

Writing a short (maybe) and impactful (Yes please) artist statement

Presented by Ellen Fisher, NOS co-director, 6-2-21

The advice I'm giving here should not be taken as an attack on anyone's writing, or way of thinking about their art.

Any advice an artist hears needs to be taken with a grain of salt. You are the best judge of your work. But I hope that some part of it may help you focus on what drives your work, and how to express that in words.

The homework questions from the first "Artist Prep Letter" (sent to NOS artists April 2nd) can help you think through what your work is about. Some of these are questions I've heard Jay Sugarman ask, during his interviews on "Museum Open House" (NewTV weekly program)

Has your work followed an arc over time? Does it have a "through-line"?

Why *your* media? What makes the process exciting for you?

What are you trying to accomplish?

Who or what has influenced you?

What's next for you?

Ellen's 3 Rules

Rule 1 - What NOT to say.

Please don't start with "when I was a child"

don't start with "when I was a child I loved to draw" -- this is generally not what the viewer has come to your statement learn. Most artists have loved drawing since they were little, in fact most PEOPLE love to draw when they're little. Just as Most people have loved music since they were a tot. So, this isn't really telling the viewer anything they couldn't guess on their own.

Dont say "I Love" (enjoy, delight....)

Dont say "I love " ; I love color, I love light, I love nature..... Again not what the viewer has come to your statement to learn.

But for many artists its not necessarily wrong to say your art is driven by love of these things... if that's you, If it's REALLY important to you — if you feel compelled to say "I LOVE, then don't say "I love nature," but, "nature is sanctuary" or whatever nature is for you — dig for the WHY of why you love something.

Rule 1 can be restated as: Don't Tell the Reader the Obvious.

A viewer may never read your statement, but if they do, it's because they have already been touched by or engaged by the work, and want to know or understand more. So THAT's what you need to tell them. Don't tell them the obvious. But do tell them WHY you made this work. **Reward the visitor for the time they devoted to you.**

In relation to Branding:

If you MUST say that you love nature, or color or texture — and these don't feel like concepts you can tease apart and elaborate on — Just understand that this could be a

hard place to take a stand for branding; you are working in a VERY big pool of people who “love nature” or “love color.”

I downloaded 70 artist statements from the 2021 NOS website, and did some word-searches.

The word “color” appears 50 times (not including where it’s part of “watercolor”)

The word Nature appears 31 times

The word love...only appears 18 times but that’s probably 15 times too many,

Rule 2 - Tell a Story

The why is a form of story, even without a narrative frame.

If the Why is well told, it will stay with the reader.

If the Why is framed as an actual narrative, short and well told (a few words, not a few paragraphs), it can have impact that sticks with the reader.

It can be an implied narrative (see Kirkpatrick).

For my own work, the statement and storytelling starts with the title of the piece. Because even getting the viewer to look at the tag is moving a mountain. It’s a win that I want to take advantage of. And it’s also a place to redirect their understand of the piece, a place to surprise the viewer,

For me, working out a title is an important part of the work. is a way for me to wrestle with what the piece (or series) is about — to clarify it even for myself.

Souvenir

What I Fear in Dreams

Walking my father’s mind

What Water Remembers

Study cards for artificial flower assembly

These are titles that are designed to take a viewer to the artist statement, or to my website. This is in part because while I think my art is visually interesting and often evocative, there’s more layers to find, if you see the statement.

Understanding or Developing your story

Use the prompt questions .

Not just WHO influenced you, but also WHAT: What About this Person’s Work is important to you. And it may not be something you knew at the front of your brain, you might have to study the artists work, and remember what first struck you about it, often decades ago.

When to break the rules?

Never. Always find a way to dig a little deeper, and explain the word Love. Always find a way to make a childhood reference something that resonates.

Good Examples

Find examples of statements *you* think work well, and try to understand why they work.

Here are some great examples from NOS artists.

The first two examples actually use a “childhood” reference to very good effect.

Elizabeth Carter, 2017 NOS artist statement

When I was eight years old I saw Jackson Pollack’s work. I began to make miniature Jackson Pollacks to hang on the walls of my dollhouse. Thus began a life-long fascination with the expressive use of line and mark. The principle of qi — or energy force — that Asian cultures use as a principle in their calligraphic brush strokes, is integral to my mark making.

My art is the landscape of my childhood. I spent much of my time in the woods or at the beach. It is grounded in the natural world, and my concern about its continued viability.

I studied printmaking at Mass College of Art and received an MFA from the Museum School in printmaking and drawing. My graduate thesis exhibition was an installation with 12-foot tall drawings of trees, some on the walls and others freestanding. Black and white photographs of a stream flowed across the floor that was strewn with pine needles. The sound of the stream played on a tape recorder to create an immersive environment.

Today, I find that a simple line drawing can also be an immersive experience.

I have been teaching Foundation Drawing in RISD’s pre-college summer program since 1993. My emphasis is on expressive use of mark making. My teaching informs my work, and vice-versa. My current work includes drawings, monotypes, monoprints and collage. I try to create a mood, a time, a season, and an unexpected space — just as I did with my dollhouse as a child.

She’s using the dollhouse, Pollack, and also her childhood time spent in nature, as a framework—circling back to each before she’s done.

Barney Levitt, NOS 2021 starts his statement with this:

I’ve been creating ‘pictures’ ever since I was old enough to grip a crayon and scribble on my parents’ living room walls.

He’s using the childhood reference to conjure a comic scene, which, like Elizabeth’s, is likely to stick with me. And, if you know Barney’s work, fits right in with the joyful, impish character of much of his work. Later in the statement, he uses the word Love a couple of times, but, both times with an informative explanation.

I love the malleability of oil paints and create my paintings layer by layer, capturing in painstaking detail every nuance of my subject. I was greatly influenced by the works of the Dutch and Flemish masters, particularly Vermeer.

Much of my work is still life driven as it affords me total control of setups and lighting. I like working with 'timeless' objects, which give a sense of nostalgia to the viewer of a long ago era. Old radios, telephones and typewriters, rusted antique tools and glass bottles are often the subject matter of my work. I also love the reflective nature of metallic objects, which captures an image of me at work in my studio.

Will Kirkpatrick —

I am a realist oil painter interested in all such genres. I'm especially interested in fading light, new day light, nocturne, fog, rain, snow and in inclement weather, and in subjects in unusual light situations. I spend a lot of time thinking about centers of interest and composition before starting each picture.

Will's is **very short**, and has no "story," BUT in that short space he gives the viewer valuable info about what to look for in his images. ie— look for the quality of light. Look for Weather. Study the composition to understand choices he might have made.

He's helping the viewer see his work in more depth.

(No "story" — except there's an implied narrative, defining a person who apparently spends a fair amount of time out in inclement weather)

Fisher (me)

This is a 500-character-maximum statement for a submission, that was required to be in 3rd person. (There's nothing wrong with 3rd person — I've seen fine artist statements in 3rd person, tho I don't usually use it myself.)

This statement was for a specific set of complex images, and was tricky to write. It is exactly 500 characters, which means I took the shortest version I had, and then had to nip and tuck. You don't get to 500 characters by accident — but when forced, you can see extraneous words.

Fisher's artwork investigates perception and memory. Recent works are visualization aids; attempts to break down large numbers, in the hundreds of thousands, or millions.

Study Cards for Artificial Flower Assembly is a 200 image work in progress. Each image represents 100,000 forced or trafficked laborers, totaling 20 million laborers worldwide. The iconography refers to information from a US Labor Department report, listing artificial flowers as a product sometimes associated with forced labor.

Which brings us to ...

Rule 3— Shorten/find the essence, the essential

In this 500 character version, I'm making statements that, in longer versions, I do explain more fully. But here, even without the longer explanation, I still see implied narrative, which is: "these numbers and facts explain my work, and came from research." And, I am depending on the viewer to look at the work first, to see that the "iconography" is flowers, and to be curious about why there's text overlaid.

While this is a drastic example— having a 500 character limit for a very complex project— it's ALWAYS good to put the work aside when finished, and then go back and cut. There's almost always fluff somewhere.

It's also good to have short versions available, for times when they are required. No one wants to start a competition entry form, and then discover an hour before the deadline that there's a statement limit that's about a quarter the length of your carefully crafted statement.

Shortening Exercise: Try setting an arbitrary limit, that's maybe 10 or 20% shorter than what you think is great, and see what you may be forced to come up with. Maybe, try 500 characters.

Each time you shorten, it can help you get closer to the essence of what you want to say.

Then, you may find yourself expanding again in a slightly different direction... it's an iterative process.

Resources:

A great resource

The ArtLeague.org

<https://www.theartleague.org/blog/2015/08/24/8-artist-statements-we-love/>

Includes some lovely sample statements, and some good writing tips.

A terrible resource

Dont' just accept what you see out there as always being good advice:

This website for a pretty big artist representation gallery, has a jumble of TERRIBLE advice mixed with some ok advice

<https://www.agora-gallery.com/advice/blog/2016/07/23/how-to-write-artist-statement/>.

For instance, some advice that flagrantly breaks my “don't state the obvious” rule:

...Many visitors are interested in knowing about your artistic process. Describe your works; what colors do you use, do you make large marks or small marks, or do you use blending so there are no visible marks at all? ...