

Art Autobiography

I have been privileged to be around art my entire life. My childhood home was decorated with paintings and prints from around the world. My paternal grandparents were actors, my aunt was an artist, and my sister became an expressive arts therapist. It seemed the arts were in my blood. Yet, my family would not consider me an artist. How could I be? I was always branded as ‘The Scientist’.

My earliest memory of art comes from primary school. Art was always a separate activity in a classroom of its own, separate from daily classroom work. I was personally never fond of going to art rotation. I liked structure and routine, yet art was chaotic and lawless. The classroom alone was designed unlike a typical classroom: tables were tall and covered in paint with stools instead of traditional chairs. I distinctly remember the room had ceilings with painted tiles and smelled like rubber cement. Once a week, my class would be escorted down to the art classroom in a single file line. We would then have a small demonstration on the type of art we would be working with today and then time to work on our own piece. I don’t remember much about the art teachers, other than they had gray hair and preferred the students who knew how to use water color paint without the color bleeding into brown. Other students had natural talent for art and were invited to join the elusive Art Club, drawing realistic eyes at age ten. I personally couldn’t draw a stick figure.

Throughout the years, there were other forms of art I tried. I played the clarinet, I participated in the middle school musical, and I even danced ballet for two years. I don’t remember much of these fleeting experiences compared to mandatory art class in elementary school. I think I only chose to pursue these as a means to socialize with friends and less because I was passionate about learning more about these art forms. Of course, there are the little moments such as going to art museums, watching movies, listening to music, and attending concerts. I think most of us have these experiences when it comes to engaging in art. Especially growing up in New York, I think many of my peers have been exposed to art all of our lives. However, I would have rather spent my time collecting data from my rudimentary weather machine I purchased from a Scholastic magazine.

I wouldn’t say I had an active role in art until I started taking pictures. This started with disposal cameras purchased from the pharmacy with a mere twenty-seven photographs. I remember having to be deliberate about the photos I would take and I restricted myself to only

taking photos on ‘special occasions’. Then three weeks later, getting the photos back and seeing my thumb covering half of the lens. I still cherish those photos to this day. With a camera, anyone could be an artist.

This was never more apparent as when I got my first bright pink point-and-shoot digital camera for my 10th birthday. I began taking photos of everything: my friends making silly faces, clouds, the outfit I wore to the mall. Perhaps this was my way of documenting and collecting data; a very scientific way of engaging in art. In high school, I loved photography so much that I finally took a photography class. I upgraded my point-and-shoot camera to my dad’s outdated CANON 35mm film camera and the photographs switched from candid snapshots to well-thought out compositions.

For my undergraduate degree, I took photography courses. While these classes were unrelated to my science major, I thought it was a great reprieve from the lab. I began learning the theories and principles to elevate my photography skills. This time coincided with the advent of digital photography. Now, I did not have to wait for chemical baths to develop photos or risk over exposure or contend with the price of limited film; photographs could be taken and adjusted instantaneously. This led me to start learning how to apply graphic design techniques using ADOBE Photoshop. I even learned how to use mixed media to enhance my photographs. Some of this work was presented in local galleries, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Photography artwork displayed in local gallery (Greenwald, 2014)

When I moved back to New York and began working as a teacher, it became difficult to actively engage in art. The cost (both time and money) can be expensive, as is any hobby. Even with photography being more accessible as a feature of every cellphone, it became difficult to actively find the space to take photographs. This became even worse during COVID-19 when circumstances discouraged activities and opportunities for photography, especially portraits.

Currently, I try to find as much time to actively pursue my art as much as possible. I figure skating and currently journal every day, but I would like to find more outlets for creative pursuits.

Personally, it is hard to define 'success' in art. It is easy to say that a person is successful in science when they receive an A+ on a difficult organic chemistry examination or publish a research paper. Numbers are easy to compare, but how can you quantify art? Sure, you can determine success through the number of streams on Spotify or the number of views on a TikTok dance. In art class in school, success can be quantified with a grade, which feels directly correlated with how well a student can apply a technique. I know art grading has changed since when I was in school, but then students who were naturally talented artists would achieve high grades and I would be stuck earning low scores. When you do not have the same skills at using a pencil as your classmates, your idea of success can become warped to one of comparison instead of motivation. While my friends could easily earn 100s on their masterpieces, on my report card, I distinctly remember a 2 out of 4 in two categories: desk organization and artistic skills. They were 'The Artists' of the class.

However, when I began to learn about photography, I learned that success in art does not have to be measured as a comparative grade to others. Art can be measured by how effective you interpret a theme or capture a moment or apply a specific technique. That is when I learned art does not have to be chaotic, subjective, and dependent on natural talent. Art does have theories and rules, just as science does. In art, it is just called elements and principles instead.

When reflecting on my experiences, it is clear that some art forms were more memorable than others. Mandatory art class in elementary school was particularly memorable, but not for the best reasons. Feeling overwhelmed by the chaos of being exposed to a new technique each week coupled by not being particularly talented at traditional art made me have a certain reverence for art. My experiences in photography were also memorable, but this time for positive reasons. I had an innate love and passion for photography which is why I could pinpoint exact moments. However, when art was not practiced regularly or just a fleeting whim such as dance or music, I do not have many memories associated. I think art becomes more memorable when I associate these memories with emotions, whether positive or negative.

It is difficult to define art. I could look up the definition of art in a dictionary and write it out for this assignment. I could ask an algorithm to generate hundreds of definitions of art. I

could ask the art teachers at my work how they teach the meaning of art to students, and yet, they would not get to the core of what my interpretation of art is. Art is simply what makes us human. Art is expression and human connection. Art is language and movement. Art can be a canvas as large as 'The Nightwatch' painting or as small as a singular note played in a symphony by a piccolo. So when I am asked to define the nature of art, it is asking me to define what it means to be human.

In a way, art is no different than science. Art follows a process very similar to the scientific method. Art asks questions about how we interpret the real-world. Art uses tools to interpret the world around us. Art collects evidence by studying previous masters of the technique. Art designs and creates models. Art makes sense of the real world by making a statement or conclusion. Art communicates those findings, just as scientists publish and present their data. Maybe that exact perspective is how I became labeled as 'The Scientist'.

I think that is where my past experiences have shaped my definition of art. I have always sought out science in the arts. Photography is, to me, the combination of science and art, after all. It is crucial for students to have experiences and to find the parallels and break the stigma of 'The Artist' and 'The Scientist'.