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on the cover

How Does It Look for Tomorrow?

(Lost - umbrella), 2015, by Cybéle Young.

Japanese paper construction, 40" x 30" x 5 1/2".

Copyright © 2015 Cybéle Young. Used by permission of the artist.

Image courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York.

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ProfessionalArtistMag.com

ON LOVING AMATEUR ARTISTS AND STAYING ONE YOURSELF

BY GWENN SEEMEL



IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYONE THESE DAYS IS CALLING HERSELF AN ARTIST.

From the smartphone user who snaps a few pics and throws a fancy filter on them to the doodler who dashes off a drawing every three months and claims the title, this easy appropriation of the term “artist” can make some professionals uncomfortable. At first glance, it seems to dilute the meaning of the word and belittle the hard work that’s required to turn a creative tendency into a career. On closer examination though, it becomes clear just how badly professional artists need amateurs.

[1] Detail of *Part of the plan*, 2015, by Cybèle Young. Japanese paper, 29" x 33" x 2.5". [2] *Part of the plan*, 2015, by Cybèle Young. Japanese paper, 29" x 33" x 2.5". Copyright © 2015 Cybèle Young. Used by permission of the artist.

For years, I was one of those uncomfortable professionals. What finally changed my mind about the weekend warriors taking our title was

a sudden moment of recognition: I too had been the eager amateur. And I'm not talking about the time I spent developing my painting and visual art skills, although, in that sense, I would qualify as well. Rather, I realized I'd been an amateur in the theater world. I went so far as to attend a renowned "école de mime" in Paris, and, once I was out of school, I was cast in several community theater pieces, one of which even paid an honorarium.

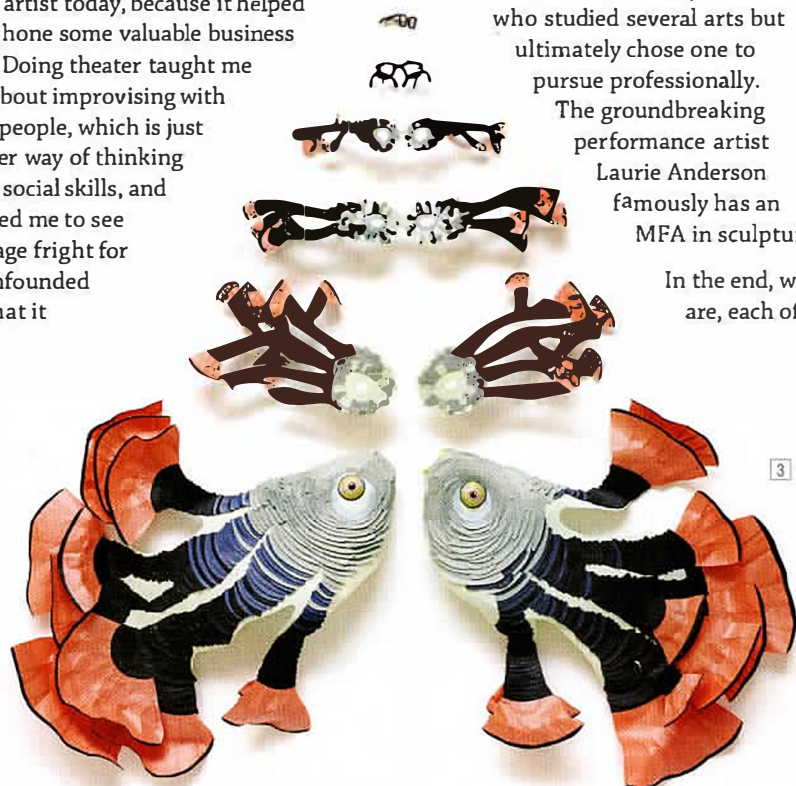
In the decade or so that I pursued performing as an art, there were moments — bright shining instances that remain etched on my soul — where I truly believed I was an actor. But, though I'm over this dream (at least for the time being), my attempted acting career was not a waste of time. It plays an important role in my ability to be a visual artist today, because it helped me to hone some valuable business skills. Doing theater taught me a lot about improvising with other people, which is just another way of thinking about social skills, and it forced me to see my stage fright for the unfounded fear that it

was. Though I'm still nervous getting up in front of strangers to do an artist talk or to speak at a conference, years of being on stage have made it seem a little homier to me.

Education is always a good idea, even if it doesn't seem to lead directly to the sort of employment that follows naturally from the area of study. Plenty of professional artists didn't go to school for art, but their studies still impact their work. Sometimes the link is more obvious, like with the biology major who does science illustration or the car mechanic who becomes a metal sculptor, but often it's not. There are always the comic book creators who studied political science and the landscape artists who went to school for nursing. In the case of the former, their education might bring a depth to the social critique in their work. With the latter, their studies could cause them to see that they needed a retreat from people or maybe it made them want to create calm, reflective art to soothe the sick. Either way, the experience shapes the art.

What's more, it isn't just me who studied several arts but ultimately chose one to pursue professionally. The groundbreaking performance artist Laurie Anderson famously has an MFA in sculpture.

In the end, we are, each of us,



3] *Just around the edges*, 2015, by Cybèle Young. Japanese paper, 33" x 29 x 2.5".
Copyright © 2015 Cybèle Young. Used by permission of the artist.

amateurs to somebody in some activity. After all, most of us don't cook at the level of a professional chef when we make our family dinner, and many of us are using social media to invite ourselves into the branding sandbox that was once the territory of marketers and public relations firms. Our amateur status doesn't make our efforts any less useful in our everyday. In fact, it may help keep us grounded in situations where professionals might become entangled in very specialized technical things that only they understand.

So amateurs create in a state of semi-ignorant bliss that's very nice for them, but their uninhibited output doesn't just benefit them. Laypeople contribute to the lives and careers of professionals in a variety of ways. In art, the amateurs help professionals in the following ways:

1) Amateurs see to it that art education remains a part of the curriculum.

For whatever reason, it isn't always easy to find funding to ensure that children are taught basic art-making skills. If it were only professional artists fighting for today's kids, the programs would be cut down more than they already are, and these



next generation of artists and amateurs would suffer.

2) Amateurs use art-making tools and then these tools become more accessible.

Currently, the crowd of amateurs who are clamoring for less expensive cameras and video-editing software have given artists a new range of tools, but this scenario has played out again and again in our history. The interest of laypeople helps simplify art tools and also makes them safer and more affordable.

3) Amateurs' love for their art is contagious.

People can't help but talk about the arts they've done, and their passion can spark similar feelings in others as well. Furthermore, amateurs know how difficult a certain technique is because they've tried it

themselves. Their respect for the artists they admire is deepened by their own experiences, and this makes them the best kind of art advocate.

4) Amateurs appreciate the tenacity it takes to market oneself successfully as an artist.

When amateurs have tried at some point to be professional artists, they truly understand us. This field requires courage, passion and persistence in spades, and, while the amateurs might have decided that it wasn't going to work out for them professionally, that doesn't mean they don't want to see others thrive. They might support the efforts of professionals by buying professional work, or they may nurture art in others ways, like by promoting their favorite artists or art in general. Truthfully, the how of it doesn't matter as much. The important thing is that amateurs are some of the closest allies artists can have.

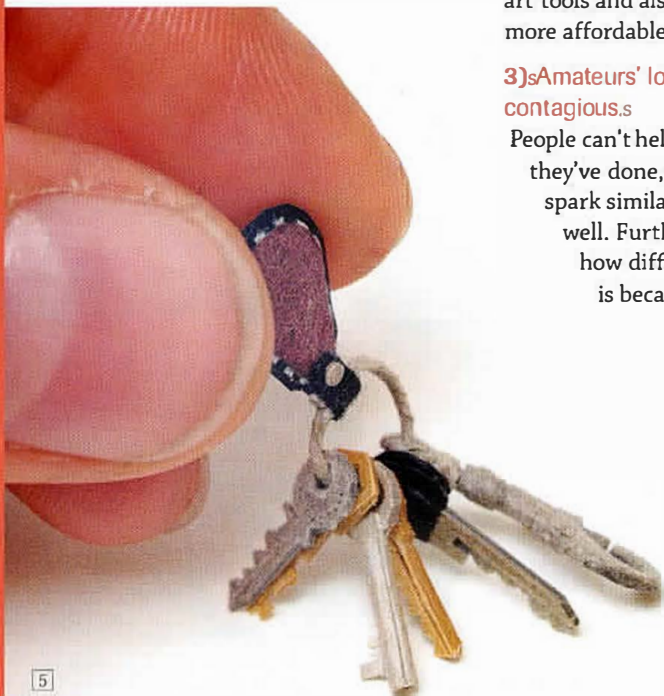
If I had to sum up these four things that amateurs do for professionals in a single sentence, I'd say this:

Amateurs create a context in which professionals can flourish.

Without this supportive environment — without this engaged audience — professionals have nothing. So instead of cringing every time another wannabe artist claims the title, maybe professionals would do better to give them a big hug.

It's vital that each of us remembers where we come from, that we honor the amateur in ourselves. Here, I'm referring to the term in its original sense, the one

“ It's vital that each of us remembers where we come from, that we honor the amateur in ourselves. — Gwenn Seemel



45 You ain't nothing but an American citizen (Australian-American), 2008, by Gwenn Seemel. Acrylic on canvas, 39" x 29". This work is in the public domain. No permission required. 5 Where they always go, 2015, by Cybèle Young. Japanese paper, 28" x 26" x 3". Copyright © 2015 Cybèle Young. Used by permission of the artist.

“ I am captivated by the ability to experience something big in something small. — Cybèle Young



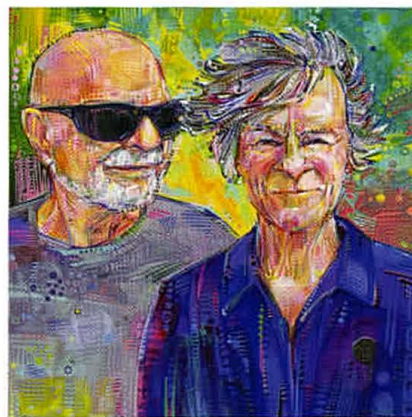
without the baggage of judgment and the worry of just how much money a professional must make to be a part of the club. I'm talking about the term that comes from Italian via French. I'm talking about the "amateur" as the lover.

One professional who is very much in touch with this part of her practice is the award-winning artist and author Cybèle Young (cybeleyoung.ca). She studied sculpture and printmaking at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and her résumé is at least as impressive as her work. Still, it's her exquisite sense of craft that appeals to me, especially in that it showcases her colorful

imagination so beautifully.

When I first encountered Young's art, her miniature sculptures made from Japanese paper were what caught my eye. These tiny worlds are sometimes representational and at other times more abstract, but always surreal. Their size lends them a near-mystical quality that I find completely engrossing.

Still, as I looked further into Young's oeuvre, I noticed that the artist had a lot more going on than these pretty paper pieces. For one thing, she has written and illustrated eight picture books to date. Some of these even feature images



of her sculptures, juxtaposed in new and interesting ways, and Young's film work takes that inspiration to another level. Using stop-motion, she animates her paper creations, often building mysterious narratives that are deliciously inviting for the audience.

Her videos have a raw quality to them that's not entirely like the rest of the artist's work, and that difference made me want to ask Young a bit about what goes on in the studio in her head.

GS: What drew you to sculpture and printmaking in the first place? Why did you end up studying them?

CY: Sculpture initially enticed me with problem-solving challenges: What are things made of? And, how are they put together?

When the sculpture became too big and cumbersome, and I craved the drawn line, I turned to printmaking, which is like drawing sculpturally. When I realized the prints could be worked with in three dimensions and with limited means, I found all of my creative needs satisfied.

GS: What drew you to books as a form of expression?

CY: I am captivated by the ability to experience something big in something small.



“ All professionals can strive to remain amateurs, even as they continue to cultivate their chosen discipline. ~ Gwenn Seemel

I strive for this in my work, and I think this is reflected in my love for books and what they can provide for any walk of life.

Books can also foster intimacy between people who might find it difficult otherwise. I never knew my son was capable of sitting happy and calm on someone's lap until we started reading to him.

GS: What drew you to film?

CY: I used to create kinetic sculpture, so I often articulate my small sculptures to understand them on a deeper level. I give them life in film so they have the chance to

tell me more of their story and allow me to see them in new and unexpected ways.

GS: How do these different modes of expression play off of each other in your process and in your finished work?

CY: Sometimes I find I'm shifting gears more than I can handle, but generally the different mediums form a synergistic relationship. In the end it's about what works best to express the ideas at the time.

GS: Which one has been most helpful in establishing your career? How or why?

CY: Truly I can't make a distinction.

For example, the film work hasn't generally been directly profitable, but it has had great influence in the development of my ideas.

This last revelation rings true in my own work as well. I've been making videos about my art and my ideas and posting them to my blog for five years, and, until recently, I hadn't managed to monetize them at all. That said, it would be hard to overstate their worth in terms of my whole practice, both in generating concepts and in getting better at communicating them. Twice now, I've culled my videos along with the text I publish on my blog in order to find material for marketing books I was writing.

All professionals can strive to remain amateurs, even as they continue to cultivate their chosen discipline. We never need to stop looking for new tools and mediums, new directions in our work that can open up our creativity and provide insight, both into our art practice and into our marketing. The sense of possibility that comes with inexperience is at least as valid as the one that comes from knowing an art form inside and out. When we're too hung up on what makes a "real" artist or "real" art, we forget what's most interesting about being an artist: We forget to play. Art-making is a fundamentally social act and one that can and should be for everyone. Embrace the amateur in others; embrace the amateur in you. **PA**

Gwenn Seemel is a full-time artist who writes and creates videos in English and in French for her award-winning blog about her work, portraiture, the business of art, free culture, feminism and her struggle with endometriosis. Her art has been featured by many publications on the Web, including Scientific American, BoingBoing, and Hyperallergic. Her book about why she refuses to claim the copyright on her art can be read for free on her website, gwennseemel.com.

7 | Cybèle Young working on her latest book, *Some Things I've Lost*, due out Sept 1.