



Gouache portrait of Matt Morris by Eric Ruschman

Farewells and Final Fantasies

A writer and artist reflects on the Cincinnati arts scene

MATT MORRIS // AUG 31, 2011

I moved to Cincinnati a little over eight years ago. Now I'm moving to Chicago to return to academia and to give myself a much-needed span of time to turn inward and concentrate on improving my art and my writing.

During my Cincinnati years, I began to exercise my public identities as a writer, an artist and a curator for alternative-arts spaces. Each role has given me a voice to contribute to aesthetic discourse, but, somewhat unexpectedly, the trifecta has also

cultivated a multifaceted empathy for all the hardworking individuals that make our local arts what they are. A very small number of people with limited resources expend enormous effort — often in the hours between day jobs that pay their bills — to cultivate wonder and challenge the way we see the world.

I've always retained a personal interest in philosophy and art theory, but over the past four years of writing for *CityBeat*, I've found that theory necessarily morphs in order to be usefully applied to real-life encounters with art. A number of ideas — epiphanies or otherwise gradually wrought — emerged that have shaped my experiences of our local art scene. I've been invited to share them here. The following guiding principles will surely shift for me in a lifetime, but they are my “tells” in how you've read me approaching art, and hopefully they'll also offer some insight into our community.

Art is research and not “edutainment.” While there might be spectacular elements, I believe art is akin to other progressive research, say in physics or psychology. As such, I am excited by an element of struggle in experiencing artworks from any period. I've found that sometimes my initial impressions are totally off base, and that if I'm willing to give art — even static objects — longer stretches of time, unexpected things start to happen.

Since art explores and problematizes, I never have the expectation for it to be tidy or pretty, but I do demand beauty, even in the most cerebral work.

There is almost nothing that I'm predisposed to dislike in art. I am continually surprised by where I find thrilling, strange, unexpected beauty. But no matter what an artwork looks like, art that poses inquiries and then proceeds to answer all of its own questions leaves no space for the viewer to become involved in the experience. This type of work is an unhelpful closed circuit that instantly puts me off. I want art to expand ideas, continually question and spark dialogue with the viewer. I stay open to any experience that invites my mental participation.

I'm skeptical about how significant the back-story is to an experience of an artwork. This runs against my Marxist grains a little bit, because I'm usually very invested in socioeconomic readings of any situation. But my experience, on the beat as an art critic, has left me sensing that who the artist is or why they think they produced something usually gets in the way of their art's maximum potential.

Having gotten to see Cincinnati from the vantage point of several different roles, I am most protective of the artists. I am cautious about projects that appear to support artists but actually pull them away from their “true work,” the practice of art-making that is set deeply inside of them. I believe the best way an artist can contribute to a healthy society is to be empowered to go on the journey of making the work — with all the doubt and struggle and sublimity that comes into a studio practice — and then share that with an audience.

I’ve seen that artists in Cincinnati are endlessly generous, always donating works to your good causes, leading crews of teenagers to paint your buildings and giving more of themselves than they can afford to. Even when there is compensation, I think there is an element of sacrifice involved.

In the wake of individual artist grants being struck from the budget of our local government, I entertain a fantasy of an organization stepping up to fund intense summer residencies for local artists to make their own work, with teams of assistants helping them to create ambitious new projects, and exhibitions and venues already lined up and publicized. Enabling them to go deeper than they might otherwise will reap rewards from which we as viewers benefit.

That there isn’t a program quite like this locally might speak to a collective loss of faith in the capabilities of contemporary art and artists.

Also, those who support art need your support any way you can offer it. Nearly all smaller, alternative art galleries are funded by those who operate them, and a number of them have chosen not to take any commission off of the sale of art, so as to function as a totally artist-friendly space. They lose money monthly in order to bring art about which they feel passionately into public view.

Likewise, I know few gallerists in commercial spaces who don’t work second jobs to help support their galleries. Even when they are making sales, their first mission is usually to share something significant with their community. All I mean is that, in this town, little is materially gained through these efforts beyond the belief that we are edified through the act of looking.

I’m grateful to have been given the chance to share my impressions and ideas with you, the reader, for a few years. No doubt I’ll pop back in to write a piece here and there in the future; I’m not relocating all that far away.

I hope I've drawn your attention to corners of our art scene you might not have been familiar with and offered additional ways to consider what we might have thought we understood. I could have filled this page with my deep gratitude for many individuals who have supported and mentored me. I'll assume instead that all of them are reading and sign off cosmically. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Matt Morris will be pursuing a Masters in Fine Arts in Art Theory Practice at Northwestern University beginning in September. He has been contributing to *CityBeat*'s arts coverage since 2007.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13011193/farewells-and-final-fantasies>