

SAM GILLIAM, JR.

The Transformation of Nature through Nature (1986)

Graduates, Mr. President, teachers, proud parents, and other guests: Ever since I was asked by Bob to address this illustrious group, I have been filled with a certain sense of pride and anxiety. One, I have finally made it to Tennessee, and, secondly, there is nothing more responsible than speaking to a group of artists who are about to embark on their maiden voyage in a great occupation. I have sat in many audiences where one has bemoaned the artist. Thus, I have come to praise the role he plays as a transformer of nature. I have also come to challenge the process of that transformation to greater heights.

Robert Henri, in his book *The Art Spirit*, a collection of lessons and orations given to his students, encouraged them to "Keep your old work. You did it. There are virtues and there are faults in it. You can learn more from yourself than you can from anyone else." I have always used this quotation to my students and particularly to the group of students I have taught the past two years in a seminar course on survival. I like its meaning in that it proposes that the work that you have done is a treasure chest that should be savored. The work that you have done is much like a knapsack of your anticipated belongings. The work that you have done is also a crystal and when held up to the sun will radiate the aspirations of the whole of society whom it is your intention to serve.

Let's look at the artist in this way. They tell me that once upon a time in a very mythical land that was filled with small huts there existed a huge volcano. It had an amazing fire that came from within it. This was such a great fire that it kept the valley warm, lighted and always with pleasant weather. What was not known was that behind the volcano was a team of little people armed with bellows and logs fanning the fire and making it blaze higher. These little people formed a long lineage. I will name only a few: Rembrandt, Leonardo, Monet, Van Gogh, Eva Hesse, Cézanne, Pollock, Avery and many others. And now you have been called to join that team. For the illusions, the spaces, the forms that you create will keep your fellow persons warm, lighted and always in good weather.

I am reminded of a statement that was made to my class when we graduated from the University of Louisville in the 1960s. We had been blessed by having a very great teacher who had taught at the Bavarian Academy in Germany. Unfortunately, he had been captured and placed in a concentration camp as an artist during WWII. He mentioned to us how he had run and hidden in order to keep his life. He also mentioned how in appreciation to whatever being that kept him alive, he drew every day while on the run. He said his reasons for drawing were to keep his memories of life alive. He pointed out that even when captured and placed in prison, he made art in his head to keep his sanity. And how upon repatriation, he afforded himself a trip around the world, mostly to check out if things were still the same and when he was assured that things were, he went back to making his art.

However, this time he resumed his art with things from Japan, India, Greece, etc., in a

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Sam Gilliam with indoor and outdoor paintings, 1967-78.

crazy quilt way. He also said that one of the things that entered his work was the figure of a Centaur and that this symbolized for him the mythical aspect of being the artist. Hence, among Greece, Italy, India there stands the mighty Centaur. The most special thing that I remember from this period of my life was that he suggested, "Keep on working. For in the work you not only see, but you also help others to see."

He said during this time he had one complaint. That in Munich were he had taught, he had taught many students who had great talent. However, when he visited them, many had gone on to become teachers of art. And, of course, they readily showed him the work of their students. And when he asked for their own work, they said they had stopped. This, young graduates, shocked the old man and hurt him. He said, "You, by stopping your art, have erased the Centaur from the work. You have allowed the fire to go out." An artist must stay an artist. For without the artist in him, he cannot see and others cannot see through him. . . .

It is said that at this time in 1986 there is a lull in art, that the thing that was sought in Post WWII years by many immigrants coming here has been lost. It is said that even the sense of this land as honored by the Hudson River School is lost from American art. What has come to replace this great inheritance is known as rampant commercialism and production. It is suggested that there is not a transcendence between the public and the art, that only a special group counts. It sounds like Sodom and Gomorrah reigns in this mythical land with the gigantic volcano.

Many of us have come to recognize the absence of the Centaur, the lowering of the light. But do we recognize, more specifically, the possibility of losing the nature of humanity in this way? Do we realize that there is a need for the artist to act as an artist? Where does this come from?

I guess the most immediate answer is contained in something I have already expressed earlier in this speech. That is of the professor who even though on the run, made drawings, who even though imprisoned, kept art alive in his head and who upon release went

taur as a symbol of himself, as an artist to remind himself that the artist was still there.

Picasso in his series about the artist and the model keeps himself there. Rembrandt in his self-portrait keeps his presence in art. My teacher chided his students for not keeping themselves present as artists before their students. Now, I challenge you that the most important thing you must do is to keep the artist present in you, keep the artist present in your work, to use the artist in you to secure you on the nights when you have to run and hide, to keep the artist in your presence and mind in times when you are hostage to situations, difficulties, like bad grades, and keep the artist in you even though you cannot work as an artist. You are coming aboard the Grand Armada. You have first watch. The nature of nature is your quest. It is the only way that the valley can be warm. It is the only way that the valley can be lighted and it is the only way that the valley can have good weather.

I have not been around the world as my teacher had, but I have found a clever way to climb aboard the Grand Armada and to experience the world. It is something I figured out in 1962 when I first came to Washington. I realized that in any day I had four hours I could go to the National Gallery and walk the entire gallery which extends some two blocks and look at paintings, allowing trails of man's existence to criss-cross and interface in various beautiful rhythms. In four hours one can see all of the paintings in the National Gallery. I remember that one: "In order to see a painting, one must be a painting." Thus, having remembered this, I know that the nature of man as defined by art is in me. Secondly, in many hours alone in a studio I have often thought about such trips. . . .

Thus, I want to say to you, as the artist, you are nature. I must say that you as the artist must always make new work. You as the artist must keep the Centaur present. You as the artist must keep the fire blazing.

It is the hope of the world. More importantly, it is the hope of America; it is the hope of Tennessee. It is the hope of each individual that we are immediate to.

We are, as was Georgia O'Keeffe, or as are Louise Nevelson, Frank Stella, and many among you, avatars, all of whom, including you, have chosen to transform the sense of nature through yourselves for others.

Let me end as I have begun. "Keep your old work. You did it. There are virtues and there are faults in it for you to study. You can learn more from yourself than you can from anyone else."

Represent the Centaur. Stock the volcano. Good luck. God bless you all.

Hello and Good-bye to you all.