

# WHAT A PAINTER TAUGHT ME

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DAVID CARRIER



# INTRODUCTION

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- In 2011, Carrier, an art critic, was invited by his former editor to write an essay on the work of Francesco Polenghi Milan, who he had never met.
- He explains that art criticism is demanding and often requires him to travel, in this case to Milan, including going into an unfamiliar studio, looking at the artwork and listening to the artist talk about it, taking mental notes, writing about the art, and taking note of the “objects of inspiration” in the artist’s studio.



Francesco Polenghi, “K 33” (2006), oil on canvas, 100 by 100 cm

# THE JOB OF AN ART CRITIC

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- Carrier says that it is the job of the art critic to put the work in context, to define where they belong in art history and identify their distinctive values.
- He claims that writing about well-known artists is too easy, and that writing about artists who are not well known is a challenge that sometimes requires rethinking the fundamentals of art criticism.
- Carrier states that the art critic is split between a critical self who watches and censors reactions, and a receptive self whose response to art pays no mind to intellectual reflection.
- He claims that both “selves” are required for the reading and criticism of artwork.

# EXPERIENCE

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- Carrier claims to not remember much detail about what Polenghi said to him, but he showed a small number of recent paintings, explained his art making process, and told him about his inspiration from living in India from 1981-1988
- He went to lunch with Polenghi, realized that he was a great painter, and was glad to write about him. However, he did not know what to say about the artist's paintings.



Francesco Polenghi, "K 60" (2005), oil on canvas, 156 x 156 cm

# CHANGING MINDSET

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- Carrier explains that his critical self relaxed near the end of his visit. He felt taken from himself and he felt at peace.
- He said that Polenghi's work made him feel "exalted".
- Soon after, he felt embarrassed and skeptical of his feelings.
- He tried to make excuses to himself, thinking he may have just been jet-lagged, but he couldn't shake the feeling of being "taken out of himself".

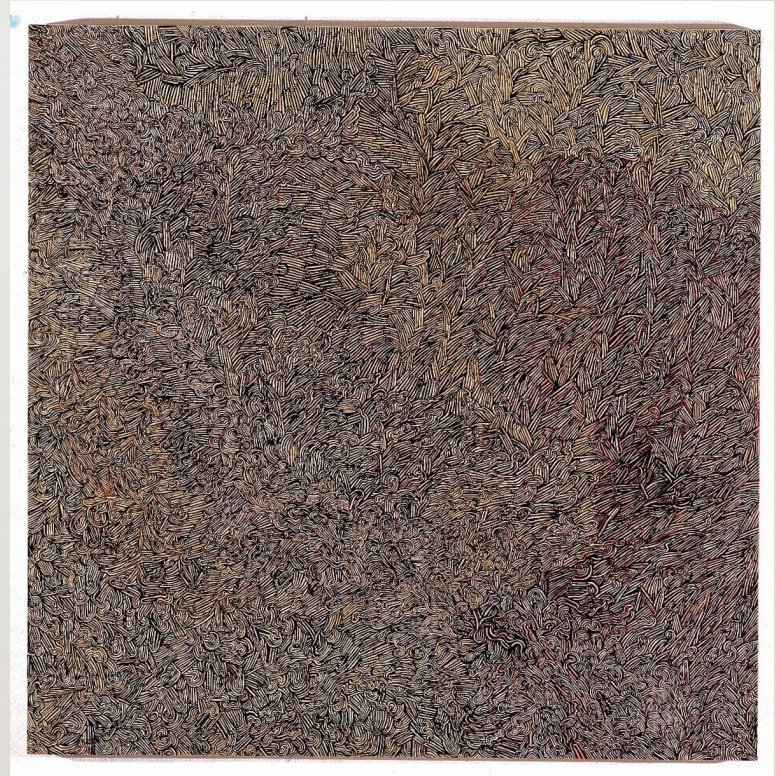


Francesco Polenghi, "K 26" (2010), oil on canvas, 105 x 105 cm

# CONFIRMATION

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- Carrier found confirmation of his receptive, rather than critical, thinking in a Buddhism-inspired book given to him by Polenghi himself: *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*.
- Part of the passage that caught his eye and resulted in his confirmation was “*If something within you responds to it, however, if you somehow recognize the truth in it, it means the process of awakening has begun.*”



Francesco Polenghi, “K 54” (2009), oil on canvas, 70 x 70 cm

# FRANCESCO POLENGHI

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- Born in Milan, Italy in 1936, died in 2020 due to the coronavirus.
- Studied at New York University where he majored in economics.
- Became a full-time abstract painter in the 1980's, after having lived in India for 7 years.
- The works seen by Carrier during his studio visit were large fields of differentiated marks applied in color on a white ground.



# EARLIER EXPERIENCES

- Before Carrier met Polenghi, he had an encounter with the 17<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist painting “Parinirvana of Sakyamuni” by Hanabusa Itchō.
- Shows the death of the historical Buddha entering nirvana surrounded by his followers, a sacred spiritual scene.
- This memory caused Carrier to realize that Polenghi went after spiritual/religious painting method that broke tradition.





# WHAT DID CARRIER LEARN?

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- Carrier mentions that Polenghi's Buddhist studies in India inspired him to make different paintings, to argue that abstract painting can hold spiritual/religious significance, even though abstract painting is a secular, Eurocentric, American modernist tradition.
- He comes to the realization that his reaction to "Parinirvana of Sakyamuni" inspires powerful feelings given its subject matter, but the way he felt viewing Polenghi's work inspired similar, yet unexplainable feelings.

# THE TAKEAWAY

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- Carrier realized that Polenghi gave him the gift of realizing the importance of the receptive self, that it is just as important as the critical self.
- He explains that he came to the realization that both the critical and receptive selves are both needed to understand why visual art matters.

# THOUGHTS

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- Sometimes we use one self over the other, letting one “self” steal the spotlight.
- We should not focus on one “self” too much, or use it as a crutch, which happens often.
- We need to let both selves play an equal part during art criticism and art viewing to fully grasp both the visual content and inner feelings that a work shows us.

# RESOURCES

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- <https://hyperallergic.com/615541/francesco-polenghi-death-in-milan/>