



Central Channel Man



She Is Like a Violin

An Artist's Lament: What to Do with It All?

CAROLYN SCHLAM

I HAVE A FRIEND WHO TRAVELS AROUND THE world with a light load—a computer, a few changes of clothes, a guitar, and that's about it. In a corner of my self, I am jealous of the simplicity of his life, the lightness with which he is able to greet a new day. He is unencumbered.

I, on the other hand, have a heavy load. And it is all of my own making. I am not a consumer-driven person at all. I don't covet things, rarely go shopping, and often think that if the American economy had to depend on people like me, deep recession would be upon us. So what accounts for my baggage?

I have been an art maker for most of my adult life. I have spent my days taking raw materials and fashioning my thought forms into substantiation . . . into paintings, drawings, sculpture. Things. Taking evanescent wisps of mental energy, momentary blips of impulse into manifestation, into something one might call art.

Now, after years of this practice, I am left with a conundrum: where to put it; how to move it; what in the world to do with it all. The detritus of my mind, the labor of heart and hand, my art, my life's work has become a problem, an issue, a dilemma, yes, a burden—dare I say ball and chain?

I know it is difficult for people who do not have this particular problem to see it as



Tree-She



Elinor

such. When someone makes a piece of art, it is something treasured, something to be protected. I felt this way, too, way back when I was young and thought of art as something so special, so essential to preserve. I remember visiting a rich relative who kept her Milton Avery in a closet because her walls were already full, and I felt outrage at the indignity of this. *You have a Milton Avery!* I remember saying in shock and awe, thinking that if I was so fortunate as to have one, I surely would find a suitable place for it.

But come to my studio today and you will find stacks of paintings creating a teetering tower, one falling over the other in a much less protected place than that closet, probably getting scratched and torn and otherwise harmed. A closet would be a much safer place for these works that I labored over for hours and days, some even months and years.

The studio I have today is not my first; I've had several. There was the lofty Women's Workspace in New York's Greenwich Village, my first and most memorable studio where I worked for some fifteen years after discovering the listing in a local paper for a studio space "for women only" that was but \$40 a month. That place was the most amazing and inspiring of all the places I have subsequently worked, and with that kind of rent and space, not to mention prices for art supplies in the seventies, I went big. Canvases four and five feet in length, filled with gobs of oil paint applied with big brushes. Am I painting you a picture? Can you visualize the stacks beginning to build?

I didn't ever think about moving, but when we were thrown out of that marvelous space due to rising real estate values, I had to, and a truckload of jumbo canvases went with me to the next studio. But not all of them. Moving means culling, and in every move, some of the lesser lights have to be sacrificed, thrown into a nearby dumpster. When I left the second space to move to Florida, I left a prized sculpture I had made in art school on the studio floor for the next occupant to find; I didn't have the heart to physically throw it away. It actually pierces the heart, at least for a moment, to hurl these children of your imagination into the gutter.

In Florida, continuing with my new obsession with glass, I acquired a kiln—a giant, heavy thing that would be something new to tote around with the art. Also, the panels and sculpture created in that kiln were inordinately heavy and breakable. I had discovered this new passion while still in New York and fed it in the hot oven of Urban Glass, a Brooklyn factory, never actually giving a moment's thought to the would-be byproduct of this creative fervor, these very breakable and quite lovely "things" I was now accumulating. They had to be wrapped and rewrapped and stored in plastic containers ready for transport. And they were super heavy—I was to discover.

But did this stop me, give me pause for even an instant? Not really. When I moved to New Mexico to join a cohousing community, I packed my bigger, much heavier bundle and called the movers. Oh yes, lots got left behind, got to continue living somewhere in the Florida heat, but the kiln came along, and with it the opportunity to continue making more and more and more and more heavy, glorious new things to store and pack.

Before I moved to California, where I am now—and hope to stay—I had a three-day garage sale where I happily unloaded lots of artwork along with furniture and other collectibles. Happy shoppers left with my labors of love for \$50. I begged friends to take works for nothing, and was thrilled when one offered to take my seven-foot wood sculpture of a man carved out of a charred log. He agreed to plant it in a spot near his home as a phoenix rising out of the desert. I have a picture of that sculpture with a bird sitting on its head, and it makes me smile, thinking that some creature is enjoying my work, even if just for a place to park.

Now I don't want to give you the impression that some of this artwork has not found proper buyers. My work has been exhibited in museums and galleries and other venues, posted in books—my own four published books and others as well—and sold to buyers who hopefully have placed it on their walls, though I am sure that some has also found its way into a variety of closets. But selling work is not easy. It takes an inordinate amount of time to get it out there,



The Red Bow

market it, and get it seen, and though I try, I get tired of all this promotion and just want to get back to the studio and work.

I've also tried giving it away. I would most happily give—donate—my work to organizations and museums and people who would like to hang it. To the average person this would seem to be a relatively easy thing to do, but it is, alas, not easy at all. It took six months for the people connected to the Cedars-Sinai collection to agree to take a painting, to finally find something they wanted, even after myriad near-begging emails. I want to give more away to other worthy donees—if they will only let me.

You'd be amazed at what I've tried—unsuccessfully—to give away. There's the stunning etched glass panel of a ballerina I offered to the Miami City Ballet. They couldn't think of a place to put it. There's the *Woman in a Box* sculpture made of wood and ceramic and glass and wearing a pair of doll shoes made in 1900 that I found on eBay. I wanted this to go to the Brooklyn Museum for their feminist collection. They demurred. Then there's the torso of an older woman I carved out of a hollow tree I found in the forest and lugged back to my studio and worked on for months and months. I even had a metal stand made for her. She's my *Tree-She*. I want her to go to Planned Parenthood or some other such organization, but she's still sitting amidst the clutter in my storeroom.

I've tried to give a work of art to nice people who visit my studio and admire a piece that happens to be sitting forlornly on the floor. A man recently seemed captivated by a work I had placed close to my easel as a candidate for rehabilitation, a painting with some good in it, but needing help. He found it charming as is. I asked if he would like to buy it. He said, "How much?" I said, "What would you like to pay for it?" realizing a moment after I'd said it that it was a terrible question as it put him on the spot. I followed with "If you like it, you can just have it." He looked stunned, said "thanks," and walked out.

I thought, *I can't even give it away* and then, *he doesn't know what to do with it either* and then, *a shame to toss it*. Sigh. Bottom line: it will probably get tossed. It really is a shame.

It would have enjoyed a much better life in this nice man's closet. At least it would have room to breathe.

Do you notice that I speak of these artworks in the familiar, as if they are living things? I plead guilty to this. They are alive to me as they are the result of some of the best moments in my life, moments when I was totally engaged and totally myself, utilizing all of the skills I have developed and honed over many years to make these "births" possible. They are not living per se, but they have a life by virtue of my own, and therefore I have affection for them, which continues to linger. They, all together, are my history, the story of my life, and in a way, I mourn for them as they pass into oblivion, as assuredly, someday, so too will I.

In the meantime, I continue to lug them around and pay to do so. Maintaining a storage space and studio is mucho expensive, especially as my income dwindles. In recent years, I've turned also to writing, which I love dearly as an activity, an artform, and for the meagerness of space it requires. I have written four books on art: two have been published and two soon will be, to my great satisfaction. I also have myriad other shorter writings, and they are marvelously all compactly stored on my computer. I don't have to even print them out for them to exist. They don't take up a sliver of space, and I never have to drag them around.

Only visual artists have this problem—especially sculptors. Sculptors need warehouses, aircraft hangars, giant three-story buildings. I love sculpture, but sculpture doesn't love me, and I've had to keep it small when I've dabbled in this most expensive art form. Thank goodness I lack the physical strength, pocketbook, and ego to go big because there's no way I could deal with the physical byproduct of being a sculptor, though there's nothing I would actually fancy more.



We do what we can do, isn't that so? Make compromises, adjustments, bargains. The truth is that I'd like to work on really big canvases, hire models every day, buy gallons of paint and glorious sheets of colored glass. I'd like to do

so much more than I have. I'd like to have help, would love to win a grant, have an assistant make these canvases, have a marketer and a gallerist sell them, and a consultant to give the best works away. I'd like these things so very much, but it's probably not going to happen. At least I can't count on it.

There are people who recognize this issue. I remember when the Dutch government came up with the benevolent idea of storing their artists' works in these huge government warehouses. Now that was an amazing idea. The problem was . . . there was too much. Too much art.

It's hard to stop an artist from continuing to make art for the simple reason that we never feel we get it quite right. We have an idea and try to realize it, but we always are just a smidgen short. So we have to go again. And again. And again. And before you know it, we've run out of room.

So what in the world do we do? I come back to that. And the answer? We grapple.

We make more. We stop. We toss. We worry. We try to give something away. We try another medium. We organize. We cull. We get a great new idea and start something new. We sell something and invest the windfall in a couple of sheets of expensive glass. We look around and the pile has grown higher. We make something we love, then add it to the pile. We tidy up, put the drawings in glassine envelopes. We can't just stop, or can we?

Being an artist is a life that requires a lot of motivation and self-actualization. In exchange for the utter freedom to plumb your heart and soul in an unregimented way, we have to pay the price. And the price is this stuff that can become a burden and a pain.

The truth is—and the Buddhists who make sand art know this—the meaning of art is in the doing, not in the result. The resulting work of art, beautiful as it may be, is only a hint of the fascinating, glorious process that went into

making it, those hours of rapturous absorption, those minutes of discovery, those bubbles of delight when it all works and makes sense. We must learn to live in these moments and detach, as much as we can, from the after-parties.

I have a dream that all my creations will find homes and will fly away to find their proper places. I will take one home to remember the rest. The ballerina will be in the ballet studio, and the students will glance at her when they come in for class. Women will walk by the case with my *Woman in a Box* and stand and study her, thinking she is of another time. A light from the ceiling will pierce my *Tree-She* torso, and people will stand around, seeing the aged beauty, the wabi-sabi of her form and surface. A beautiful dream. ☪

After reading this, if you've got some suggestions about what to do with it all or are willing to help, please get in touch (write to me at carolynschlam@aol.com). At the moment, I'm into consolidating and keeping the load as compact as possible, doing more writing, more teaching, and, I guess, more concentrated, less frivolous work. I'm actively trying to limit my output while still creating, just going smaller, more nitty gritty. Truthfully, I don't know what else to do, and until the day comes when that dream is realized and I am ready to walk away, the mountain of art climbs ever higher.

—Carolyn Schlam



Woman in a Box

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