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Speaking art

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After a forceful keynote address on Leadership at a conclave organized in the US by one of my business clients, Gen Colin Powell, former US Secretary of State, agreed to pose for photographs with participants. At the opportune moment I shied away, so the keepsake picture at home has my wife alongside the General, but not me. On her query of my sudden disappearance, I replied, “*Guernica*.”

When Nazi and Fascist warplanes bombed Spanish town Gernika during the 1937 Spanish Civil War, Spanish artist Pablo Picasso was furious. He started painting his protest in “*Guernica*,” a huge 11x24 feet canvas. This painting has since become an anti-war icon, used extensively in 1960s by anti-Vietnam demonstrators. A “*Guernica*” reproduction hangs in UN headquarters, New York. When in February 2003 Colin Powell presented the US case for declaring war on Iraq, “*Guernica*” had to be covered as author Russell Martin wrote. Although I don’t support Colin Powell’s move for war, I admire his sensitivity to conceal “*Guernica*” that’s so imbued with anti-war messaging.

Art is a medium where you don’t require a visiting card. I’ve found art’s extreme power to always have two elements, execution on canvas or sculpting form, and the artist’s imagination

that creates influence beyond the canvas. Painting “is an instrument of war,” said Picasso. Art can be a medium of revolt as in “*Guernica*,” or it can spark invention. Here are two examples of artists drawing the future, latent movement of society. The automobile was ignited from 14th century artist Simon Martini’s drawing, while 16th century artist Leonardo da Vinci first drew the flying machine, the seed of today’s aviation industry. Art can be hetero-dimensional, converging ideas to be scientific, philosophical or seductive, communicating different elements to different people to take society forward.

Let me take you to an exhibition of my paintings I was invited to hold in the sophisticated Carlton hotel in Cannes, south of France. As I’d started my consulting business, I did not want to sell my paintings, so I informed the hotel my paintings were for exhibition only, not for sale. After the first day of the exhibition the hotel PR person called to say that a genuine art lover and collector wanted to buy four of my paintings, and insisted she has to meet me. The PR person persuaded me to at least meet her. Actually I found that even holding an exhibition of my simple paintings in this opulent hotel to be a total dissonance. There were so many different fragrances and decor in this lavish hotel, the prime lodging for film personalities to Cannes Film Festival every year. Anyway, for politeness sake, I came from Paris to meet the art lover on the last day of the exhibition.

She was about 55-years-old, we met at the hotel coffee lounge. It was really incredible how she described my paintings, expressing every detail of my art in unbelievable poetic language. She totally paralyzed my idea that I cannot sell, saying, "Come and see your beautiful paintings in my home any time you want. You can even take them for exhibitions. You don't look like an egocentric person so why don't you share your art so others can enjoy them?" Nearly two hours had passed, I was totally mesmerized. "You do whatever you want, Madame," I heard myself say. She made a finger indication, and a well dressed gentlemen wearing a black suit and tie waiting at a distance came. She showed him the paintings and he took them away while I was getting a big envelope from Madame.

I have to tell you the way she gave me the cheque. She had already written the cheque, it was inside a gorgeous parchment paper packet, exactly the kind of paper I use when I do water colours. She took it out from her large Louis Vuitton bag. On top of the A4 size envelope was written in French in fine-looking hand calligraphy, "Idea and beauty without frontiers." The respect she showed in handing over the cheque in this envelope was not of exchange of money for art: "As you didn't tell me the price, just think that you are sharing your art." Later I realized that art is another medium that brings you closer to an unknown person. As I accompanied Madame to her chauffeured Rolls Royce Silver Cloud, she left saying, "Au revoir l'artiste." On opening the envelope, I was astonished that my art can fetch such high value.

From my different art exhibitions in Paris and other provinces in France, I've come to know a few French women who lead extremely opulent lives. I've been invited to their homes to chat with them in small groups. They are very curious, often surrounding me with lots

of questions on art, my colours, my way of ideation, sometimes they even ask me to describe my day's activities. Although they know I handle big projects in corporate houses as a consultant, they've never questioned me on it. I've observed their discussion with me was always in artistic language. I have never seen their husbands in these meetings which can be very provocative, even perverted, on bizarre types of topics like bourgeoisie, sex, showbiz or "Money makes everything. When you have money you can enjoy all."

One day one of the women asked a question to which I still don't have an answer. "You always paint on a white canvas, did you ever try a black canvas?" Another woman replied, "He may not have painted in black canvas because his life started from poverty, it might already be his black canvas." What bothers me in such genuine, opulent French aristocrats is their condescending attitude of sympathy for poor people whom they can never know. Another question I have is apart from art, what could be in their minds? But the idea they've planted in my mind is still in my agenda. I have to do a series of paintings on black canvas.

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