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Seeing Meaning

by Barry Goldberg

During a recent classroom painting session, six children were sitting on the floor, working independently on the various shapes of paper they had chosen. There was the usual mix of impromptu experimentation, welcome aesthetic accidents, and occasional minor mishaps (distinctions which are not always easy to discern.) One of the four-year-old painters, who had been working on a rectangular piece of paper, announced to no one in particular, “I have a good idea.” Without another word, the child proceeded to carefully tear his painting roughly in half. He tried various ways of recombining the two pieces and then finally crumpled one half of the painting into a ball and stuck it in the center of the remaining half, which still lay flat on the floor. Pleased with the result, he happily announced he was finished and trotted off.

One could write a good many paragraphs and not begin to convey what this child’s actions expressed so simply and forcefully: *The activity of making art is a unique form of wordless thinking.*

Thinking and *idea* are bound up with one another. This child’s project, left on the floor and almost lost in the sea of marks from previous paintings, was filled with ideas. It might be useful to regard the physical project—in this case, an object made of paper and paint—as the material evidence of *visual thought*, of *visual idea*. When we look at this child’s painting, what we see is the tangible result of each of the child’s actions. This child’s final few actions alone embodied a number of striking ideas. The first was the idea of tearing the painting in half. The child, of course, did not reason this out with words and then act. Rather, he was responding to materials that were changing right in his hands and right before his eyes. Within that evolving process, he decided to *tear* the paper—a very different idea than, say, cutting or folding it. Although the result was still a rectangle, changing the paper in this particular way significantly altered the smooth regularity of the original shape. The one rough, torn edge gave the new rectangle a particular energy and liveliness that the original shape did not possess. Had the child used scissors, the changed shape would feel very different to us.

Then came the idea of crumpling one half of the already painted paper into a ball. Watching this take place, it was easy to imagine that half of the painting was about to be discarded—in fact, that may well have been the child’s initial impulse. There was certainly a degree of happy destruction, or at least aesthetic mischief, in crumpling up one half of a painting. But there was also the idea of taking a flat, square-cornered, straight-edged shape and transforming it into an irregular, rough, round, three-dimensional object. One result of this action was that the physical paper now played two very different

roles. On the one hand, it played a quiet, background role, existing—quite literally—behind the paint. On the other, it forcefully declared its independence—a paper ball free to move in space. Moreover, it was a ball formed by the child’s own hands, unlike the original rectangle. What became clear was that two different intentions were now at work. The first was positive and constructive—applying paint to paper to make a painting. The second was seemingly negative and destructive—tearing the paper in two and crumpling up one half of it. That’s when the child arrived at the final surprising idea—to join these two opposing intentions together in his project. By reuniting the balled-up paper with the half from which it was separated, the child found a way to make something new and whole out of two contradictory impulses: the positive and constructive entwined with the negative and destructive. We see the child’s original painting now torn in two. And we see the removed half, crumpled into a ball, then surprisingly returned to the painting as a new element—a veritable pre-K yin-yang. As humorous as this may sound, it is in no way meant to make light of the extraordinary level of visual thinking that had taken place in this project. Again, it goes without saying that the young painter did not intellectualize those ideas and then act upon them. He neither could have nor did he need to. And that is what is so important to recognize. The child was *thinking directly through seeing*.

Making Sense When There Are No Things to Name

For many adults, the phrase “to make sense” is almost synonymous with being able to put an idea into words. If we see, for example, a child’s drawing in which there is a figure, a yellow sun, green grass, and a flower, it makes sense to us because the things which we see, and which we readily name, go together in a way that we accept. But when we try and apply this notion of sense to a painting that has no things to name, it simply doesn’t work. For example, there is not much to name in the painting I have been describing, except perhaps for the ball of paper. This inability to affix names or identifying labels is difficult for many adults. The lines, swirls, pools, and smears of color do not collect themselves into anything we recognize. Drips, spatters, and spills can all seem like just a lot of accidents resulting from a lack of facility. The problem is that the sense we are looking for, rooted as it is in words, has little to do with the sense and meaningfulness of the child’s project, which is rooted in the visual and material. Until we recognize this, we may find that a child’s project pleases our eyes but, unfortunately, its sense and meaningfulness eludes us. We remain *outside* the painting, while the child has lived the painting’s making from the inside—where its meaning lies. The young child has no need to translate the experience into words in order to make it meaningful. The child is, in every sense, *seeing meaning*.

The Vocabulary of a Visual Language

When we talk about language skills in early childhood education, we are usually referring to skills involving words—reading, writing, and the ability to use words to express our feelings and our thoughts. Thinking is often regarded as almost inseparable from the use of words. Visual thinking, however, is a way to make sense of experience that does not involve these word-based skills. Children, before they acquire spoken language, are natural visual thinkers. Seeing provides one of the primary means by which they begin to make sense of the world around them. For most of us, visual thinking eventually gives way to thinking in words. The acquisition of word-based skills, however, need not be at the expense of visual-language skills. When reinforced at an early age, visual thinking accompanies thinking in words and often offers a way to find meaning in experience where words fail to provide one. On the other hand, when words provide the only “means to meaning”—to borrow a phrase from the poet Archibald MacLeish (1961; p.1) —a child’s ability to think, and the world of experiences to which they are open and receptive, has been effectively and significantly diminished.

A visual language is one in which ideas are found in the innumerable decisions made during the creative process. Evidence of those decisions is what constitutes the work of art. Placing one cardboard tube inside another is an idea very different from placing those tubes side by side, just as tearing the edge of a piece of paper is a different idea than cutting it with scissors. Often we can feel these differences more easily than we can articulate them. These differences are the vocabulary of a visual language. They embody meaning even when we are unable to affix a name to them as we might name, for example, an object in the world. Unfortunately, the more our ability to make sense of experience is dependent on words and the more we feel the need to name what we are looking at, the more uncomfortable (if not threatened) we feel by elements we cannot easily name. This uneasiness with what cannot be named speaks directly to the value of art in education: *Visual thinking enables us to not feel threatened by what we cannot name—by what we cannot take hold of with words.* This capacity is one whose implications extend far beyond the edges of a painting.

The perplexed adults standing in front of the abstract painting saying to themselves, “I don’t get it, I don’t understand what it means” might just as well be saying, “I cannot translate this object into words. If I could, it would make sense, it would be meaningful.” Young children do not have this problem; they have no need to translate a painting into words in order to experience it. They see the differences within the painting, and these differences kindle meaning. The roughness or smoothness of paint surfaces, the speed of a line crossing the space within the painting, the way two forms don’t quite touch all have meaning to a child who is still thinking visually.

It's helpful to remember that, of course, adults were themselves children at one time and possessed the same capacity. For this reason, when an adult responds to the amorphous colored shapes in a young child's painting by attempting to attach labels like "clouds," "water," or "mist" to them, it speaks more of an adult's lost capacity than of a child's lack of facility.

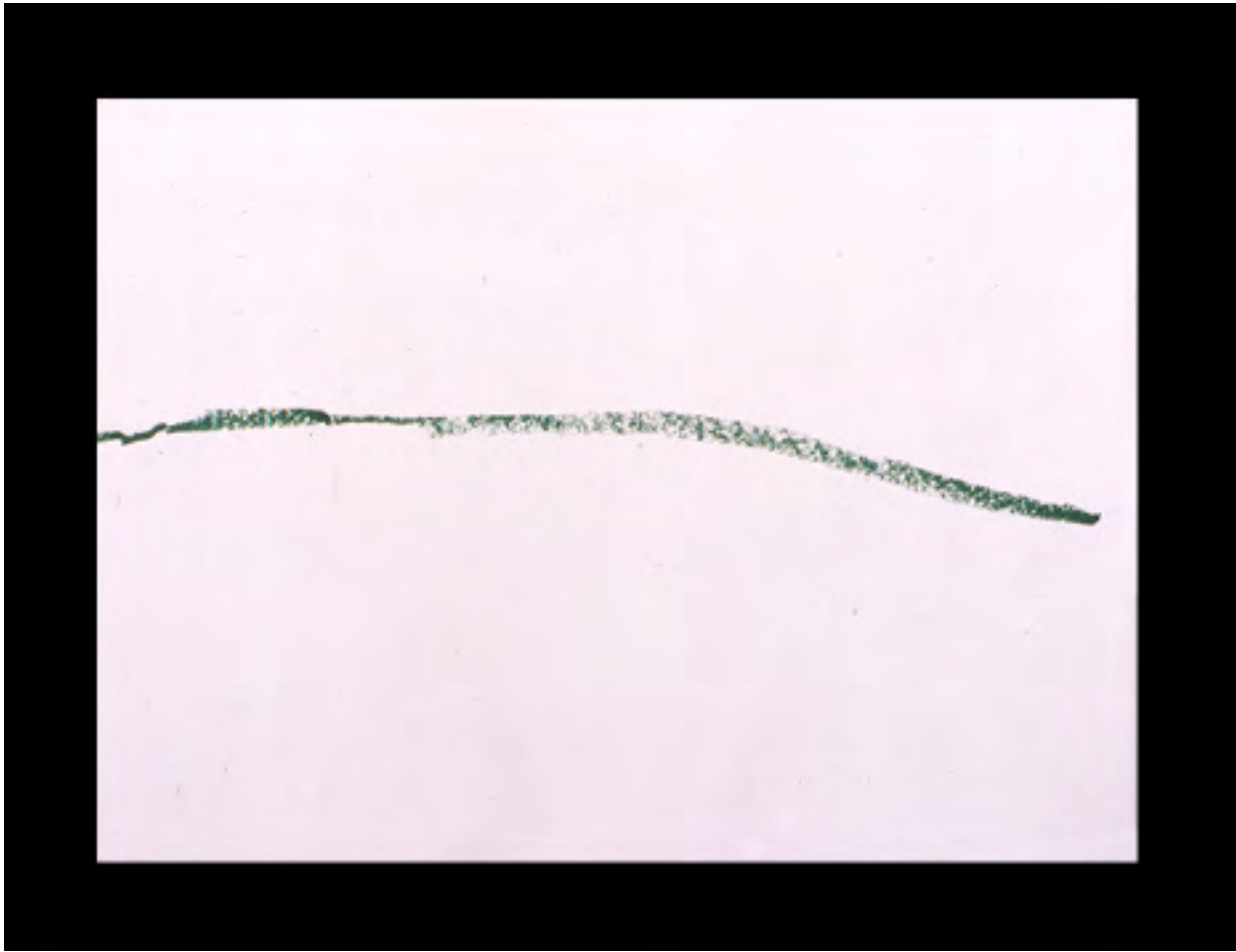
Talking about Art When "The Art in It Is What You Cannot Talk About"

Importantly, the capacity to think visually is one that young children naturally possess. Ironically, it is, one might say, taught out of them. In this regard, the role of the teacher should be one of preserving and nurturing what already exists rather than instilling something perceived as missing. One of the most important ways of preserving that capacity has to do with the way we talk to children about their art.

The question which often confounds the adult is: How do you talk to children about their art when, as one painter put it, "the art in it is what you cannot talk about"? You do so by talking about the painting in terms that have to do with *seeing* rather than in terms that have to do with *naming*. For example, when you approach a child's work you might say: "Let's look at your painting...the paint that makes the blue shape is so smooth and flat, even its edges are smooth. The red shape is very thick and lumpy and its edges are rough. I like the idea that those two shapes are rubbing together in your painting. I see a new color where they are touching," and so on. We have said a good deal about what we *actually* see, but we have not "named" anything. "I like the idea of" is a phrase which sets the tone for what is important in the child's work—idea expressed as visual language.

A very different approach would be to say to the child, as many of us have, with the best of intentions, "I love your painting. It's so beautiful. Is that blue the sky? The red shape looks like a flower. Do you want to paint some grass?" In this example, we have said almost nothing about what we actually see, about what the paint is doing or how the marks have been made. We have said nothing that enhances visual thinking or broadens a child's awareness of the elements found in a visual language. We have, however, said a good deal about our need to take hold of the shapes in the painting by giving them the names of things we know in the world.

But what about a drawing like this?



It might seem like there is almost nothing to say to a child about such an apparently minimal effort except maybe, “Don’t you want to draw some more?” Looking closely, however, we realize that even the simplest line has a place where it starts and a place where it ends. It has a speed, a direction, and a location on the page. How hard the child has pressed with their hand changes the line—and changes the way the line feels to us.

In this drawing, the line enters at the left almost as if it had started somewhere before it ever got to the paper. When it enters the white rectangle, it makes two short, sharp movements and then it suddenly speeds up and broadens out as if pushing into the white of the page. Only a moment later, the white seems to have pushed back, twisting, thinning, and slowing the line. It’s something of a surprise then that the line suddenly rushes boldly forward again—lightening, almost lifting off the page before speeding to a halting, dark, and definite stop just before it gets to the far edge of the paper. Now the white of the page feels squeezed as it is forced to go around a green line whose appearance

has completely changed the quiet world of this one white rectangle. While only a single crayon line may have been made in this drawing, there is a lot going on. It's also important to remember that the decision *not* to make another mark is just as significant as the decision to make a mark in the first place.

Verbalizing a “trip” taken with your eyes on a line like this often delights children and encourages them to try new ways of mark-making without ever directly asking them to do so—and without having named anything in their drawing.

The gratification we receive from the simple act of naming a form or object is strong. Probably this goes back to the praise we received for it as a child. I have already given the example of the adult who stands mystified before the seemingly impenetrable abstract painting. Confronting this painting may seem a bit like trying to comprehend a sentence which has no nouns. The feeling of frustration is not surprising. This same individual would no doubt happily turn their attention to a Van Gogh painting that seems easy to understand. In that painting, they might find a chair, a pair of shoes, and a room with a bed—and along with these objects, they will find the “sense” that they could not find in the abstract painting. But naming is not seeing.

That said, recognizable forms will begin to enter the drawings of children around the age of three or four. The presence of identifiable forms adds the new element of associated meanings which are conjured by those forms. What is important to remember, however, is that the way you see a form is inseparable from the means used to render it. *How* we see forms is utterly entwined with every aspect of the materials used to create them. The same visual elements which carried meaning when we could not affix a name to the forms continue to carry meaning when we can. The difference is that when there are identifiable forms present, the meaning carried by the visual elements alone (color, line, shape, surface, and so on) now involve themselves with the associations conjured by the forms we recognize.

The Drawing Is the Telling

The tendency to gratify ourselves by just naming the forms we see is usually accompanied by the strong desire to connect these objects with a story. Often a well-intentioned teacher engages a child in the story of the painting without ever acknowledging the ideas within the paint itself. A teacher once asked me if she should be saying to a child, “Can you tell me about your drawing?” My response was that *the drawing is the telling*. When story replaces real seeing, we effectively recast a primarily visual language as a primarily literary one. We have once again reduced the visually charged painting to words and begun the process in which the capacity for visual thinking steadily disappears.

But how can we not talk about a large, toothed orifice when one is staring at us from a child's painting? Indeed, it may seem irrelevant to be acknowledging the way the paint is applied when one figure in the painting is about to devour another—and especially when the child is telling me that they were thinking about a monster when they were making the painting. It is, in fact, a perfect opportunity to talk about the particular kind of marks the child used in relation to the words they are relating.

For example, vigorous, high-energy marks made by a big brush loaded with paint feel very different to us than the thin, scratchy marks made by a small, relatively dry brush. And a head created by a heavy application of green paint coarsely brushed into a lower corner of the painting is clearly different than the same form created by a delicate wash of yellow floating near the top of the paper. It is these differences that are so important to acknowledge.

It is not that *what* or *who* children are drawing is unimportant, but that if we don't talk about the *what* and the *who* in terms of the *how*—how something was drawn, how the marks were made, how the drawing or painting or sculpture was constructed—then we risk turning visual art and visual ideas into narrative, into literature, into illustration. We turn something made out of paint and crayon and cardboard into something made out of words.

You might say to a child who has identified a specific shape in their painting, “The paint you used for that balloon is so thin and delicate. I can see the white paper coming right through. It reminds me of just what it feels like to hold a balloon.” The particular way the child painted this form reflects, consciously or unconsciously, choices that child has made. By acknowledging these choices, you heighten a child's awareness that such choices are meaningful. So whether or not the drawing or painting has identifiable forms, the question that is helpful to have in mind is not “*What* does this mean?” but rather, “*How* does this mean?” Interestingly, when we answer the question of *how*, the question of *what* often answers itself.

In short, when the forms in a child's painting begin to take on recognizable shapes, the vocabulary of a visual language is being enlarged—not replaced. Viewing the child's project, our role is not to psychoanalyze it but to acknowledge it by describing what we see. In doing so, we continually reinforce the act of visual thinking and expand the elements of a child's visual language.

The “It's So Beautiful” Problem

Aesthetic accidents that end up on a child's project—wayward drips, paint flung from another child's brush, a puddle of color from a spilled paint cup, and so on—also involve choice. After all, the child might either choose to paint over the accident or might find interesting ways to make use of

this unexpected occurrence. Again, these are all opportunities for us to acknowledge an expanding visual vocabulary. More often than not, such a painting—filled with intention and accident, seized opportunities, and unplanned results—will be received by a loving parent exclaiming, “It’s so beautiful!”

“It’s so beautiful” is one of the most common responses of a well-meaning adult who has been presented with a child’s art work. While this response may make a child feel good, it unfortunately ignores all the ideas present in a project—ignores the language of its making—offering instead reflexive (rather than reflective) praise.



Thinking back on one project in particular, *The Large Ink Drawing Project*, there are certainly times when I, too, can barely contain the urge to say, “it’s so beautiful.” The drawings in this project are accomplished by using a large, long-handled brush, black India ink, and a substantial rectangle of cream-white paper as big as the child’s body.

These drawing often achieve a very powerful presence. And equally often, they are indeed beautiful, sometimes astonishingly so. Such drawings obtain what all compelling art obtains: *a deeply meaningful condition*. But they are not meaningful because they are beautiful. They are beautiful because they are so meaningful, because of how forcefully the ideas in these drawings have been realized—ideas made of ink, paper, and light. And it is those ideas that we need to be talking about, to be acknowledging, to be reinforcing.

One drawing may involve a powerful, concentrated massing of broad brush marks, while another may convey an almost atmospheric delicacy, and jaunty, playful rhythms may be most prominent in yet another. The problem with saying “it’s so beautiful” is that it makes everything the same. And these drawing are in no way the same. They convey very different things to us, and it’s those differences we should be talking about.

Children are very responsive to praise, as we all know. That’s why it’s so important to talk about the ideas that are embodied in a child’s work. When you hear young children say, “Isn’t my painting pretty?” or worse, “My painting is prettier than your painting,” it is no doubt because their valuable visual ideas have been ignored in the past and that the simple pleasure of receiving praise has taken the place of receiving acknowledgment of their ideas. When we tell a child only that their work is “beautiful,” we are not just reducing everything to the same blank, well-meaning platitude, but we are



also telling that child that they are finished. When, on the other hand, we acknowledge a child's ideas, we are affirming an infinite number of possibilities in the language of form, enlarging their capacity to think, exciting their curiosity, and emboldening their willingness to take risks.

Open, Inquisitive, and Imaginative

Words provide an essential way to make sense of the world, but they provide only one way, one currency of thought—one *means to meaning*. It would be unfortunate indeed if, in our conscientious effort to prepare children for testable, word-based skills, we unintentionally diminish their overall capacity to think and to apprehend meaning.

The value of art in education is almost always spoken of in terms of fostering creativity and self-expression. This is unfortunate. The result is that when children come to regard themselves as not particularly creative, they feel that what art has to offer is not for them. This sentiment is often tacitly reinforced by teachers who feel similarly. All individuals, however, begin their lives as open, inquisitive, imaginative beings. It is in the very nature of being a child. The question is: What happens along the way that most of these children will no longer think of themselves as receptive, creative individuals by the time they are young adults?

The real importance of art in education is not a matter of creativity, or self-expression—nor, for that matter does it have to do with developing an aesthetic appreciation of painting and sculpture or honing

fine motor skills. Rather, its importance lies in the vital awareness that art is thinking and that as the activity of making art disappears from a child's life, a realm of thinking disappears with it.

By taking the time to acknowledge the ideas within a child's work of art, we not only reinforce an entirely other way to think, but we help preserve that curious, creative, receptive self from which art emerges as embodied thought.

Reference

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