ARTY FACTS
Jo-Marie Rabe

The road to fame

An artist's success can be predicted according to whether his or her career passes through four clearly identifiable stages. Well, that's the theory.

YEARS AGO, I WAS EMPLOYED BY THE UNIVERsity of Stellenbosch to work on a three-year project at the Institute for Futures Research. I was a young political science major and interested in the effect the media have on socio-economic development in a so-called emerging economy such as ours.

What an amazing early education – to work with a group of brilliant economists, demographers, statisticians, sociologists and philosophers who were all interested in one thing: what the future might hold.

I remember being teased about what I did. "So, do you each have your own crystal ball or is there a single Giant Crystal Ball you all consult?" That was a favourite jibe. But, alas, there were no such aids; it was purely an academic exercise.

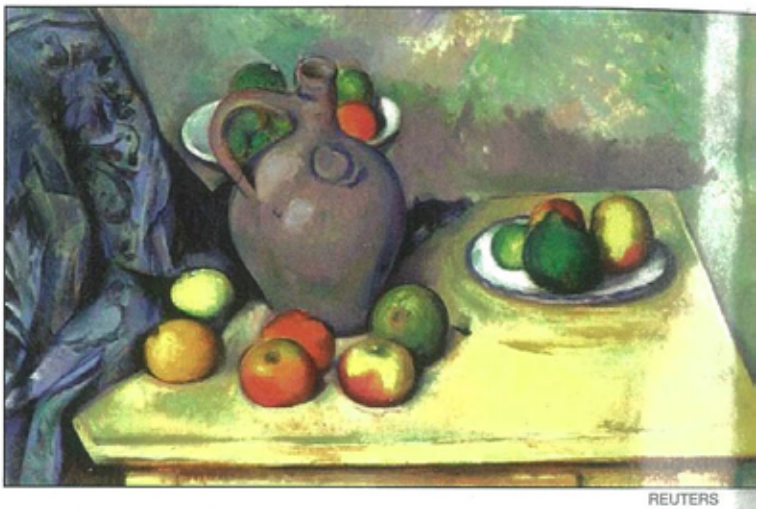
What we did was to postulate possible futures based on current trends. Futures studies looks at facts, figures and tendencies from the past and extrapolates those to create scenarios for the future. A sort of "at the current rate of ... one can expect that ... will be the case 20 years from now" exercise.

And the reason we postulate future scenarios? So that governments, businesses and individuals can plan ahead, position themselves, make provision and be prepared. As a social science, futures studies does not predict, it proposes and, like all other sciences, it has scientific models, measures and tools at its disposal to help with the task.

As a trans-disciplinary intellectual orientation, futures studies concerns itself with every aspect and expression of our humanness and how that will play out in the future, be it the cars we are likely to drive, the diseases from which we might suffer or the political parties for which we could possibly vote.

I should therefore not have been at all surprised when I recently learned that the very cerebral approach prevalent in futures studies has been applied to the world of fine art for some time now. What? Is art not the last enclave of emotional decision-making, gut-feeling excitement and rare individuals with a special talent to know what other people will want to hang on their walls in future?

Well, apparently not. As far back as 1989, Sir Alan Bowness, a former director of the Tate Gallery in London, gave a lecture that he titled "The conditions of success: how the modern artist rises to fame".



REUTERS

Paul Cézanne's *Pichet et fruits sur une table*. Cézanne was shunned by the Paris art establishment and he retired to the south of France, where he kept on painting without initial critical acclaim. He was put on the map by the brave art dealer Ambroise Vollard. *Pichet et fruits sur une table* was painted in 1893–94, towards the end of Cézanne's life. Sometimes the four stages on the road to success do not occur in the order Sir Alan Bowness suggests.

Based on his personal experience and the data he had collected over decades, Bowness claimed that success for an artist is not a matter of chance or the result of clever marketing. Instead, Bowness claimed that you can postulate an artist's possible future success by analysing the four clearly distinguishable stages that make up the artistic road to fame: "peer recognition, critical recognition, patronage by dealers and collectors, and, finally, public acclaim".

In the true spirit of the scientist, Bowness did not predict who the next important artist or artists would be; he gave us a set of tools that anyone can use to see what the future of an artist might hold.

For Bowness, the most important of the four stages was the first one, peer recognition. "It is always the artists themselves who are first to recognise exceptional talent." And this does ring true, doesn't it? A thousand examples come to mind. Perhaps the best known is the way that the French >>

>> Impressionists recognised in each other a new kind of seeing. And another is Jackson Pollock's adulation and frustration with Pablo Picasso. A small vignette from a video I once watched brings to life the plight of creativity. In it Lee Krasner, Pollock's partner and an esteemed artist herself, told how she was one day working in her studio when all hell broke loose in Pollock's studio. Things were falling and she rushed next door. There she found him enraged and distraught. The noise was caused by a book he had flung across the room. The book was on Picasso. "He has done it already," the master lamented.

The incident raises two interesting points. The first concerns the matter of artistic influence.

Subtle influence

LONG BEFORE BOWNESS DESIGNED HIS FUTURES model of artistic fame, art critic Harold Rosenberg suggested in 1965 that not only is it important to see what artists have to say about each other, but one should also take note of the extent to which an artist exerts influence on other artists. (Taking inspiration from a peer must be one of the subtlest yet most honest compliments one artist can pay another.)

But even before that, in 1910, the painter and art critic Walter Sickert tried to explain to a doubting London art fraternity why the French Impressionists were important. "They have changed the language of painting," he stated. And then he postulated a key question still pertinent today. "Have they so wrought that it will be impossible henceforth, for those who follow, ever again to act as if they had not existed?"

The question brings us to the second point: the role that innovation plays in the creation of great art. As in most other fields, it is the artistic innovator who gets the rewards, hence Pollock's frustration when he realised that a brilliant new idea that he had come up with was not so new after all.

Art had been driven by innovation for centuries, but it was during the 20th century that a yearning to go beyond the boundaries of the known had an influence on all the greatest artists. It was the century of artistic heresy. This is probably why art critics came to use that very aspect as one of the most important criteria in their critique of art. In Bowness's conditions for success, critical approval is the second stage on the artist's road to fame.

For a modern artist to be successful, she or he must be taken seriously by art critics of the world, which, as you can imagine, is not always something that the artists themselves appreciate.

A few years ago I interviewed one of the doyennes of South African art history, the author Esme Berman. My topic of interest was her involvement in a project that sparked great controversy during the 1970s. In an attempt to answer the questions most frequently put to her by the public, Berman wrote a book *The South African Art Market, 1971/72: A Handbook for Collectors* (Johannesburg, Art Institute of South Africa). It was published in 1972.

In it she collated the results of a questionnaire in which some of the most prominent art historians of the time were asked (among other questions) to predict who the great South African artists of the future would be. Even though she never suggested anyone herself, her role landed her in hot water.

I could imagine that among a fraternity of local artists, only one would have been very taken with such a list – the one who came up tops. According to Berman, most other artists took great offence: they were either insulted by their assigned position or horrified at not being included at all.

Yet almost everyone was interested in Berman's results. They were looking for some certainty and someone to predict the future for them so that they could plan accordingly and make the right decisions, a soft synonym for "make sound investments".

Despite the debacle, Berman had no quarrel with the practice of investing in art, she assured me. Bowness's third stage is about just that aspect: whether the investors believe their investment will be sound. For an artist, the patronage of the gallerist and the collector is paramount to success. Very few artists can keep on creating when no one is buying their work (Van Gogh was the exception, thank goodness).

Always the exception

THE LAST STAGE IS PUBLIC ACCLAIM. WHEN I discussed this story with my art-loving friends, this led to a heated debate.

"But what about someone like Tretchikoff?" they wanted to know. He was ignored by his peers, ridiculed by the critics, no gallery would promote him so he marketed his own work and yet he was loved by the public. Well ... there is always the exception.

The man from the Tate was clever in many ways. He neatly resisted the temptation of naming the "art stars" of the future. I am sure that Bowness had a list of artists he admired and touted for fame, but, look as I may, I could not find it in any of the sources at my disposal, which might mean that I have simply not looked in the right places or it might mean that he has never published such a list of names, a practice that can land one in hot water, it seems.

Instead, Bowness gave us the four conditions for success so that we can do our own homework and make our own decisions about the future.

Oh, and don't discount that gut feeling just yet. Living with art you love has its own rewards.

■ Jo-Marie's column on the art bubble part 2 – making sense of the South African market and the fate of Damien Hirst's fabled head – will be run in next quarter's PERSONAL FINANCE.

■ *Jo-Marie Rabe is a cultural historian, and she co-owns Piér Rabe Antiques in Stellenbosch.*