Paul Roehl

It seems to me that art was always just an extension of my imagination or a way of making real what was playing out in my mind. My dad worked in a commercial printing plant and brought home huge pieces of paper that I filled up with drawings of what I remember as naval battles with ships and planes and parachuting soldiers. I don't think I ever thought of it as making art but simply part of the act of playing. I suppose if there was any parental encouragement it was for the sake of seeing me occupied. I'm not sure my parents ever encouraged me to make "art" but I was never discouraged either. I remember two pivotal childhood experiences in picture making. In the second grade while working at easels with other students and slopping tempera on newsprint, I noticed one student, Darryl, actually using light and dark on his image of a tree in such a way as to make that tree seem to appear three dimensional, and in that moment I had a kind of staggering realization, an epiphany, that has perfect clarity even today as a memory. It was the advent of a kind of visceral understanding about the illusion of space on a two dimensional surface. The other experience was at the age of ten using a Jon Gnagy drawing kit. Jon Gnagy was a kind of pre Bob Ross television drawing instructor taking his audience step by step through the process of making a drawing and selling little drawing kits that included wonders such a s kneaded erasers and pencils of varying softness that seemed to me to be almost magical. My childhood picture in this exhibit is, in fact, an image from the Jon Gnagy kit that included a demonstration of the wonders of creating snow and trees and mountains all with the playground of my own infinite yet very personal space.

It really wasn't until the sixth grade that I understood the notion of art making as a "thing" when in class once a week we listened to a radio show of music relating the national parks and students were encouraged to draw pictures of those parks from their imaginations based on the music. I remember then the attempt to create something beautiful and how fulfilling that act was.

At that time I don't think I had any understanding of what might be called "preconceived notions" of what art should be. Any artwork that was good or had quality as a child, thought no doubt subjective subjective and filled with bias, seemed obvious as a consensus among children. Art was just art and understood as such.

Call it arrested development, but I don't think I've ever gotten past that point in my own work. I've never really felt the need or desire to "return" to the experiences of childhood as a source of creativity because by and large they still seem to be with me in the joy of invention and play in my own exclusive little world. Making "art" is still, to me, very similar to building roads in the dirt for my little cars when I was eight.

I do believe teaching is problematic for the artist because it consists largely of helping students make creative decisions that tend to tire one's own creative spirit making it difficult to go back to the studio and feel fresh and enthusiastic. This is one reason I sort of naturally fell into teaching art history classes, as they seemed to have almost exactly the opposite effect. As a teacher of studio classes I always tried to create an atmosphere of ease in which the process of making was something of an act of play. The art teacher's role is a strange compromise between technician, creative consultant, evangelist and motivational speaker; it's tough and I'm done.