had a call, a certain excitement and energy about

it that, again, was not of your own making. Then you went ahead and painted it, not knowing how it would turn out. And most likely, it didn't look like what you first saw at all. So where in any of this is ownership?

An experience like this has the potential to alter the fundamental assumption of ourselves as prime mover. Where do we hang our hat in a process where our presence seems necessary, yet any control superfluous? What's our role in a painting that's obviously determined by some force beyond our own thinking or willing? And if we have insight into the fact that the creative movement doesn't require any self-referencing, how then do we then envision our 'self'? The creative experience places us on a collision course with these great questions, coaxing out of sleep the most pregnant of inquiries – who's painting this painting?