

Julian Stanczak, 1928-2017

Julian Stanczak died on March 25, 2017, at age 88. I knew him for 30 years. He was a great human being. He was also a great artist, and his work is included in the permanent collections of more than 100 museums. An obituary article written by Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* provides a good overview of his art and extraordinary biography. Go to the newspaper's website, search using the words 'Julian Stanczak Roberta Smith', and you'll find it. As Ms. Smith writes, "[Stanczak] produced some of the most emotionally gripping paintings associated with the Op trend."

The world has lost a giant, and Julian is deeply, deeply missed. Rather than try to put my own thoughts about his life and art into words, I decided to let Julian speak for himself here. Below are selected quotes by him from over the years. Some of the quotes are particularly meaningful to me since they are from an intensive three day interview of Julian I conducted in the year 2000.

The image on this card is also particularly meaningful to me: it is a painting Julian made shortly after his father died—the gray, but firmly vertical, *Stoic*, 1983, 70x32 inches.

--Neil K. Rector

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"Africa had a *profound* effect on me. I spent six years totally isolated on the edge of the Ugandan jungle in a Polish refugee camp. It was a scary, godforsaken place where you never knew what was going to happen next. I can still hear the sounds of the jungle, the cries of the animals, the beat of the drums and the people's call. I can still see the light and color and myriad shapes dancing in the sunlight, the trees, plants and flowers entangled and intertwined—this action, this movement, these colors, and I can still smell the *smell* of it! The sheer provocation of nature's performance. ... How could I *not* be affected by all this? It presented me with an immense visual field from which I could pick and choose, and it still does. Africa is still in my head. I am still organizing its visual energies into constellations and offering up my own translations."

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"If you ask me how you should feel [about] or understand [one of my paintings], I feel ... that I have no right to interfere by answering, because it might interfere with your makeup of your entity as a person: your logic, your percept, your sensitivity, your experiences, your connections: your need to even look at it. The fact that I can make you look at it, that is what I find pleasing. Because I know that I am not alone. I am sharing myself, but I am sharing myself not through means of physical facts. I am sharing myself by taking a fraction of your life and overlapping it with mine."

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"I love the music and poetry of colors. They have an interactive language all their own—a secret whisper. I play with these whispers within the measures and divisions that I devise as 'containers'—particular sizes, beats, and amounts that facilitate the visual activity."

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“Color cannot be [easily] measured .... Its energies are diffused in memory. We know color through our reaction to it. It becomes an experience.”

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“For me, visual art is no different than music or poetry. They all exist in time: sound to sound, word to word, color to color, one to the next. They are nothing by themselves, but they become precious in sequence and in relationship to one another. I cannot see everything at once, but, in the end, the sensation gathered from the totality imprints itself on our minds as a singular unit.”

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“In my art, I do not dwell on ‘what is it?’ but rather on ‘what does it do to you?’ I want to leave my paintings open to interpretation. I tell my wife that if I had more time, I would be a minimalist. But then I imagine dishing out orange so that it can say proudly “I am Orange!” Then I think, *What about the metamorphosis? What about the interactive process through which paintings become alive?* My point is that most people who claim to be ‘colorists’ are good at using all the colors available, but they cannot make the colors dance with you.”

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“Art must be universal. By that I mean that it must transcend the pain of daily life, overcome the ordinary, in order to come to another visual plateau. This I can accomplish by scrupulously analyzing visual activities which parallel nature but do not directly reflect it. In the ordinary life from day to day between the joys and the pains—that’s not art. I wanted to induce an elevation, a state of nirvana, and some new position of aesthetics.”

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“I am always trying to give room to the viewer in time and space to find aesthetic elevation while I and my personal feelings stand aside. I am not important—the viewer is. The strength of the viewer’s reaction helps me to evaluate my efforts and through that come closer to the clarity of my aim.”

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Question: After all the years you have spent exploring, do you feel any closer to understanding what art is than when you started?

“No! No. As I said that quote the other day to you, ‘He who has art, even religion has he. He who has not art, let him religious be.’ To me, I almost don’t separate the two. Honestly. No, because this is the human aspiration: who in the hell are we?! Why are we so lonely, locked in our own bodies? The reason we want to extend, to communicate ... is because we want to shatter that loneliness, isn’t it? Why do you look at art? (pause) I can reverse the question. It is the same thing that I am looking for, except I am caught by trying to be a doer. I am not saying that everyone has the stamina to be that. You have to give up a lot of things to be a creative person.”