

Duncan's email to me:
Hey Jaleen,

I was trying to read your thesis on my computer, gave up, and started printing it. I've been underlining parts that catch my interest. You've done an amazing job in what I've read so far. One aspect inferred regularly is the hostility that artists have towards each other. Isn't it amazing? Why would an aesthetic outlook cause so much anger. Seriously disliking an artist's aesthetic choice and summarily hating the individual who creates the work is a kind of racism. The potential meaning or value of a work of art is ignored because the surface doesn't appeal - like hating a black person for being black and not taking the time to get to know him. It's happened to me regularly that I'm outright rejected as a person because my art doesn't fit the mould of what I'm supposed to be doing in order to get the title "artist." Who says?....

Jaleen Grove's Thesis On Target - Sept. 21, 2006
By Duncan Weller
<http://duncanweller.com/news.cfm>

Jaleen, studying at Ryerson and York University, kindly sent me her in-depth MA thesis with the title "BUT IS IT ART? THE CONSTRUCTION AND VALUATION OF ILLUSTRATION IN VICTORIA'S ISLAND ILLUSTRATORS SOCIETY. She interviewed over a hundred artists for her thesis, and with great wit and detailed observation created a thoughtful piece that is sure to cause a ripple effect, if not for the possibility that she may re-introduce art historian Alan Gowans to the art scene and present a real challenge to the contemporary status quo.

The basic argument of her thesis is "that the Island Illustrators Society of Victoria, BC represents a way to make art that challenges the divide in the art scene between contemporary, non-commercial artists and conservative, commercial artists."

Other arguments include:

- that this divide is silly, counterproductive and artificially maintained despite underlying similarities between the sides
- that illustrators are involved in a deeply creative process
- that illustration is concerned with communication, whereas fine art doesn't have to be
- that "illustration" can be mistaken for "fine art" and vice versa; only intent and context distinguish them
- that conservative art is not anti-change but reflects culture as it changes
- that so-called non-commercial art is just as commercial as any other aspect of our society
- that being commercial is not a dirty word but reality, and working in commercial ways does not mean the art has to give up political and meaningful content

Jaleen's thesis accurately argues that a divide exists, and it's certainly something I've had to deal with since first year university when I made it clear I wanted to write and illustrate children's books. The hostility towards my work, and subsequently towards me as a person from "fine" artists astounded me - especially in Toronto. I'm

quite glad that I grew up in a small Northern town away from the ideological fog that steals away an artist's freedom to choose, be practical, and maintain a moral universe that is personally constructed rather than forced, or force fed. I too am a "fine" artist. (I'm actually well travelled - having seen most major galleries in the United States before the age of 15 - my father, a professor of political science gave papers in many cities, and my mother is an ardent art lover). I've shown my abstracts in public galleries and continually experiment with aesthetics -- but I don't make a big deal out of it, and I don't feel the need to prove myself to anyone. Also, I happen to like many kinds of contemporary art and believe anyone has the freedom to become an artist if they so dare; what I don't like is the CLAIM of the value for work that is suspect; ie. shows no talent, commitment, or imagination. In Canada, mediocre artists and their supporters who benefit from praising the mediocre - rule. However, egalitarians, being human first, are never truly happy being equal (an impossibility anyway), so where they can't physically outdo one another (because they have little talent - only intent), they argue for their superiority. Arguments alone don't work because logic can rip holes in dishonestly fabricated statements, so the artists create a foggy world of subjective language to defend against any probings of the skeptics. And so the ideological battles rage. The only war fought in the arts is a war of words, but the result is more and more bad art and the public becomes more and more disinterested. They shy away from the arts. As a result, the conservative elements of society - the right wing clamp of puritan values descends to fill the moral gap. And the public leans right because the left is unable to offer up distraction or guidance, and all the values the artists pretend to defend wither in the fog. The underlying problem is that one thousand mediocre works of art will never replace the one work of genius, only create a greater hunger for it.

Not that I'm so great. I like my world in the playpen of the artworld. But as I sit in my sand box creating my own world the contemporary artist - as passerby - can't help but to see some pretty good works here and there in my little sand box. Rather than walk by and let me do my own thing, they're quite agitated and make it known that I shouldn't be doing what I'm doing - I guess for fear that I might show them up. But they don't have to worry. I don't plan on leaving or challenging their ideology. I'm too poor and too easily a victim of the economy to do anything about it. And it would be a hopeless waste of time. Egalitarianism is far too attractive than any other ideology.

The Americans know what I'm taking about. Here's a quote from a popular culture source - a movie - where the underlying statement of the story is anti-egalitarian (a popular theme in American comics and films). Can you place it?

"Dash, everyone is special."

"Sigh. That's just another way of saying no one is."