

PREBLES'

ARTFORMS



TENTH EDITION

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE VISUAL ARTS

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THE NATURE OF ART AND CREATIVITY

WHAT IS ART?

WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

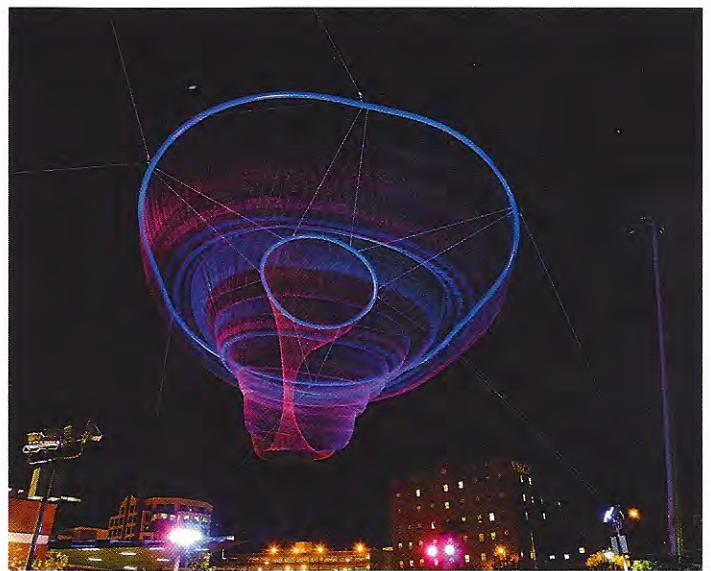
WHAT ARE SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CREATIVITY?

When Janet Echelman's huge artwork *Her Secret Is Patience* was hoisted into the air above Phoenix in mid-2009, even most of the doubters became admirers. This is because the work is simply stunning: It defies gravity as it dances and waves slowly in the breeze. Suspended from three leaning poles between 40 and 100 feet above the ground, its colored circles of netting seem both permanent and ever changing, both solid and spacious.

The artist chose the cactus flower shape to symbolize the Arizona desert city of Phoenix. She was inspired by the patience of the saguaro cactus, she said, "a spiny cactus putting down roots in search of water in the desert, saving up every ounce of energy until, one night, in the middle of the cool darkness, it unfurls one succulent bloom." The work also refers to the character of nature itself. Echelman drew her title from the words of American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, "Adopt the pace of nature; her secret is patience." Thus, the sculpture both resembles and reflects the surrounding nature; it catches and moves with every breeze as if choreographed by the wind.

The citizens who advocated the piece over the extended waiting time between conception and

completion were patient as well. Doubters objected to the price tag (\$2.4 million), the shape (one said it resembled a giant jellyfish), and the artist's origins (she is not from Arizona). Those misgivings and a few technical issues kept *Her Secret Is Patience* on the drawing boards for a year and a half. But today most Arizonians look on the work with pride: this unique



1.1 Janet Echelman.

Her Secret Is Patience. 2009.

Polyester fiber twine and rope. Height 100'.

Width at top 100'.

Civic Space Park, Phoenix, AZ. Courtesy Janet Echelman, Inc.
Photo: Peter Vanderwarker.

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visual delight will forever mark the city of Phoenix just as the Eiffel Tower marks Paris. The *Arizona Republic* editorialized: “This is just what Phoenix needs: a distinctive feature that helps create a real sense of place.”¹

The creation and reception of *Her Secret Is Patience* embody a central theme of this book: artistic creation is a two-way street. That is, humans form artworks, and then the art forms us. Hence, the title of this book: *Artforms*. In this chapter, we will look at some of the ways in which art can affect or influence us.

Not all of us regularly create works of art, but we are all creative in some way. We create a home life. We create relationships. We create events, goals, projects, and accomplishments. Even the common acts of arranging furniture in a room or pictures on the wall can be creative. Visual art is one type of human creativity, and art viewers, when contemplating a work, create their own responses to it. When we respond to a work of art, we activate our own creativity; the artist’s work evokes the artist within us. In this chapter, we will also discuss the meaning of creativity and look at a few examples.

WHAT IS ART?

First, some definitions: Within this book a **work of art** is the visual expression of an idea or experience, formed with skill, through the use of a medium. A **medium** is a particular material, along with its accompanying technique. (The plural is *media*.) Artists select media to suit the ideas and feelings they wish to present. When a medium is used in such a way that the object or performance contributes to our understanding or enjoyment of life, we experience the final product as art.

For *Her Secret Is Patience*, the artist sought to create a work that would say something about the Phoenix area, in a way that harmonized with the forces of nature. Thus, she chose flexible netting for the medium because it responds gracefully to the wind. Echelman similarly chose the size, scale, shape, and color of the work that would best support and express her message.

Media in use for many centuries include clay, fiber, stone, wood, and paint. By the mid-twentieth

century, modern technology had added more new media, including video and computers, to the nineteenth-century contributions of photography and motion pictures. Many artists today combine media in a single work. Whatever the medium, art grows from our common need to give expressive substance to feelings, ideas, insights, and experiences. In this book, the focus is the visual arts, including drawing, painting, sculpture, film, architecture, and design.

Much of our communication is verbal, yet any single medium of expression has its limitations. Some ideas and feelings can be communicated only through visual forms, while other insights can be expressed best through music. American painter Georgia O’Keeffe said: “I found that I could say things with colors and shapes that I couldn’t say in any other way—things I had no words for.”² The arts communicate meanings that go far beyond ordinary verbal exchange, and artists use the entire range of thought, feeling, and observation as the subjects of their art.

PURPOSES AND FUNCTIONS OF ART

Art forms us in many ways: by telling us things, embellishing our lives, elevating our spirits, showing us who we are, waking us up to injustice, or just flooring us with beauty. A given work of art may serve several functions all at once. To understand their purposes and functions, let us examine some works as examples.

Art for Communicating Information

Because art makes a statement that can be understood by many people, it has often been used to impart information and ideas. During the Middle Ages in Europe, stained-glass windows and stone sculpture of the cathedrals taught Bible stories to an illiterate population. Many artworks provide evidence about the historical period in which they were created. Today, many artists use photographs and movies to make works that inform us.

In 2009, photographer Lauren Greenfield went to the Mideastern emirate of Dubai to document the impact of the global economic downturn on that formerly high-flying city. She returned with many