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Brian Rutenberg is an American abstract painter and landscape artist. He is considered to be one of the finest painters of his generation. Brian's book, [Clear Seeing Place](#), and his new monograph, [A Little Long Time](#) are both listed as Amazon bestsellers.

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**Where did you grow up and what was your childhood like? Did you have any particular experiences/stories that shaped your adult life?**

My greatest fortune in life is that I was born and raised along the coast of South Carolina. Where I grew up, people didn't ask how you were doing, but where you were from—not the town or street, but what patch of shade under what tree. Southern children are taught to drink in the wondrous details of the local landscape: a flower isn't just a flower, but blue water-hyssop or southern marsh canna, birds are black-bellied whistling ducks or red-footed boobies, and barbecue sauce is light tomato, heavy tomato, mustard, or vinegar.

Poetry lives in details, and the artist's job is to amplify them. Art stems from local knowledge. Tell the truth from your point of view. Painting should nail your foot to the floor so that you spend your entire life walking around in a tiny circle. At the center of that circle is one question: Are you making art, or are you manufacturing a state of lucidity and trying to keep it around for as long as possible?

Every spring during childhood, my mother placed a crystal bowl of water on my bedside table in which floated three pink camellia blossoms cut from a bush in our front yard. At night, I'd lie on my pillow,

watching them slowly spin and bump into each other until my eyelids betrayed me. They would still be spinning when I awoke. Looking is gathering information, but seeing is contemplation. My mother was teaching me how to see. She created the conditions for an experience that had no intrinsic meaning whatsoever, yet it filled me with a rage to live.

There is too much focus on meaning in contemporary art; people want to know what it means. They need to understand. This desire to know is logical if you're reading a pill bottle, but painting is seldom logical. Seeing a painting takes patience and the willingness to perceive differently. It restacks our priorities in unexpected ways and entices us to notice that which we overlooked.

When a painter does their job well, the richness of content supplants the requirement for meaning. Van Gogh painted a pair of old shoes on a table, but we don't need to know what he meant to access acres of rich content because of how he painted them.

Everything we need is compressed into each ropey brushstroke. All that's required is our full presence. Painting enacts place.

### **What is something you wish you would've realized earlier in your life?**

I wish I'd learned to stop trying so hard. An artist is born the moment he or she gives up. If you're making art, you're trying too hard. Stop it. The best paintings look like work, not art. Success is too often confused with popularity, and you'll never have enough of that. True success is curiosity and effort. I gave up trying long ago, and what was leftover, that sleep-deprived, desperate version of myself, was my spark.

I've built a successful career fanning that spark. Anyone can knock it out of the park once and a while, but purposeful intent and execution in a body of work is the sign of a pro. To paraphrase the stand-up comedian Steve Martin: It's easy to be great. It's hard to be good. Consistency is everything.

### **What are bad recommendations you hear in your profession or area of expertise?**

There comes a time when every painter must ask themselves: Am I a Judge or a Witness? By Judge, I don't mean justice or magistrate whose role it is to interpret and uphold the law, but a decider who inserts him- or herself between the painting and the viewer. They use paint as the delivery system for a message rather than to create the conditions for an open-ended experience that combines both idea and process.

Art is skill and imagination combined to make something that transcends both. There is nothing weaker than a work of art that tries to provoke a certain response. The artworld is full of Judges; galleries are lined with paintings that beg to be "understood." Art students are frightened into thinking that they must be original right out of the gate or risk mediocrity. They face constant pressure to grow and evolve. Those are art school bullshit words. There is great poetry in repetition, in doing the same thing, over and over, for a long time. That's how you get good at stuff. No one talks about that. Duke Ellington said, "The wise musicians are those who play what they can master."

### **Tell me about one of the darker periods you've experienced in life. How you came out of it and what you learned from it?**

Myrtle Beach, South Carolina in the early eighties offered little exposure to the fine arts, so after school, my mother dropped me off at Chapin Memorial Public Library, where I systematically consumed the entire art history section, one book at a time; I still remember it was the 700s in the Dewey decimal system. It was here that I read *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*. One sentence from that book still haunts me: "The sadness will last forever." That was the one I'd been waiting for. It was a permission slip into the contours and dimensions of something darker that I couldn't yet articulate.

I don't measure my life in ups and downs. I have certainly experienced tragic and painful events in my life but I neither learned from them nor did I try to come out of them, I just paid attention to the feelings. What I

learned was that all art comes from sadness. Meaning comes from paying attention to suffering, not because the artist is depressed or miserable, but because sadness is a richer, more complex state than happiness; a modicum of sorrow is a legitimate part of any good life because it allows us to experience our entire being. There's a reason it takes more muscles to frown than to smile—we want to say “buzz off” to pain and suffering through effort and perseverance. Creativity requires attention to detail and persistence in the face of failure; that's why it's called discipline. An artist is someone who reveres suffering. That's how we learn to see the grace in simple things.

**What is one thing that you do that you feel has been the biggest contributor to your success so far?**

The secret to my success was marrying my wife Kathryn. The love and stability of a good marriage to a self-reliant spouse can knock the legs out from under any problem the world can fling at your windshield.

Choose your spouse, partner, and friends carefully. You can't be what you can't see.

**What is your morning routine? Please include the time you wake up.**

I wake up at 7:10a. The first thing I do is make my bed. It is important to start each day by completing one task that has a beginning, middle, and end.

After shaving and dressing, I go to the gym and work out for exactly twenty minutes and then join a couple of actor friends for coffee and oatmeal at the local diner. My studio is a fifteen-minute ride on the downtown subway.

Upon arriving, I do a series of stretches developed during my years as a drummer. Here is my routine: Sit down in a hard chair and cross one leg over the other to form a T. Lean forward slowly to stretch the thighs. Repeat with the other leg. Stand up and bow forward, trying not to bend the knees, and slip your hands under your feet, if possible. Hold for one minute. Come back to a standing position. Reach toward the ceiling and wiggle fingers vigorously while keeping shoulders down. Breathe deeply. Do ten slow windmills with each arm. Sit down and vigorously slap the bottoms of your bare feet. I know that I won't always be in the physical shape that I'm in now but, whenever I think of exercise as a dirty word, I rinse my mouth out with Hershey's syrup.

**What habit or behavior that you have pursued for a few years has most improved your life?**

Taking a daily nap and going to bed earlier. Under the covers before 10p and I'm a happy man.

**What are your strategies for being productive and using your time most efficiently?**

The single most important thing you need to be an artist is a locked door. Creativity thrives on solitude. Locking your door achieves two essential goals at once—it tells the world to stay out, and it confines you to a place where self-awareness, the enemy of art, can be rinsed away; it's easier to fall in love with the sound of your voice while no one's listening. The worst thing a painter can do is edit while working. Spill everything out behind your locked door and fix it later. The time will come when you can unlock it, but for now, paint for an audience of one. Remember, you're not only the painting's maker but also its first looker. My only strategy is to show up.

**What book(s) have influenced your life the most? Why?**

I discovered [The Odes of John Keats](#) in a little bookstore in Florence, Italy, when I was twenty-two and have rarely traveled since without a copy. I've read them on the banks of the Arno, in Irish chapels, at East End Pubs, at NASCAR races, in Las Vegas casinos, and on the New York subway. My favorite, “[Ode on a Grecian Urn](#),” changed the way I think about art and its role in the world. The poem begins with a solitary observer experiencing a work of representational art; the urn is incomplete without the presence of the viewer, just as a painting is lifeless until the spectator projects their vitality into it. The urn is an object that

exists separately from ourselves, which produces a fascinating paradox for the figures dancing across its shape, figures simultaneously liberated from a time yet stuck in it. They won't age or die, but neither will they inhale the brief fragrance of having lived.

Keats taught me that life isn't a support system for art, but the other way around. Art shows us how to be human. We move through life divided in half, focused on either thoughts or bodily sensations. Rarely are we fully present in both.

Art teaches us to be whole because it is whole. A painting is two things at the same time: a flat surface with little piles of color and a fictive world into which we expand our consciousness. In a Rembrandt self-portrait, creamy oil paint suddenly becomes translucent flesh with warm blood coursing beneath. Scumbled brushstrokes instantly transform into the folds in a cap.

The singer/songwriter Donovan said it best, "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is."

My two other favorite books are [The Elephant Man And Other Reminiscences by Sir Frederick Treves](#) and [Among Grizzlies by Timothy Treadwell and Jewel Pavolak](#). These are books about obsession, delusion, redemption, and tenderness. They taught me that purpose is more powerful than inspiration. As Andy Warhol said, "Don't think about making art, just get it done."

#### **Do you have any quotes you live by or think of often?**

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." – Heavyweight Boxer Mike Tyson

"Nothing bothers me, my friends; one night they threw hamburgers at me." – Tiny Tim



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