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ARTS + ENTERTAINMENT

Art: A creative curator with artist's sensibility

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Contributing Art Critic

Brian H. Peterson is the most unconventional museum curator I've encountered in more than three decades of trying to understand and interpret the glories and mysteries of art.

At the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, he does all the things one expects a chief curator to do. He helps produce the special exhibitions that are the lifeblood of all art museums of any consequence. He writes some of the catalogs for these shows with one hand while developing relationships with potential art donors and managing a curatorial staff with the other.

In short, being chief curator at the Michener is a demanding 9-to-5 administrative grind. Yet, though I can't understand how he manages it, Peterson somehow squeezes a personal creative life into each 24 hours.

In the 15 years he has held his museum job, and for long before that, he has compiled impressive achievements as a photographer, with more than 30 solo shows to his credit. A half-dozen major museums, including the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#), own his pictures.

Most impressive to me, Peterson is also a writer of considerable talent, style, and insight, not just on art and photography but particularly on the creative life.



Chief curator Brian H. Peterson with the bronze "Shorn Medusa" by Charles Rudy, in the Byers Gallery of the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown.

I discovered this over the last few years when I read some of the books he has produced for his museum, among them *Pennsylvania Impressionism* and monographs on such regional painters as Robert Spencer and [Charles Rosen](#).

The commonsense accessibility of Peterson's essays in those books suggested that he didn't come to curating by the usual route, which is art history. He began his artistic life studying musical composition, which segued into photography, which became teaching and freelance curating, which ultimately became museum administration.

Because Peterson writes about art and artists from the inside of that world and with the soul of an artist, he offers a perspective on the origins of creativity and the way it works in real life that often escapes other commentators. Scholars, dealers, critics, and other curators can be more engrossed in classifying, describing, and ranking art than in deconstructing its ineffable essence.

In my experience, relatively few artists master this trick, which is one reason I have found Peterson's writing so distinctive and satisfying. Another is, as he

demonstrates in his new book, *The Smile at the Heart of Things* (247 pp., Tell Me Press/James A. Michener Art Museum, \$28.95), he's an acutely observant and sensitive writer, to be read not just for content but also for the literary grace and vitality of his language.

As Peterson's geologist father might have observed, *The Smile at the Heart of Things* is a conglomerate. It's part memoir, part criticism, and part disquisition on the creative life as exemplified by the author himself and a small cohort of artists he admires, such as painters Daniel Garber, Randall Exon, and Celia Reisman and photographers Frederick Evans and Emmet Gowin.

As a personal narrative, the book sometimes becomes so intimate that one feels like an eavesdropper on a privileged conversation. Peterson not only gives us standard biographical details, he also reflects at length on life-shifting epiphanies - health crises, the deaths of family members.

He does so to explain how he came to understand the genesis and the essence of the creative life – to answer the question, why did I become an artist and, by implication, why does anyone do so? The place of art in human affairs becomes an inevitable corollary.

To provide an armature for what otherwise might be a procession of tangentially related essays - the book is subtitled *Essays and Life Stories* – he posits five guideposts to the creative life. These thematic sections are titled Nourishment, Honesty, Beauty, Depth, and Hunger.

Nourishment is where the aesthetic quest begins; for Peterson, that was in Portland, Ore. where, as an 18-year-old traveler waiting for a bus home to Missoula, Mont., he read the poetry of [Walt Whitman](#) and was thunderstruck.

He explores Honesty – locating the unmediated essence of artistic truth - by discussing the work of the aforementioned artists and photographers. This section reveals his ability to talk about art in a way that connects it to common experience, a rare and welcome skill.

The book's middle section consists of a string of journal entries written between 1975 and 1982, a dark period when Peterson's struggle to define his identity was most intense, and an essay on Beauty. Who can adequately define that elusive commodity? Peterson makes a gallant run at the ideal with these words:

"Beauty transforms ... beauty says, listen to me, follow me, and I will turn you inside out. Whatever journey needs to be made, whatever obstacles are in the way, whatever walls need to be broken down – nothing else matters once beauty enters your life. Grab on and hold on and never let go."

Depth, a quality in art that I prefer to characterize as "authenticity," asks putative artists to get below the surface, to pursue essential truth

relentlessly, just as Peterson's father did when mapping subterranean strata as a petroleum geologist.

(Understandably, geology is a rich source of metaphors for Peterson, who grew up in Utah, New Mexico, and Montana, and he deploys them with tasteful restraint.)

Finally, there's *Hunger*, which in Peterson's telling seems to be an artist's most important lodestar. Satisfying that hunger, "the primordial condition of the universe," means achieving a unity of life and art, of purpose and result, of being in the world and outside it simultaneously.

For him, this boils down to what many might consider a religious experience, although he doesn't equate art with religion per se.

He does declare, however, that "artists are some of the hungriest people around. ... art and religion are two trees growing from the same root system." To which I would add a third tree, science – that is, empirical knowledge.

The Smile at the Heart of Things is a plain-speaking humanist argument for the necessity of creative activity. It's the diary of a pilgrim cutting his way through a thicket of youthful false starts, doubt, and occasional despair toward enlightenment. Yet it's not depressing, as these words might suggest, but uplifting.

Peterson explains that he became an artist "because I thought it was the only way to find the truth about myself." A few pages along, he adds, "Whatever truth there is to be found in life, that's where art lives. The artist's job is to search for ... that authentic experience, that sense of deep honesty, then find the clearest and most concentrated way of expressing it."

Easy to say, perhaps, but as Peterson, artist and curator, must know, not so easy to achieve in practice. His wise and wonderful expressions of sharp creative intellect make a reader appreciate the necessity, even the urgency, of the artist's labor.

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