

## Finding Your Voice

by Carla Sonheim

As artists we long to have a style that is uniquely our own. Sometimes, though, it can be difficult to recognize that common thread in our work, especially when working in mixed media and exploring so many different techniques — AND being influenced (in this digital age especially) by so many different styles of art.

In this PDF I hope to explore several ways we can begin to identify and ferret out our own “styles.”

### **My Experience**

When I was 30, I took a monotype printmaking class at a local community college. At the end of the semester, we gathered our work for a group show/critique. I remember being slightly envious at all of the other work; everyone seemed to have a unique style except for

me. My prints seemed all over the place; animals, faces, flowers, trees... color, black and white... and to me, it all seemed so random. I couldn't see a thread.

So when it came time to talk about my work, I said as much.

Boy! Several in the class looked at me with dumbfounded looks on their faces, and then assured me that I DID indeed have a style....

And when I looked again, I did begin to see the thread of "silly and serious" working through all my prints! I just needed someone to point it out to me.

Still, a few years later after taking many different art classes, I again began to feel anxious that my work was "all over the place." Every media I tried seemed to produce something completely different, and in frustration I decided to limit myself to one media for awhile, in order to try and build a "body of work."

I decided to paint a series of 3"x3.5" faces using just watercolor, pastel and black ink:



1,300 faces later, and my “style” was clearer to me!

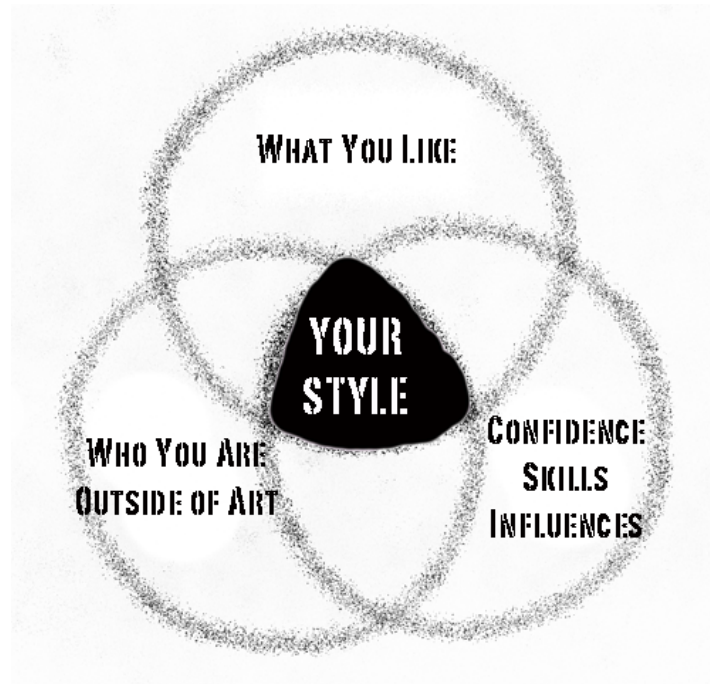
In general my faces were “cute” but not “cutesie.” Also, none of my little people were smiling.... It’s not that they’re unhappy, necessarily, it’s just that I thought of them as getting caught “off-camera,” at a moment when they didn’t think anyone is watching and, perhaps, the moment they realized that life is not really fair. ;)

In general, all of my characters since then have that same look:



My style!

## **Three Parts Make a Style (Working Theory)**



This idea is still in the “working” stage, but I’ve been thinking a lot lately that our individual art styles are loosely the combination of

WHAT WE LIKE,

WHO WE ARE,

and

WHAT WE’VE DONE.

PART 1:  
**WHAT DO YOU LIKE?**

I think one of the first things to consider is what it is you LIKE. This can be divided into three questions (you can print out this PDF and write answers/notes on the pages, if desired):

1. What do you like to draw or paint? People, animals, landscapes, abstracts, cityscapes, trees?
2. What materials do you like to work with the most? Do you like/hate getting your hands messy? Do you love glue? Hate glue? Must you be able to erase? Pencils, paint, collage, photography? Or would you rather sculpt? Dance? Sing? Write?
3. Finally, what is your favorite kind of art (created by others)? Realistic? Cartoons? Contemporary Illustration? Old Master Paintings? Messy, neat, colorful, or muted work?

Even if you feel like you “love it all” there will most likely be some commonalities. :D

PART 2:  
**WHO ARE YOU?**

The second things to look at, I think, is who you ARE outside of your art studio.

In general (and remembering that nothing is black-and-white), are you

patient or impatient?

slow or fast?

simple or detailed?

big or small?

loose or tight?

depressed or normal?

serious or silly?

lazy or hardworking?

deep or superficial?

impulsive or measured?

messy or neat?

sensitive or stoic?

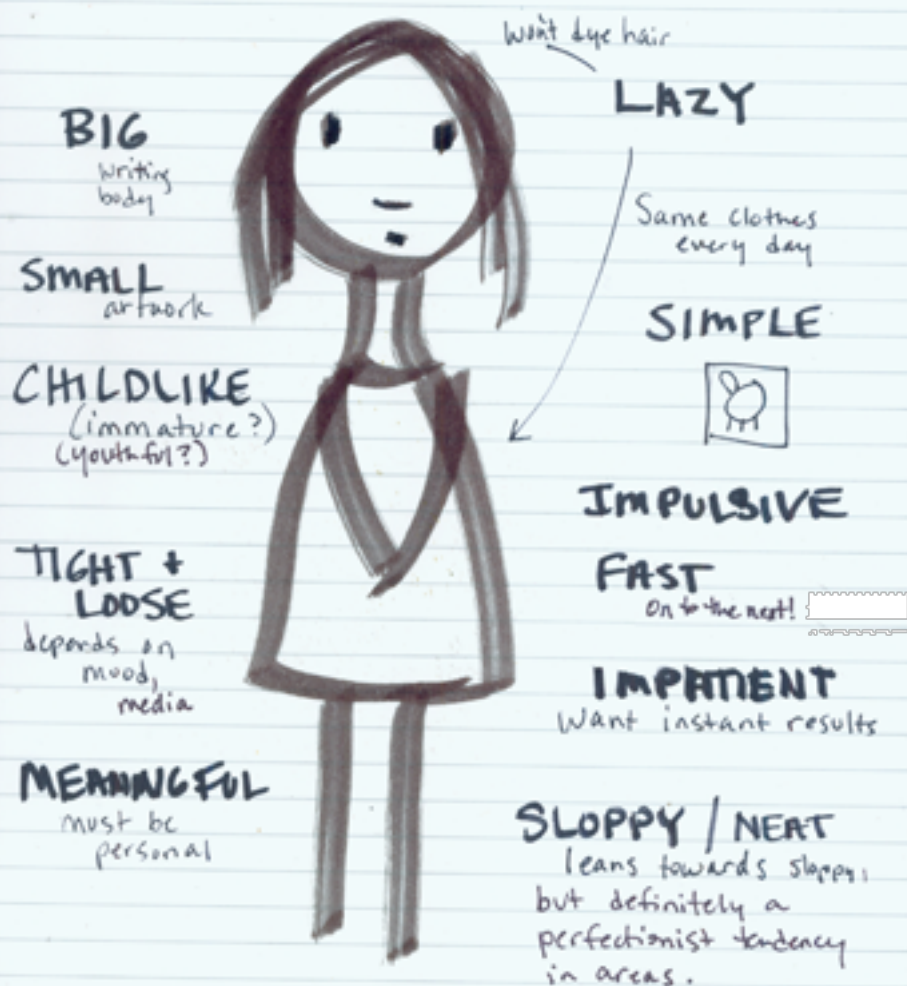
happy or sad?

Ask yourself questions about how you do your hair (an easy style or time-consuming?), how you feed yourself (fast food or many courses?), and what your bedtime routine is (do you follow a bedtime routine or just flop into bed the moment you're too tired to do anything else?).

\* \* \*

Before moving to the third Part, ask yourself how WHO YOU ARE reconciles with WHAT YOU LIKE. Do they overlap? (If not, that's okay! Just make a note of it.)

# Who I Am





PART 3:

**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?**  
**(Confidence, Skills & Artistic Influences)**

If you are just beginning expressing yourself visually, your style might feel somewhat hidden behind false starts, unconfident lines and/or beginner's luck.

For example, if you love messy-looking work and are messy in real life, but tend to be "neat" when drawing, it could possibly be that you feel insecure with a pencil and, once you have drawn enough and feel confident that whatever you do is 'okay,' your messier style might emerge.

(On the other hand, your neater drawing style might BE your style and not match up closely with the you "outside of art" at all — a place where you can let your inner neat-freak flourish. :D Unfortunately, nothing is black and white!)

Also related to this is influences — artwork you admire, classes you take, etc. All of our influences get mixed into our own styles, and some "stick" longer than others. Often, your artwork might temporarily reflect the influences heavily for awhile (such as when you take a workshop from a teacher with a unique style), but usually in time the influences will recede and mix in with all of the other factors that make up "your" art style, especially if you stay true to the first and second parts (Who You Are & What You Like).

**However...**

Throwing a monkey wrench in all of this is the fact that each day, each hour, we are different people, seeing and feeling things differently. Every day we fight illness and fatigue, come across new influences, try another media and are beginners all over again.

For this reason it's good to remember that "your style" is a moving target... it's always changing slightly just like you are. There is no "there." It evolves and changes as you do.

On the other hand, because the YOU part of it is so big — such a big part of all three of the Parts — your style is there, and it's yours, right now. You might just need help seeing it!





## **“FINDING YOUR VOICE” ASSIGNMENT**

If you feel “all over the place” like I did, and would like some clarity on what your style as an artist is, I recommend the following (it worked for me!):

### **1. Review Your Artwork**

Find 5-10 recent pieces of art that you have created that you like. Lay them out before you. Take a look. Ask yourself these questions:

Which ones were the funnest to make?

What is your subject matter? Is it consistent or varied?

Would you describe your work as “careful” or “loose”?

Is the media consistent with the rest of your life?

Do you like to drawing living things or non-living things?

What are some common threads in the work you see?

Some of you might already be seeing your style in better focus. That’s great!

Others might not see it quite yet... that’s okay! Try asking a friend to take a look at your artwork and see if they see any common threads. A fresh set of eyes always helps!

## **2. Do a Small Series**

Start a new series of work in one subject, one medium (or combination of media), and one size.

Pick one subject (such as flowers, animals, faces, houses, abstracts), one combination of media (such as watercolor, pastel and ink) and do a series of 10-20 pieces. You can change color combinations, types of flowers/faces/animals, etc., but force yourself to stick with the one chosen combination of media and one subject matter.

When you force yourself to limit your media, I've found, the "you" will start to emerge more clearly.

A lot will likely happen during this process:

- You might get bored.
- You might find that you love a certain color combination.
- You might decide you hate faces/animals/flowers/houses/abstracts.
- You might be delighted in your series.
- Your series might be wildly different from first efforts to last.
- You might have quit the project altogether.

Don't worry, whatever happens, these things will teach you about yourself and give you clues to your natural style!

## FINAL THOUGHTS

I think the best way to find your “voice” or style is to be confident that if you do art that you like, in media that you like working with, and you do a lot of it, your style will become more and more apparent to you. And the rest of us? We probably already see it!

If you do a series, please email me with links... I’d love to see it and have a conversation with you about your “style.” [carla@carlasonheim.com](mailto:carla@carlasonheim.com).



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