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How Bloopers Become Breakthroughs

By Deidre Stein Greben, excerpted from a longer article

Every Artist Makes Mistakes, But Each Has Different Strategies for Converting Failures Into Successes

"IF I SOLD ONLY THE GOOD THINGS I DID," AUGUSTE RENOIR REPORTEDLY told his Paris dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, "I'd die of starvation." While most artists may be more circumspect about their substandard efforts and botched attempts, there is no getting around the fact that failure is, as one contemporary artist puts it, "integral to the process of making."



Fred Tomaelli pushed his comfort zone by adding objects like pills and leaves to his painting *Super Plant*, 1994.

Perhaps no one expressed the dilemma of failure more eloquently than Robert Rauschenberg with his seminal 1963 print *Accident*. When the lithographic stone he was working on broke, Rauschenberg decided to retain the resulting diagonal white gash in his composition, recording the event and snagging first prize at the prestigious Ljubljana Graphic Biennial that year.

"If you're not failing, then you're not pushing," says Fred Tomaselli. "Once you do something well, it's easy to keep doing it." Others take a Platonic stance, claiming that an element of failure is inherent in every work. "It is never a complete execution of an idea," explains Suzanne McClelland. "There is always some of the original concept that is not fully formed."

Time can significantly affect how artists regard their failures. While there are artists who view their mishaps as works waiting to emerge, others find themselves critical of imagery that once pleased them. Elizabeth Murray recalls seeing a painting of hers year after she made it. "I remember going into the collector's house

and thinking the painting was boring at best," she says. "There was not much I could do about it. I couldn't afford to buy it back."

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"And I wouldn't want to," she adds after a pause. "It's not fair. They were living with it and loved it."

Fred Tomaselli

I believe in failure, but I don't believe in showing failure. Sometimes I muck things up to see what happens. I push myself; I push the object. I listen to the object. It's a very mysterious, evanescent process.

In 1988 I was working in electronic media and making them park-style environments using motors, LEDs, and lights. There was a high learning curve, and I was poring over manuals. Eventually I finished one object I had spent a year working on. It was a series of technical achievements, but the object did not mean anything.

So I began to push my comfort zone. I started wilfully making decorative pictures combining real objects—such as pills, leaves, flowers, and insects—with photography and paint, and it seemed very wrong at the time. But it turned out that the installations had many similarities to the paintings I did later, which also feature accumulations of objects in nocturnal environments. I am still interested in the landscape of the unreal.

Last year I returned to and resolved paintings that I had put aside in my studio 16 years ago. I had thought they were too simplistic. They merely illustrated concepts, which they did well enough, but I wanted the objects to be articulate in and of themselves, without me having to explain. They were not vivid enough, so I added stuff. Now that I am more conversant with my materials, it frees me. I have confidence that I can repair and change my works in various stages of making. I don't feel so timid going into crazy places.