

Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Instructions to Painters & Poets by Lawrence Ferlinghetti

I asked a hundred painters and a hundred poets
how to paint sunlight
on the face of life
Their answers were ambiguous and ingenuous
as if they were all guarding trade secrets
Whereas it seems to me
all you have to do
is conceive of the whole world
and all humanity
as a kind of art work
a site-specific art work
an art project of the god of light
the whole earth and all that's in it
to be painted with light

And the first thing you have to do
is paint out postmodern painting
And the next thing is to paint yourself
in your true colors
in primary colors
as you see them
(without whitewash)
paint yourself as you see yourself
without make-up
without masks
Then paint your favorite people and animals
with your brush loaded with light
And be sure you get the perspective right
and don't fake it
because one false line leads to another

And then paint the high hills
when the sun first strikes them
on an autumn morning
with your palette knife
lay it on
the cadmium yellow leaves
the ochre leaves
the vermillion leaves
of the New England autumn
and paint the ghost light of summer nights

and the light of the midnight sun
which is moon light
And don't paint out the shadows made by light

for without chiaroscuro you'll have shallow pictures
So paint all the dark corners too
everywhere in the world
all the hidden places and minds and hearts
which light never reaches
all the caves of ignorance and fear
the pits of despair
the sloughs of despond
and write plain upon them
"Abandon all despair, ye who enter here"

And don't forget to paint
all those who lived their lives
as bearers of light
Paint their eyes
and the eyes of every animal
[...]
and the eyes of men and women
known only for the light of their minds
Paint the light of their eyes
the light of sunlit laughter
the song of eyes
the song of birds in flight.

And remember that the light is within
if it is anywhere
and you must paint from the inside

[...]

Turner painted sunlight
with egg tempera
(which proved unstable)
and Van Gogh did it with madness
and the blood of his ear
(also unstable)
and the Impressionists did it
by never using black
And the Abstract Expressionists did it
with white house paint
But you can do it with the pure pigment
(if you can figure out the formula)
of your own true light
But before you strike the first blow
on the virgin canvas
remember its fragility
life's extreme fragility
and remember its innocence

its original innocence
before you strike the first blow

Or perhaps never strike it
And let the light come through
the inner light of the canvas
the inner light of the models posed
in the life study
the inner light of everyone
Let it all come through
like a pentimento
the light that's been painted over
the life that's been painted over
so many times
Let it surge to the surface
the painted-over image
of primal life on earth

And when you've finished your painting
stand back astonished
stand back and observe
the life on earth that you've created
the lighted life on earth
that you've created
a new brave world