

Artists are often asked to make statements about their work and when presented with this invitation my first inclination is always to say "thank you but, why can't we just be silent and look at the work". However, since on occasion statements are welcome, I would like to beg your patience and acquaint you with The Great Sam Small.

One of the personal pleasures I enjoy is to take some time off now and then and go fishing. I've done this since I was a schoolboy and in my youth I found myself in awe of The Great Sam Small. I was the only person who called him "The Great" because I was certain he possessed secret knowledge. And I had faith that if I could but possess this knowledge I could solve the problem of an unfathomable mystery that was confounding me.

As I walked to my grade school, morning after morning in the spring of the year, I would see Sam riding his bicycle eastward out of town toward the Falling Spring Creek. The Falling Spring is one of the great limestone trout streams of south central Pennsylvania. On those same days as I walked home for lunch after another unrewarding morning of trying to comprehend algebraic logic, I would see him again peddling back into town. And every day as he passed I would see, hanging on the side of his bicycle, his full limit catch of the most beautiful rainbow and brown trout some of them twenty inches long, their iridescent scales reflecting every color of the spectrum.

The rest of this homage to Sam's fishing prowess must remain incomplete however, for a young boy whose skill at catching trout was no better than his comprehension of algebra, I knew it was time for me to seek some tutorial help. So with youthful trepidation, I approached my hero and I asked him the only question that to me really mattered. "How do you catch all of those fish every day"? His answer revealed a truth that was as baffling to me then as it is elusive for me today as I try to realize my hopes when making a drawing. "When you go fishing" he said, "the first thing you must do is stop talking; not only to others but also to yourself. You must be attentive to only what's around you at that very moment and you have to learn how to become invisible." Flattered a bit I suppose by my wide-eyed interest in his every word he continued, "Fishing with a hook and line is a matter of touch you know, you must see the fish with your fingers. Remember he can feel your presence through the line with instincts more sensitive than yours, and a heavy hand will scare him off. He knows when something is not real, not natural. Only when there is nothing artificial in what you do, when you are completely in his world and you have honored him in this way then, he might take the hook and make a gift of himself to you".

Making drawings and going fishing still hold important mysteries for me. But I have since come to understand that a mystery is not a problem you can solve, rather it is an experience that you can, if you choose, participate in with the hope of learning something. Written statements about an artist's work can certainly help to orient a viewer. However the essential objective, when fishing or drawing is simultaneously a simple yet difficult act. We must be present in this world and learn how to do honor to the act of sensing and seeing.

While there are many other instructive insights we could harvest from the advice of The Great Sam Small it is sufficient for the moment to say that, when trying to catch a fish or make a drawing, words can only get in the way.