On Cows...
and other things

pphillips8@elon.edu
paultravisphillips@gmail.com
www.paultravisphillips.com
@paultravisphillips

Abstract

On Cows and Other Things is a hybrid essay that blends personal narrative, philosophical critique, and conceptual observation to examine how uncritical consumption—of media, meaning, and even memory—erodes authenticity in contemporary culture. Anchored by a recurring image of cows chewing cud, the essay explores the tension between digestion and understanding, mimicry and emergence. It draws on lived experience, including the author's reflections on illness, marginalization, and artistic formation, to expose the ways individuals are trained to repeat pre-digested ideas rather than develop their own.

The piece critiques the recursive, self-replicating logic of capitalist attention economies and social mimicry, revealing how people—particularly artists—are often rewarded for simulation rather than sincerity. Through metaphor, metacognition, and fragments of absurdist insight, the essay pushes back against the cultural flattening of inquiry into content. It asks what it means to think for oneself in a landscape of simulations, and what must be risked in order to do so.

At its core, *On Cows and Other Things* is a meditation on authenticity, absurdity, and the search for a kind of thought—and art—that cannot be passively consumed.

Intro...

To reference my mother's current side hustle obsession—crocheting—the thread I'm pulling on here is one of metacognition. I am attempting to observe, participate, and pontificate simultaneously. And I am well aware that if I pull too hard and too long on this thread, the entire damn thing might fall apart. I do not want it to fall apart. I love it so much, just like I love the sweaters, blankets, pullovers, and hats my mom has made.

Farmer Ellis owned 70 acres of cattle. His property shared a fence line with the retired farm property where I grew up. Our kitchen window looked over the fence that separated our property from the cows' grazing land. Our house provided the herd morning shade and dew-filled mouthfuls of soon-to-be cud. A byproduct of not having air-conditioning meant that many morning meals were interrupted by the stench of freshly flowing cow shit wafting through the open kitchen window. At first, this was a highly unwelcomed occurrence. More than once did I "leggo my eggo" due to their odiferous output. However, in time, the regularity of their defecations lost novelty, and their ubiquitous productions were reduced to mere background noise. Before long, the creatures became endearing.

The grazing land adjacent to our home became a sort of extension of my yard. For my dad, it served as a convenient rough that saved his wayward golf balls from rolling down the quarter-mile-long hill and filling the pond at the bottom, becoming the equivalent of neon balls clogging the concrete ponds at putt-putt. For me, it was a dreamland of large fields with tall grass filled with jumping, flying bugs and ponds full of fish that I routinely taunted with the bugs skewered on the end of half rusted hooks. The woods surrounding the farmland were littered with posted hunter signs that read, "NO TRESPASSING." These signs ensured that I was the only one tromping about in the thicket.

When we first moved to the retired portion of this farm, my older sister quickly took to walking the fields and naming each of her new furry heifer friends. Naturally, she was particularly fond of the calves. I spent my time hiding in pokeweed forts that I built and scattered across Ellis' property as a means to be undetectable to both her and the herd. The trick, I discovered, was to snug the structures up to a tree, fence, or slanted shed where the cattle would frequent for shade or to scratch the itch on their hindquarters. Lining the exterior of the pokeweed walls with grass provided a deeper layer of camouflage. Often, this drew the cattle in so close that they would begin consuming the walls of my dwelling while I lay in hiding, holding my breath to protect my nose from their steaming fermented snorts.

In the summer, when it came time for Farmer Ellis to bale what the cattle couldn't consume, the creatures were "relocated" to another part of his property far out of sight. My forts were soon plowed, and the fields were trimmed bare. A few weeks later, different sorts of fun emerged: relocating piles of earth to make bike jumps, bashing soccer balls around in the fields, chasing snakes, throwing rocks down abandoned wells, or attempting to get lost in the woods—all the while knowing the smell of the grill would soon serve as an aptly timed evening homing beacon.

That first summer, while chewing a particularly juicy bite of a burger fresh off the grill, my sister asked, "Where are the cows? When will they be back?"

She didn't name the next herd of cattle.

I, however, was undeterred. My game pressed on, herd after herd. In time, I learned that decaying weeds lack sustainable structural integrity. As a result, I was afforded ample opportunity to test various materials and designs. With each fort, I learned from my failures. I reassessed my materials and discovered better techniques to accomplish my goals. And... my forts grew. Eventually, they functioned as kid-sized yurts and were camouflaged well enough to fool even Farmer Ellis. A truly successful series of structures eventually took shape, enabling me to routinely move between forts without detection from heifer, human, or hacker.

This stealthy game was great fun until the bull was introduced to the new herd.

He was a territorial ass motherfucker who saw straight through the shabby shacks that had previously helped me evade detection. He embodied every stereotype my adolescent mind knew of bulls. He was dirty. Always brooding. His balls bounced off his backward-turned knees when he walked. A constant drip of condensation fell from his septum ring, formed from his never-ending blighting breath.

And...
he was always on the lookout.

I stopped wearing red that year...

...to no avail.

From that point forward, a clear divide was established at the fence line. If the bull was in the field, I was not.

I learned a fair amount about cows from laying in hiding, from observing, from building, from failing, from rebuilding, and from fleeing. Cows (not bulls) are gentle and kind. They startle easily. But mostly... they're pretty dumb. I mean this in a practical sense. They are largely quiet, unassuming, and passive creatures. However much we like to teach our toddlers, "The cow goes 'mooooo,'" mooing is not a primary occupation in cow culture when left undisturbed. Based on my adolescent observations, cows enjoy killing time most by chewing, meandering, regurgitating, and chewing some more. Their shit fertilizes the soil where their sustenance grows in a never-ending cycle...

Consume, shit. Consume, shit. Consume, shit. Consume. Shit. Consume. Shit. Shit. Consume.

Shit. Consume.

Some cows have preferences for other cows. Others aren't particularly fond of any. But no cow is complicated. No cow is complex. No cow is all that interesting. Despite popular opinion (and apparently countless scientific studies claiming these creatures are intellectually "on par with toddlers and primates"), I found it difficult to conclude that cows are all that intelligent. The idea that alien life forms might visit Earth to study these grazers instead of humans is a hilariously satirical B-grade sci-fi trope for a reason.

Eventually, Farmer Ellis sold his property to a developer who cleared the pastures where I built my forts and leveled the forest where I used to get lost. Soon thereafter, house after suburban house popped up. Asphalt was poured over my bike paths, serving to connect this house to that. Little families with good incomes and nice hobbies moved in. The yards behind my soccer field now hosted windows that could break. The fishing holes were repurposed into collections for residential runoff, and peeing behind our barn became an enforceable offense.

In short, my time of hiding, exploring, and observing had ended. New neighborhood road signs ensured that I could no longer get lost. And the brooding bull that stunted my freedom was replaced by brooding domestics with potted plants and a plethora of plastic seasonal décor.

As the new residents mindlessly meandered in their Bermuda-based backyards, it occurred to me that as one type of cattle left, a new type of cattle came.

My in-law is the alleged artist in the family. I write this in jest. They are a nice and kind person… let's make that clear. Much like the nice, kind domestics that invaded my childhood backyard. And you should definitely buy one of their paintings to hang above your couch from the farmer's market. Maybe they'll post a selfie with you as their patron! I think their booth is in between the freshly slaughtered organic veal tent and the family playing spoons. Their art will make your repurposed, upcycled, shabby chic side table poop… I mean pop!

They only recently took to pushing paint around, but they already have a wide assortment of works for you to choose from—farm-friendly landscapes mixed in with "whimsically unnamable" abstract this-or-thats. Each piece is conveniently tailored to accommodate the presumed preoccupations of its potential buyer, a flimsy nod to artistic intention.

Meanwhile, I have spent my life immersed in the field—studying it, advocating for it, expanding its discourse. Yet somehow, *they* are the artist in the family. I have a master's degree in this shit. They have a background in high-end auto sales. I have a few museums exhibitions under my belt (complete with an apparent giant fucking chip on my shoulder). They once had a piece hanging in a now-defunct boutique on the outskirts of their suburb. I teach contemporary art full-time. They frequent Pinterest when Google image searches come up dry—dry, I assume, because the same recycled images keep surfacing from the same circle of people regurgitating the same *inspirations*. Or perhaps because the soon-to-be-reproduced compositions have already proven their ability to rack up scrollable "likes," while conveniently aligning with their pre-scripted, performative persona.

And so, they perpetuate a problematic cycle—reproductions of reproductions with slight alterations of some now-uncitable source.

Cud chewing cud chewing cud…

Am I the bull?

Often, when they "art," they take nice pictures of their paint-splattered feet in front of an out-of-focus work-in-progress and post the image with a delightful caption that declares how hard they are working at being creative. Cute little personified names are given to their WIPs, such as "this sweetie." And the obviously discernible mistakes are dubbed "delightful drippies". Unintentionally deformed perspectives of

lone boats and grotesquely altered anatomy of farm creatures—frequently cows—are passed off as expressively unique and creatively abstracted.

Nevertheless, they are the artist. And I am the asshole ever brooding over my tiny little territory of bullshit.

If you are curious, a quick Google search of "how to abstract art" will help paint in your mind how they art.

In 2015, Jerry Saltz took aim at the superficiality infecting contemporary art, no doubt drawing from Baudrillard's *Simulacrum Simulacrum*, particularly in his critique of what became known as "zombie formalism." When I first read Saltz's *Zombies on the Wall*, I didn't picture artworks devouring each other like some gory horror flick, with one artist's piece cannibalizing the legacy of another – a Limping Jacob Kassay offering a Robert Ryman one last blurry self reflection as he slips into everlasting whiteness perhaps. No, what I imagined was far more banal—herds of cows lazily chewing cud, unknowingly masticating the same rehashed ideas in the digital fields of Pinterest and Google Images. These digital platforms, like pasturelands, offer up an endless stream of easy-to-consume "inspiration"—content already digested, regurgitated, and spat back out to and by countless others. It's a closed loop of visual mimicry that lacks any real sustenance, originality, agency, or risk.

The process of feeding on this visual loop is akin to the fast food that Ellis' cows became: quick, filling, and forgettable... that is until the reflux kicks in. Google Images serves up ready-made, easily replicable trends, perfect for regurgitation in the next cycle of "content creation". Superficially engaged artists, like cows chewing their cud, run the risk of continuously "consuming" the same safe, marketable ideas just to spit them back out in slightly altered forms- altered most often by incident and/or accident. It's the antithesis of meaningful artistic digestion, where ideas are absorbed, transformed, and articulated in a new, significant way – or a deeply personal expressive way. Instead, we get this endless churn—art that may appear alive on the surface but is hollow, trapped in a cycle of imitation.

In my art classes, I often refer to the "crappy coffee house cow painting." If you're from the American South, you know exactly the kind I'm talking about— It's a basic bust of a dumb looking creature, suspiciously domesticated, cute, probably kind and cuddly, and they have a nice little hidden hobby of regurgitating and chewing cud... a lifeless, overly sentimentalized docile cow. Its creator, like so many others, has likely scrolled through the same Pinterest boards, looking for easy-to-digest content to

reproduce. There's nothing inherently wrong with cows as subject matter or such paintings hanging in community coffee shops—I'm certain with the right conditions, context, and/or intent cows could make amazing subjects. But paintings of cows rarely do. Instead, these caffeinated cows are part of the broader field of derivative, lifeless art that populates casual searches for "artspiration." And once you've seen one deformed, "creatively abstracted" cow painting, you've seen them all. Each iteration is just another form of regurgitation, passed off as something new because of a slight change in color palette or mark making.

These overly processed creations lose their likeness to any authentic motivational source, and they lack any real depth in terms of form, content, technique, or intent. This is why I bring them up with my students so often. Being art students in the rural South means they often get lumped in with these Sunday hobbyists when they tell people they want to be artists. The assumption is that they'll make cow paintings too—shallow, clichéd works that hang in local coffee shops with tiny red dots on the label indicating that a supportive friend of family member felt guilty (or had pity) during the reception. No wonder they feel unseen and misunderstood.

But my students aren't hobbyists. They take their practice seriously—not *serious like cancer,* but serious in that they pay close attention to the world around them and respond in kind. They're learning to speak a nuanced visual language, one that allows them to articulate ideas and emotions through materials and techniques that would otherwise remain inexpressible. Their decision to major in art is a commitment to this lifelong practice—a path that demands constant reflection, experimentation, and growth. Yet, when they share their aspirations, they're often met with skepticism: *"How do you plan to earn a living?"*—which is really code for, *"No one's going to buy your cow painting."*

I know this line of thinking sounds hierarchical. Consider that fact acknowledged. But—though I don't usually brood this openly—I've been feeling irrationally bullish lately. The reality is, different degrees of engagement and commitment exist in any field, including art. And those degree differences matter. This isn't about ranking one approach over another but recognizing that motivation shapes the work itself. **Intent matters.** Creative intent guides creative action, defining the conditions and context in which the work operates.

That difference is stark when my in-law is asked to describe one of their pieces. Instead of offering genuine insight, they retreat behind flowery words and quirky behavior, fishing for whatever subject matter might make the patron fawn. Because saying, *"I found something like it in a Google search, and it superficially resonated with me. Rather than exploring the maker's intent or interrogating my own, I took a screen grab and made my own version,"* won't fly. Neither will, *"I wanted to make trendy paintings to match your Ikea couch."* So, they bullshit until something sticks.

Once I shared my thoughts on cow paintings with a friend pursuing an MFA in creative writing, and they offered a familiar argument: *"Any act of creation should be celebrated, no matter where it comes from."*

It's a tough point to argue against—mostly because that's not my aim. I agree that creativity is inherently valuable. The simple act of making something is a deeply human pursuit, one that should never be shamed. But that doesn't mean that everything made is *art*. Nor do all forms of art operate in the same way or have to be appreciated universally. And that's actually a good thing.

Expecting every creative act to be qualified in the same ways places an unnecessary burden on makers of all kinds, as if every decision must be the mark of a genius. It generates unwarranted pressure, squeezing the space where curiosity and exploration thrive. In my experience, the most compelling ideas emerge precisely from that space—the unknown, the uncertain, the uncharted. Some of those ideas lead to questions and learning. Some, lead to interesting conversations, and some lead to art.

When truly exploring it is well known that mistakes will be made, time will be lost, paths will be abandoned, and provisions will be spent. But in time, interesting features will be found, insights will be developed, and experience will be had. From the exploration new stories emerge and new paths (some logical and to the point, others meandering and overly complicated requiring topographical maps and tour guides) are formed. And here, it is important to note that not everyone is engaged by exploring, discovering, and sharing. Some prefer sightseeing along prescript paths. And good for them. They're staying health. And likely are taking up other meaningful work such as maintaining the trails, advocating for public lands, or rejuvenating so they can do other unrelated work. None of them, however, are deluded to believe that simply because they are hiking, they somehow *discovered* the trail. Nor is it reasonable to assume that they will attempt to copy the trail onto their own property and call it their own. The landscape is simply too varied for that to be remotely feasible. Paths respond to and are built from the landscape they are in. And this holds true for the motivations that govern art production. They are shaped by the terrain of an artist's inner world—their experiences, inquiries, and obsessions—just as much as they are influenced by external forces. A path forged through genuine exploration carries the imprint of the journey itself, while a path merely traced from another's map lacks the depth of understanding that comes from firsthand engagement. This is why art born from true exploration resonates differently than art that simply mimics familiar routes. The former reveals something new; the latter only reinforces what is already known.

What I'm advocating for isn't a hierarchy where some forms of making are "better" than others, but rather a recognition of the different motivations that drive making. These motivations range from casual hobbyists seeking self-expression to dedicated practitioners trying to push the boundaries of their medium or developing new mediums that enable them to expand the boundaries of their ideas. It's a spectrum, not a ladder, and the motivations behind the work determine where it falls on that spectrum.

Precision of articulation matters here because knowing and articulating one's motivations can lead to greater creative freedom. When an artist understands their own driving force, they're less likely to get lost in the noise of digital trends and easy solutions. Instead, they can engage with their practice more intentionally and more deeply, making work that resonates with their own experience and vision, rather than just feeding on pre-processed inspiration.

Unfortunately, in our overly branded, utilitarian society, everything needs a justification. This mindset seeps into private time, infecting even the smallest actions—ironically leading to less doing, more passive scrolling. So, when art materials show up, so do assumptions about what must follow. And it's worth noting: odds are, you're surrounded by paint right now. Not paintings. Paint. On your walls. Slapped on by a painter. Maybe it's a neutral eggshell white. Maybe it's a sassy sage. Either way, no one is calling it art. Materials are just materials. Sometimes they serve a function. Sometimes they solve a problem. And sometimes—when pushed, prodded, and questioned enough—they become art.

To this end I often use an analogy to the medical field with my students. My family is speckled with healthcare professionals—nurses, pharmacists, researchers. When my child falls and scrapes his knee, I clean the wound, apply ointment, and bandage it. In this act, I'm performing similar tasks to a healthcare worker, but I'm not one. My motivation is care and concern, while a doctor's motivation is more oriented toward diagnosis and treatment. Both actions are valuable, but they're not the same, and they shouldn't be conflated. They are informed by different degrees of investment in different motivational sets. I am deeply invested in my child, his life, his interests, the qualitative nature of his experiences. And when he hurts, I hurt. A doctor, ideally, is invested in knowledge of the human organism and its homeostasis, in rectifying imbalances through the use of the appropriate materials, tools, and techniques needed to heal. Though both sets of motivations are ideally net positive, the results are substantively different in meaningfully discernable ways.

Similarly, when my brother-in-law works on his beater of a classic car, he's doing many of the same things a professional mechanic would do. He's knowledgeable, skilled, and passionate about it. He would

make for a very reliable and effective mechanic. If he were to become an auto mechanic by trade, his relationship to the work would change. The pressures of making of making a living from it or working to solve other people's problems instead of his own would alter his motivations, and by extension, the results would be different in drastic ways.

Ought naught the same apply to art then - where it is acknowledged that the motivation behind the work alters the intent of the process and, therefore, the outcome?

Unfortunately, in a culture that prioritizes instant gratification and easy solutions, it's no surprise that so many artists default to the path of least resistance—Google Images, AI prompts, Pinterest trends. And this fast-track approach might seem effective if the results weren't so frequently hollow, lacking the depth that comes from truly engaging with one's motivations and ideas. No manner of ass-backward bullshitting can justify everything that has been made as being art in the same way. Sometimes, things are made just because it's fun, or helps distract the maker from other life pressures, or helps them build build focus, or pass time, or stay saine. Owning the relationship that govern what's being made—rather than feeling pressure to label everything as A-R-T—creates immense freedom. When everything is framed as art, regardless of intent, it generates artifice rather than authenticity. And that artifice breeds confusion.

This confusion isn't just theoretical; it creates real frustration for those who have dedicated their lives to art as well as those who haven't. Many artists—myself included—find ourselves growing defensive, not because we resent so-called "bad art," but because vastly different relationships to making are being flattened into the same category. When someone says, "I'm so tired of seeing bad art," they're usually reacting to this very frustration—or to an assumed pressure to take their work in a direction that conflicts with their personal relationship to making. The issue isn't simply whether something is "good" or "bad," but that serious, intentional engagement with art is being lumped together with casual, uncritical production. It's especially frustrating when the latter is preemptively and defensively propped up by vague, flowery descriptions designed more to appease patrons and curators than to communicate genuine artistic intent—because too often, it works. The result? An environment where meaningful artistic development is overshadowed by shallow mimicry, and where creators feel pressured to justify their work in ways that don't align with their true motivations.

This pressure is exacerbated by the way "art" has been positioned at the top of an assumed creative hierarchy. If art is seen as the pinnacle of human expression, and that pinnacle is equated with value, then naturally, everyone will want their work to be considered art. As a result, "art" gets tacked onto everything:

The Art of Climbing, *The Art of the Deal*, *The Art of Manliness, The Art of Shopping*... again, you get the idea. The term art has been diluted to the point of near meaninglessness creating an environment wherein the best tasting bullshit reigns supreme. And let's be clear—terms need boundaries to retain significance. Today, everyone wants to be associated with art, but few want to put in the effort to truly discover where or what their art is. This makes sense. It's hard fucking work. Rather than face the discomfort of digging deep to understand their motivations, people apply the label thoughtlessly, reducing its significance. And thoughtless people meandering through the meadows of mass media see that label and eat it up with an "moo" and an "ahh."

My issue with my in-law being dubbed "the artist in the family" isn't that their work is illegitimate. Our motivations are radically different—and that difference shows. We put in different levels of dedication, reflection, and effort, yet we're categorized the same. Only they get the "credit," because what they make is already familiar and easily consumed, while my work asks something more—from both me and the viewer. That conflation doesn't just frustrate me—it creates confusion. For my family. For anyone who's truly committed their life to their craft.

It's even more frustrating that when I voice such concerns, I am often interpreted as elitist. I'm not. I simply value understanding. And I understand that there are vast differences in a multiplicity of activities, both related and unrelated to art. Acknowledging these differences isn't about gatekeeping—it's about clarity. And clarity has the potential to free makers from unnecessary pressures while allowing art, in its many forms, to be engaged with more honestly.

By acknowledging that not all creative acts are the same, does it not actually open up to more opportunities for curiosity and ways of relating to our activities ? Simply put, similar actions with similar materials can yield vastly different results, and those results are valuable in their own ways. Just as my role in bandaging my child's knee doesn't make me a doctor, my in-law's relationship to what they make doesn't mean that much more is being engaged with than a possibly healthy pastime. Judgments aside, defensiveness and inauthenticity erode personal health not only for such makers, it creates an overwhelmingly toxic environment for all involved wherein everyone has to pretend they aren't tiptoeing around a plethora of cow patties. Distinctions matters—not to create a hierarchy, but to foster a deeper understanding of why we make what we make, why we do what we do, and how we can do it with greater intention. If occupying one's time in healthy ways was valued, then it would follow people would invest accordingly. But something gets twisted when the word art gets thrown on the table.

My mother is a relentless busybody. She's one of those rare people with two jobs—one for practical purposes like bills, the other for fun! But even that's not enough for her. In addition, she manages a revolving door of animals, one paw-claw-talon-tail short of a domestic zoo. She cares for her 98-year-old mother, oversees the medical needs of the family (too many to count), and always has an all-consuming project that demands all of her time and energy. We often pick on her about the time she took statistics for fun at the local community college, only to follow it up with various foreign language courses. The house soon became covered in sticky notes: "puerta" on each door, "perilla de la puerta" above each doorknob, "puerta abierta" on each door frame. You get the idea. If she has downtime, the house gets turned upside down. "This couch goes here, that room goes there." At one point, she even wanted to start a cockroach farm to feed her leopard gecko, reasoning that homegrown roaches would be healthier than those from the pet store.

And then there was the time she cut down a perfectly healthy tree in the front yard. Not because it was in the way, not because it was dying, but because—well—trees grow, and one day, someone might have to deal with it. "Might as well take care of it now!" she reasoned.

The next weekend, she was out looking for stump diggers and replacement trees.

To be clear, my mom is great—way more impressive than any of y'all's moms.

After years of quilting, gardening, and language-learning, she landed on watercolor painting. And like everything else, she went all in. Soon enough, postcard-sized paintings filled every surface that once hosted Spanish labels and textbooks. She experimented with styles, techniques, and subjects. Now, everyone she knows gets gifted her work as postcards, holiday decor, or framed memorabilia. "I'm not very good at coming up with ideas," she says, preemptively defending herself whenever she shows me a new piece. "But if I can see it, I can make it!" So, she scrolls through Google Images, YouTube tutorials, and other platforms that teach people how to replicate specific birds with certain color palettes on particular types of paper using the "correct" brushes (conveniently linked in the description). These tutorials (seemingly intentionally) fail to teach what she's looking for: how to use techniques to explore personal motivations and translate them into original artistic expression. Instead, they push her down seemingly intended dead ends. Possibly because the YouTube tutor is simply staying "on trend" and as a result merely copying what they see other tutor influencers tutoring. And those dead ends are peppered with pressures (both internal and external) that keep her coming back. And when she returns, she clicks the links in the

descriptions and finds herself buying the suggested goods thus ensuring that the tutor will continue cranking out dead end content based on someone else's like history.

She's accumulated an absurd number of paint palettes as a result, each because some tutorial recommended a specific hue—cue the infamous Bob Ross capitalist complex, where the "happy accidents" come prepackaged with a branded set of paints conveniently linked in the description.

Technically speaking, my mom is quite good. Her work is leagues ahead of most of my students when it comes to drafting and handling materials. She makes cards for every special occasion, and family members even come to her for commissions. She's even won best in show at a local exhibition. And like many artists, she's never satisfied with what she makes, which is why she keeps painting the same things over and over.

Her dissatisfaction, however, is different from mine. She's frustrated by tiny technical mistakes only she can see; my frustrations lie in whether my work sparks new ways of thinking or helps me understand something I currently don't. As a result, I'm happy abandoning a body of work once I've learned what I need from it. For her, however, technique has become both the goal and the source of insecurity. So, there's an itch in the back of her mind that her work should "do more," and the pressure she places on herself saddens me.

I'm a total mama's boy, and I will stand by her and for her, entirely, forever. But let's be clear: my mom is engaged as more of an art technician as it stands. And to be even clearer, that doesn't make her work any less meaningful. On the contrary, she's staying healthy and sane, creating things that bring joy to the people around her. In this way, she loves more deeply and intentionally than most. Many professional artists, including my closest colleagues, don't get to experience those luxuries at all. She's saving the world in her own way. And honestly? I'm jealous—people often appreciate what she makes far more than what I do, and they display it proudly in their homes. How rad is that?

I just wish she could value the relationship she has with what she makes instead of feeling pressured to fit into a relationship she doesn't want. She's always been a maker—quilts, crafts, jewelry, gardens, clothes. The list abounds, and now it includes paintings. It sucks that suddenly she feels pressure for what she makes to be *more.* What she makes is awesome. It is good for her and for those around her.

This broad, catch-all approach to defining "art" frustrates not just me, but my mother and in-law too. We each make for different reasons. But when all creative efforts are lumped together under the same label, we lose sight of those differences—and that's where the confusion (and unnecessary pressure) begins. Because the differences and distinctions determine the operation for both the maker and the viewer. In the end, our underlying motivations are largely deterministic. They establish how we approach our work and what we produce. And while not everyone has the time or focus to truly understand their own motivations, those who do can find themselves capable of spending time making work that transcends the easy, pre-packaged answers offered by the digital world.

The worst-case scenario is for makers to feel unnecessary pressure around everything they create. That kind of pressure stifles curiosity and exploration. Suddenly, it is assumed that each sketch must be as impressive and impeccable as those contained in Davinci's overly curated, decontextualized and overly sensationalized coffee table book. In the face of this assumed pressure, many makers turn to Google Images and how-to videos, searching for something that resonates to replicate. But that doesn't have to be the fallback. Art or not—what matters most is the authentic human experience. This is what we need to prioritize over everything else.

When I was in high school, my mom supported my interest in art but was also concerned. She hated the idea of me becoming a starving artist, and rightly so—who the hell wants to starve? She was also quietly concerned with my output. "Why can't you paint something happy for once?" she'd ask, probably while staring at one of my moody AF self-portraits or alien-esque landscapes. What I didn't know how to articulate at 14 is something I understand well now: art, for me, has never been about materials, techniques, or garnering external approval. Rather, materials and techniques have always simply been tools that enable me to explore untapped mental content. For me, making has always been a place to process what can't be expressed in words alone. And at the time... our home life was a wreck, and I needed to process it. So, I wielded the techniques and materials I had access to in attempt to explore the ideas and to experience the experiences I needed.

As a result, I learned early on that the kind of art I was interested in wasn't the kind most people "got." When I created work that did align with their expectations—a still-life of a single rose for my mom, a pen drawing of my grandmother—they responded kindly, with comments like, "Wow, you made that?" But these compositions never sparked the deeper conversations I was craving. However, when I made work that didn't conform to pre-scripted ideas of what art should be, the conversations were meaningful and collaborative, forging connections that extended beyond the piece itself.

This realization led me to a broader understanding of art: it's not just about what is or isn't art; it's about the different ways art can operate. Those focused on perfecting technique are doing something impressive, but their goals are different from someone interested in social intervention or emotional healing, or gamification, or capitalistic gain. A designer looking to sell their work will emphasize different aspects in their compositions than someone driven by personal exploration.

I often tell my students, "What you make in art class—especially in intro courses—isn't the art you think it is." They hate that. But the truth is, most of what they're doing is problem-solving within a structured environment. Real art-making begins when they start defining their own problems to solve.

The goal of art school, after all, is to prepare students for a life of independent art-making, where they're no longer reliant on prompts from instructors. Ideally, they should graduate empowered to value their motivations and work through their ideas freely, without unnecessary external guidance or pressure. In the end, my goal as an educator is to render my "prompts" essentially useless and/or uninteresting to my students—not because I've become disengaged, but because they are equipped for their own exploration wherein, they are excited to test possibilities, experiment with different approaches, observe, learn, get lost, discover and eventually share. Education gone awry operates as a standardization model, eclipsing the interesting ends of the bell curve of creativity and curiosity by promoting conformity to conventional, predictable behaviors through rote memorization and disengaged action. It dumbs down curiosities and creativity reducing makers and thinkers to calm cattle carelessly consuming cud grown from the ground of last season's mouthful.

Shit, consuming shit, consuming shit.

The field is vast, the cud plentiful, the cows chew without thought, their jaws working in steady, mechanical rhythm and the field of art is not the only victim. So it is with the modern consumer of mass-produced, prefabricated media—content crafted not by experts, but by opportunists, attention merchants, and digital charlatans who peddle sensation over substance. They do not question the origin of what they consume, nor do they wonder whether what they regurgitate has any nutritional value left. They simply chew, swallow, bring it back up, and chew again... and when "inspired" they might even contribute to the shitstorm a little also. The consumer, like the cow, digests without question, regurgitates without scrutiny, and ultimately feeds into an endless cycle of intellectual waste.

First comes ingestion. The bite. The easy-to-digest, algorithmically optimized, emotionally charged headline. It slides down smoothly, requiring no real effort, no critical engagement—just a click, a scroll, a passive nod of agreement. Then, just as quickly, it is regurgitated. The cud comes back up in the form of a social media post, a comment section rant, a dinner table regurgitation of someone else's talking points. It is chewed again, this time with added indignation, a sprinkling of personal bias, maybe a dash of embellishment. But it is not new. It is not original. It is the same half-digested cud, reworked just enough to feel fresh to the one chewing it.

And then comes excretion. The waste product of this endless cycle of uncritical consumption and regurgitation seeps into the cultural soil, breaking down it fertilizes the next round of misinformation and manipulation. The field becomes saturated with the intellectual equivalent of manure—piled high, unavoidable, and eventually indistinguishable from the fresh grass beneath. And the cycle continues. New grazers wander in, sniff around, and mistake the excrement for sustenance. They consume, they chew, they regurgitate, and the cycle repeats, on and on, ad infinitum.

This is not a metaphor for some fringe behavior—it is the defining feature of modern media consumption. The endless chewing of prefabricated narratives, the recycling of the same outrage-baiting claims, the wholesale swallowing of convenient falsehoods without a second thought. The entire system is designed to keep people grazing in the same field, consuming the same waste, mistaking the cud for critical thought. And like the cows who never leave their enclosure, they remain within the fenced-in pastures of their chosen ideological feedlots, never wondering what lies beyond.

Breaking free requires more than just spitting out the cud—it requires leaving the field altogether. It demands active seeking, deliberate questioning, the ability to taste information and decide whether it is worth swallowing in the first place. Without that, we are nothing more than a herd, chewing endlessly, regurgitating the same pre-digested ideas, all the while sinking deeper into the field of our own making.