

Art Exposure Karen Bell

Creative work is a gift, he told us. What we do with it after it leaves the artist's hands is entirely up to us.

MY TWENTY-YEAR-OLD SELF staggered dehydrated out of the Mumbai sun and stepped sweating into the silent National Gallery to cool cross-legged in front of a [Rabindranath Tagore](#) watercolor. The perspiration on my elbows and eyelids had dried by the time the trundling curator stopped to chat. I slipped filthy feet into flip-flops and stood to ask about his favorite pieces.

He led me to a flesh-colored marble sculpture by Lallan Singh titled [Cactus II](#). The chunky cactus had the texture of a cantaloupe shell, with the exception of a suggestive smooth slit carved near the bottom of the sculpture.

"Very erotic. Do you see it?" The curator flashed teeth like an impotent wolf.

"Is the title a joke?" I frowned. This felt like a sudden test of art analysis skills. If I pointed out

possible genitalia, I might win a [shiva lingam](#) from the gift shop.

After introducing me to a primary-colored landscape with fertile rivers and voluptuous mountains, he pointed with a flourish and a schoolboy grin toward a pencil sketch. At first glance, the triangular graphite lines looked like a black-and-white photo taken from space, a crevice between granite mountains. I cocked my head and tried to make thumb or tongue or tail out of it.

Even curators succumb to projection, apparently.

Is it possible to look at art without projecting parts of ourselves? Can we have an undiluted emotional reaction without manufacturing meaning?

I asked my oldest friend, Danielle, these questions. What else are we supposed to do

with art? Hug it? Rub our faces against it? We shrugged.

When we were younger, Danielle and I emphasized quantity over quality of experience. We dragged our senseless half-starved bodies through the Louvre, waggled over what appeared to be human turd sculptures in the Tate, and shuddered past decrepit gilt babies in the Uffizi.

Danielle's husband, Skylar, has a different approach. As a professional artist, he values process over product. Creative work is a gift, he told us. What we do with it after it leaves the artist's hands is entirely up to us.

Recently, I found myself sitting on the floor of the Los Angeles Museum of Art underneath Henri Matisse's ceramic piece [La Gerbe](#). My new friend, Sage, was next to me with a sketch book open on his lap. His hair exploded out of his head like a dandelion.

I leaned over and whispered, "What do you like about it?"

"It looks like leaves."

"What do you enjoy about the process of drawing it?"

"I like that it is all my favorite colors." He bit the tip of his tongue in concentration and picked up a blue crayon.

"Anything else?"

"Just that it's awesome."

"That could be the most lucid art commentary I've ever heard."

Sage was Danielle's four-year-old son.

When he finished coloring, he took hands with me and his mom. With him we didn't have time to analyze or interpret. We accessed art at his emotional level and at his toddler-legged pace. Standing under squid-shaped glass sculptures was more fun with

a child who never hesitated to offer his gut reactions.

We spent two hours basking in an open air musical installation, *Gamelatron Sanctuary*, by artist and composer Aaron Taylor Kuffner. Sage plopped on a floor cushion to listen to the meditative gongs of robotic Indonesian instruments.

"I feel comfy," Sage whispered, and we joined him on the floor.

I rarely feel that kind of pure transcendence in public spaces. After a trauma left me with dissociative PTSD, which means I'm often out of my body when I appear to be in it, staying in the present is difficult. Sudden noises, murmuring crowds, or even free-form jazz can jolt me into a full body experience of unfiltered, unwanted memories.

My emotions were flensed and raw when Danielle and I explored the Buffalo Albright-Knox Art Gallery last summer. I was slipping into a triggered bout of nausea that felt like grief. The edges of my vision were blurring as a soft smother of flashback sensations skulked up from the floor and pressed against my chest, pushing me to relive past horrors. Danielle gently led me into the [Clyfford Still](#) exhibit where I was subsumed by an environment of floor-to-ceiling canvas. I breathed. Thick textured paint hushed screaming fractured memories and eased the pressure in my chest. My vision cleared. For the first time I had a condensed emotional response to cracks of color, to red fissures that directed my eye into expanses of monochromatic canvas. No projections or analysis necessary. My fingernails unhooked from the delicate skin of my wrist. My pulse slowed. And I breathed back into my body. ❖

