Newport ARTS: Not an Oxymoron

Culture

Noun

1. The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.

In the days after I entered a psychiatric hospital in Laguna Beach for depression and chemical dependency, in between my schedule of group therapy and 12-step meetings, I’d look out the window of my second floor room and watch the wind shaking the fronds of a stubby palm tree in the parking lot. It was August of 1990 and I was twenty-years-old and suicidal. I was by far the youngest patient, most of the others were Canadian men in their fifties who’d been shipped to Southern California by their socialized medical care because the Canadian rehabs were full. The sky was endlessly blue and the sun cast a glittering light on the windshields of the parked cars. Every once in a while a seagull flashed by. People came and went, driving in and out of the parking lot. I was so scared. How would I get
better? What would give my life meaning and purpose? How would I survive?

One afternoon I watched a brown rabbit hop between the labyrinth of parked cars, pausing to stare back at me for a long while, then hopping again, finally disappearing behind a bush near the palm tree. I’m wary of signs and awakenings, but a realization came to me, along with my first real glimmer of lasting hope: I would get better and find my way, partially by burrowing further into words—reading and writing—and finding my god and comfort and security through art.

I tell you this not to be overly dramatic or maudlin (to be honest, it’s somewhat weird that a rabbit triggered this epiphany, and not something more profound), but because I believe that for people like me, art is not only important, it is also essential, the difference between life and death.

I have a passionate love-hate relationship with Orange County, specifically Newport Beach, which is my literary terrain.

By reading, writing, and immersing myself in art, I found relief and escape from the vapid culture I’d been aimlessly self-destructing against: the finger-wagging, materialism-endorsing Christianity; the insularity and
conformity; the overwhelmingly white Republican demographic; the emphasis on wealth and sports; the limited prospects for women raised with trophy wife expectations; the superficial priority of plastic surgery-enhanced youthful looks.

I also found that I had a voice. I realized that stories and art could directly, courageously and rebelliously examine and transmit lives, real and imagined, offering power and resolution, direction and morality, all without the easy sentimental bromides that I so mistrusted. By engaging with art and devoting myself to it, I had an answer. My world expanded.

So be careful when asking an artist whether local governments, cities, and municipalities should endorse and foster the arts. Of course they should: With money and energy and passion, they should give unlimited support. Art defines our culture and our very lives depend on it.

Orange County is the sixth most-populous county in the United States, and unlike most counties, there’s no defined urban center, so that its suburban communities exemplify the landscape, conveying a somewhat neutered impression of how people live there. Tourist destinations like Disneyland and Knott’s Berry Farm further contribute to a dreamlike, cartoonish and sterilized image. Named for the citrus fruit
and its long gone groves, the OC used the commercially beneficial image the name conveyed (think orange crate labels showing snowy peaks and glowing citrus fruit) to lure its earliest settlers, thus beginning a now long-standing tradition of parlaying a fantasy. Around the world, the OC conjures a simplistic capitalist utopia. There’s also the consumer apotheosis of the upscale South Coast Plaza, the largest mall in California, and the third largest in the United States.

Yet the OC is also a cultural center. Musicals, operas, plays, museums, libraries, we have them all. To name some of the cultural markers: Segerstom Center for the Arts, the Modjeska House, SOKA University, the abundance of art galleries and festivals in Laguna Beach, the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, and Santa Ana itself, which is becoming an artists’ haven.

But as a teenager living in Newport Beach, my cultural experience was restricted. I went through junior high and high school in Newport (go Sea Kings) without a single class trip to a museum or library, or a single art history lecture. Had I been exposed more to the arts, had I experienced that expansive thrill and connection, much of the pain and loneliness that hospitalized me at such a young age might have been avoided. I’m not blaming all my
problems on Newport. Believe me, I’m aware of their source and live with it: me.

But the thing about Newport’s culture: There’s a particular emptiness or hollowness. It’s so beautiful on the outside, but when you look closer, it’s unsettling.

I’m reminded of my high school friend’s house, a mansion, really, three stories, and right along the bay, with an elevator. Her mom had an interior decorator create a library/study with leather chairs and a mahogany desk and Tiffany lamps. One day I perused the bookshelves and found that the gilt-edged pages of the numerous classics—some with covers in French—were empty: Blank-paged leather-bound props pretending to be the real thing. The supposition must have been that no one (besides an angry, searching, rebellious teenager) would ever open the books. Their looks are what mattered—how they made the study seem learned and sophisticated—not the content.

Those with the most wealth and business savvy, I have learned from Newport, do not necessarily have regard for the arts. In fact, often there’s disdain and disrespect for the artists and performers in their communities.

Yet what I also love about art is its unruliness, and how it will manifest with or without support, in defiance, like those hearty weeds that grow through the cracks of
cement. Make art that’s too governmentally and bureaucratically supported and approved, and it risks becoming what art is not: pandering, one-note, clichéd, safe.

In other words the ideal is to give money and support to artists and accommodating institutions, without regulating, demanding, or censoring. Without desiring specific results. Without understanding art, give and give more.

The best art demands radical empathy. It expands our imaginations. “The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification,” the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in the early 1800’s. “A man,” Shelley continued, “to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others... The great instrument of moral good is imagination.” This seeking for expression is imperative and must be supported.

I’m the first to admit there’s far more bad art than good produced, but it takes time for discernment and all of it—bad and good—is required. Art is mysterious and cannot be defined. Support art, leave it alone and let it flourish.

I have high hopes for Orange County’s cultural future, especially considering its growing diversity. Latino
residents now make up over 1/3 of the population; Asian residents 18%, and over 45% of residents speak a language other than English at home, and 30% are foreign born.

I often write about the engine of workers—the waiters and busboys, hairdressers, gardeners, nannies, and such—in Newport who keep the area beautiful and functioning. Often brown and working class, one of the job requirements is servile invisibility, but this is changing too. Education plus diversity equals strength and lends itself to radical transformation.

Also Orange County didn’t vote Trump, the first time since the depression that this beacon of Republicanism hasn’t gone red. In the land of Nixon and Reagan, Clinton won by 5 percentage points, or about 39,000 votes. It appears many of Newport’s one per centers opted not to vote for a racist and misogynist conman-candidate. This surprises me, especially considering the proliferation of Trump signs I witnessed while visiting my mother, and gives me an unfamiliar pride and hope.

Regardless, a Trump presidency benefits the same one percenters who didn’t vote for him, further expanding the already disastrous wealth gap. How long before that civil arrangement between the haves and the have-nots collapses?
Newport, where only the wealthiest can afford to live, leads the way toward this collapse.

Trump’s presidency also signals a cultural vacuum. I couldn’t have created a fictional president more opposed to the arts if I’d tried. Yet Trump can’t and won’t extinguish the arts, which flourish underground when necessary.

The cultivation of art is essential and beneficial to our welfare and existence. Art and creation co-exist, and while they’re both difficult to define and express, it’s this complexity and challenge that makes art valuable and meaningful. As the novelist Gustave Flaubert wrote:
“...fullness of soul can sometimes overflow in utter vapidity of language, for none of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars.”