

How to be an artist

Roger Robinson

Finding your voice as an artist is about constantly placing yourself outside the box of what's considered acceptable. Outside that box is where you find your specific voice.

You see it all the time with the access to information that we have online. Nearly everything looks and sounds the same. Poets and playwrights from England looking and sounding like poets and playwrights from America. Then there comes a fresh voice that cuts through all the copycat noise – that establishes a new threshold for what's possible in the form. As an artist you get there by proudly standing outside the box for a while and seeing what you want to include or reject. It is prudent not to have your artistic voice thrust upon you simply because that's how it's been done, or thinking that's what the people (who hire) want or expect. Make your artistic voice the result of adventurous experimentation, and then benchmarking. Never let it be the result of you trying to give people what they want. You will always underestimate people because no groups or individuals will be the same. So become a test group of one. Assemble your artistic voice from things you find that get your blood racing. Let that voice come from your choices and decisions. Then, when the others inside the box look at you, they'll be discussing how fresh your work feels and they'll probably start copying you.

The history of the intimate and moving experiences of your own life is the blueprint of your artistic DNA.

Do not run away from this as an artist. The importance of it is closely linked to originality. You're the only person who has had these experiences in a particular way at a particular time with a particular effect. Don't misinterpret what I'm saying as: you should only make art about these experiences. It's more that these experiences should be part of a framework through which you create a world. For instance, if you were taught violin at the age of nine and a Bach sonata moved you to tears, and you were making a hip hop album years later and refused to put in any violins, then I would think that you were avoiding your artistic DNA and avoiding your chance to be an original artist. Everything in the world has been done before, the only thing new is you as the artist and your unique viewpoint on it.

Take some element of the social into your art and then take your art back into the social.

The last thing you ever want as an artist is to be irrelevant. It's not enough any more to be making art in a garret, closed away from the rest of the world. Artists have to be taking cues from the world, not just a world alive in their memories but also the world as it exists today. There is a phenomenal rate of change at the moment, from racial and gender politics right through to electoral politics and governmental morality. This is not a plea for you to be didactic or overly political, it's more a suggestion that you keep an eye on the world so that your artistic modes don't become outdated. On having finished the work, it makes sense to get it seen in the world; to take it right back into the social so that the art can take part in and begin to inform a worldly conversation by which it was informed.

Roger Robinson

Roger Robinson is a writer who has performed worldwide. Winner of the T. S. Eliot Prize 2019, the RSL Ondaatje Prize 2020 and a Royal Society of Literature Fellow, he was chosen by Decibel as one of 50 writers who have influenced the Black-British writing canon. His latest collection *A Portable Paradise* was a New Statesman Book of the Year. He is an alumnus of The Complete Works and has been shortlisted for the OCM Bocas Poetry Prize, the Oxford Brookes Poetry Prize, commended by the Forward Poetry Prize and shortlisted for the Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry 2020. He has been commissioned by The National Trust, London Open House, BBC, National Portrait Gallery, V&A, INIVA, MK Gallery and Theatre Royal Stratford East, where he was also Associate Artist.

An experienced workshop leader, he has toured extensively with the British Council. His workshops have been shortlisted in the Gulbenkian Prize for Museums and Galleries and were also a part of the Barbican's Webby Award-winning 'Can I Have A Word'. He is co-founder of both Spoke Lab and the international writing collective Malika's Poetry Kitchen. He is lead vocalist and lyricist for King Midas Sound and has also recorded solo albums with Jahtari Records.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

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