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Carving Out
A Life

with
JEAN PRONOVOST

A portrait of Jean Pronovost, a man with long dark hair and a beard, smiling at the camera. He is in a workshop with a pegboard background holding various tools. A large white sculpture is visible on the left side of the frame.

GROWING UP WITH THE ARTS

An amazingly versatile sculptor, painter and muralist, Jean Pronovost made a name for himself in Quebec, the rest of Canada and abroad. Teatricus sat down with this amiable and dynamic artist.

When it comes to Jean Pronovost, the odds of becoming an artist seem to have been tipped in his favor. His mother, who taught art history, was able to give him a love of the arts, which turned him into a voracious reader on the subject. Before long, he developed a real passion for the visual arts, especially sculpture and painting, which, he says, "I did out of sheer joy". During his twenties, Pronovost moved to Montreal, where he would work in the film and advertising industries for five years as a set dresser, a trade he found interesting in many respects. He still contributes to the film industry as a prop designer, even if from a certain distance: "As anyone who's ever been on a set knows, work conditions can be harsh. Hectic schedules, difficult management decisions at times, these are only the tip of the iceberg." However, the artist acknowledges that the set can also offer great experiences. One that he particularly enjoyed was working on the set of Denis Villeneuve's very intriguing short film *Next Floor* (2008), which happened to be his last on-set experience before fully dedicating himself to what he loved the most: sculpture and painting. Though he had been practising both on a regular basis since the age of sixteen, financial stability issues gave him no choice but to put the dream of making a living from them on hold. The time had come to turn that dream into reality.

STRIVING TO TURN DREAMS INTO REALITY

To make a living as an artist, Jean Pronovost was willing to move heaven and earth. Though there were plenty of struggles on the way, his tremendous work ethic earned him contracts, which in turn provided him with the money to enhance his practice (airbrush tools, paint, oil, etc.) In this, he was trying to follow the footsteps of old masters such as Rembrandt and da Vinci: "To make a living, the old masters also had to secure contracts. To that end, they worked for kings and other wealthy patrons who had a taste for the arts. I told myself that I would follow their footsteps, and yet I wasn't too sure how to go about it. After all, I come from a family of five children whose parents were highly educated [His mother taught art history and his father taught philosophy], but certainly not acquainted with the wealthy! I had already learned at a young age that hard work was the way to reach my goals, but I still had not figured out how to make a living as an artist. Despite all this, I knew that it was my calling, and I was determined to follow it." But Pronovost did not start devoting himself full-time to his artistic career until his back was against the wall: "Most of us have to have our backs to the wall to realise how unsatisfying our day job really is, and how much happier we would be making sculptures and paintings, playing the piano, growing orchids or doing a million other things for a living.

Personally, art has been my salvation, my liberation." An explorer of ancient and modern material-processing techniques, self-taught Pronovost always strives to come up with new approaches to sculpture and painting. Though he may be an unconventional artist, he hones his craft with a set of refined techniques that produce exquisite, symbolically resonant works of art. He draws inspiration from the ancient civilizations, whose wonders he takes in not only from books, but also from visiting ancient and little-known archeological sites. Currently, the painter/sculptor devotes as much time to creating as he does to teaching, the latter being of great importance to him. Indeed, teaching his craft to both young and older students and being told by a lot of them, their eyes gleaming with passion, that they always dreamed of doing what he does for a living is gratifying: "As an artist, seeing their enthusiasm soar as I teach them the basics of my craft can only fill me with joy. It's also interesting to note how easily the starving artist image that we are all familiar with can be dispelled by ordinary people realising they have artistic abilities from which they can, and do, make a living! By focusing on our craft and making the necessary sacrifices, we can all make a living through art!"



Painter & Sculptor Jean Pronovost

THE CURRENT STATE OF ARTS AND CULTURE: A PERSONAL TAKE

Nowadays, it seems that artistic ideas cannot be broadcast and works of art cannot be displayed without relying on government grants and exhibition rooms, but Jean Pronovost disagrees. He substantiates his opinion by drawing from his own work experience while in New York: "An agent there suggested I get in touch with Brigid Marlin, who is the founder of Society for Art of Imagination. To make a long story short, we got in touch and she asked me whether heading the Canadian division of this alternative arts society sounded like a good idea to me, which, of course, it did. Once in charge, I sought to bring together artists from Quebec and the rest of Canada that specialized in visionary art, which is a distinct type of figurative art. And as soon as I brought them together, we started the Canadian division of the Society. During the three years that I handled the project, I was able to organize an exhibition in Montreal and another one in Cuzco, Peru. Both of them were organized with a volunteer administration and without government grants." In essence, if we do not want to depend on grants to make things happen in the art world, we have to make the most out of our professional relationships. Besides, everyone knows that grants are not guaranteed. And they are even less so to artists, as Pronovost found out when he applied for artistic purposes (he never received one). And yet, when he did for business purposes, he was given a large number of them, some generous enough to buy tools: "So, from a business standpoint, it made sense to offer me a grant, but from an artistic standpoint, it didn't! What makes this even stranger is that some sculptors who did obtain one still sought my help to bring their work to life", he says utterly baffled. Besides grants, there is also patronage, for which the main challenge is obviously attracting serious patrons (a rare breed according to Pronovost). This is due to the fact that most of the work done in arts and culture is not mainstream, but rather fringy. Nevertheless, he believes that attracting patrons is worth a try, even though he is not convinced that there really are serious ones in Montreal or in Quebec. In any case, the artist thinks that if things do turn around, it will be because of courageous people who are willing to take risks. Speaking of risks, he has a difficult time understanding why today's artistic and cultural productions are considered risky: "Why do we always display works of art from artists who died several centuries ago instead of creating groups and events that feature living artists from all over the world who can inspire people just as much? It shouldn't be too difficult to do."



TAKING CARE OF CULTURAL MATTERS

If nobody is willing to make room for today's artists, maybe it will be up to people like Jean Pronovost to open a venue dedicated to them: "I could create a small gallery. Of course, I would use it to exhibit my own work, but it would still be devoted to today's artists. I could also use the venue to introduce interested people to the technical aspects of sculpture." Although he does not wish to point fingers at anyone, the artist does think that some of the larger aspects of his craft are rather unpleasant: "Being able to display our work

is difficult, because it means abiding by pre-established standards and sharing half, if not more, of our earnings. Plus, the market is so bad that a lot of us feel compelled to almost give our work away. Sure, we have to pay rent, but we can't expect culture to flourish in Quebec or anywhere else that way. We have to roll up our sleeves, even if the workload is obviously enormous. And yet, everyone knows how important art is to society. Everyone knows that the cultural message of art is one of beauty, hope and sensibility."

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUALITY

It is widely known that the artistic life requires one to venture off the beaten track. In order to produce works of art, many well-known abilities and attributes (e.g. sensibility, the ability to concentrate and to visualize) need to be cultivated. In addition to these, artists need to develop certain aspects of the inner life which may seem frivolous to some. One of those is spirituality. In its broadest sense (not necessarily the religious sense), spirituality can be understood as an aspect of the self that is nurtured by intense—and often personal—internal struggles with existential matters, large and small. For serious artists such as Jean Pronovost, spirituality is highly important: "Spirituality is deeply related to our innermost life. When I work, I usually do it alone, and that solitude fosters self-reflexion and self-examination. Over time, this has made me spiritually richer. Also, spirituality enhances sensibility, that attribute which, it seems, makes society so uncomfortable that it'll rip it out of us and throw away if we display it! And yet, a deeply spiritual artist is capable of creating numinous works of art, the kind that really draws my attention. These works can transcend the ego, transcend that oh-so-natural tendency to always aim for the top." Clearly, spirituality plays an important role in artistic creativity.

Jean Pronovost leaves us with some advice for those who really strive to turn their dreams into reality: "Never back down, believe in your dreams and put time and energy into them. You never know what miracle you can pull off by doing so. Simply put, believe in yourself and in the arts. I know I truly do."



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