



2026 exhibition review information sheet

The intent of this review process is to give artists a critical assessment of their work. On the next page you will see an interview with Robin Laurence discussing writing a critical review. This article was published in our (now defunct) Craft Contacts. This article is given to all curators and artists to support a shared vision of the process and intent of the CCBC's review process.

The review is posted to a forum on our web-site providing a focus for discussion about the exhibition among makers. The review will also be used in grant applications to illustrate the caliber and professionalism of our exhibition series.

Ideally the review should be completed within the first two weeks of the opening of the exhibition but flexibility around that timeline can be discussed with the curator. The Council will not edit the article for content but will proof read for grammar and spelling prior to posting to the CCBC forum.

The current professional fee for writing this type of article as set out by the *Professional Writers Association of Canada* ranges from .10c to .50c per word or \$75 - \$1,000 per article or \$75 to \$500 per column.

The Council pays .25c/word for 600-word review, as all of the funding for the exhibition series and adjunct activities is raised through our annual donation campaign. We continue to search for funding to increase the amount per word we can give to writers.

Writers should submit their finished article and an invoice to Raine @ rainejmckay@craftcouncilbc.ca. A cheque will be issued either on the 15th or 30th of the month of submission.

Thank you for your support of the Craft Council, your contribution helps shape the future of contemporary craft in BC.

CCBC Curatorial Committee

An Interview with Robin Laurence: Thoughts on Writing a Critical Review

by Bettina Matzkuhn

CCBC members will certainly know Robin Laurence's writing from her visual arts reviews in the Georgia Strait. She also contributes to Canadian Art and Border Crossings magazines and has written many exhibition catalogue essays as well as articles for other publications. She studied at the University of Calgary, the University of Victoria, the Banff School of Fine Arts and the Instituto Allende in Mexico. Her depth of experience is reflected in this discussion of critical writing.

In defining what constitutes a critical review, Laurence refers back to the dictionary. Criticism, in the Oxford English Dictionary, can be "the expression of disapproval", but Laurence stresses the second definition: "a critical assessment of a literary or artistic work". For her, this process includes analysis, interpretation and evaluation, the latter falling last in a review, after other aspects of the work are discussed. Ultimately, critical writing should clarify much about the work and the artist's intentions so that readers are encouraged to become viewers.

Laurence sees analysis as a way to put the work in a context. It's important to consider how the particular piece or body of work relates to the artist's practice as a whole, and how it fits into the local, national or international scene. Politics, geography, socioeconomics all affect the work. She says the project is to "bring the work home, in a sense, to its time and place."

In many ways, Laurence points out, the critic's role is similar to a curator's: providing an interpretation of the artist's intent. She finds the artist's statement is often the best guide to the theme or specific subject at hand. But the writer needs to examine the work itself –how the materials are used, how ideas are conveyed through metaphor, process, imagery and so on. "Although criticism is not mere description, it helps to communicate to readers how exactly the work looks and the particular ways in which the artist employs materials or media. Depending on what is appropriate, given the goals of the work, the focus of criticism may be the work's formal qualities..." The term "formal qualities" often brings up visions of tuxedos and bow ties, but here it means the basic physical elements of the work such as line, shape, colour, texture, or surface. Some craft works focus entirely on the physical and the writing should respect and reflect this. In other works, there may be more complex intentions, where they have "generated interest beyond the work". Again, the critic's role, through interpretation, is one of clarification.

When she comes to evaluate the work, Laurence says that she will often measure it against the artist's stated intentions. She may find that it succeeds handsomely in certain areas and falls short or is unclear in others. Very occasionally, she may write a largely negative review, but stresses that if there is nothing positive to be said about the work, it is probably wiser not to review it at all. Writers should examine their own motivations; she feels that "if their intention is simply to amuse, to create a humorous piece, for instance, at the expense of the art, again, it would be more professional to find another vehicle – like stand-up comedy! This is not to say that criticism can't be entertaining. It should be lively and engaging and humour can be part of a writer's strategy. It shouldn't be the entire point of the review."

In meeting deadlines and word counts for publication, Laurence says that it is crucial to be able to compress your ideas. You may be assigned to write a catalogue essay of 3000 words or a snappy 400-

word review. In the latter, she aims for a quick overview and then picks out one or two aspects of the work, with a few examples, that will give the reader a sense of detail. There simply isn't space to discuss each piece or element of the show. Here, it's important for the writer to compress ideas into tighter sentences and to focus selectively. In a longer essay, there is room to discuss the works, the process and ideas in much greater depth.

Laurence records interviews and uses software to transcribe speech into text. That way she can quote someone with accuracy. We all speak differently in spontaneous or prepared situations and sometimes she finds that an artist will want to retract or rephrase something. It can be helpful to send the artist questions before the interview so that they have time to think about them. She finds that many artists/craftspeople who are absorbed in the materiality of their work find it difficult to speak about it, but given time, and questions from different angles, they often come up with wonderful insights.

As a freelance writer, Laurence shares the same financial roller coaster that the craftsperson's life entails. There's no extended health care, sick leave or plump pension plan. Many glossy magazines will pay the designers, the production/editorial staff and the printer a standard wage, while the writer is expected to "contribute" an article for free. Just as artists are expected to donate work to myriad charities, writers get buttonholed to dash off something for assorted projects. She feels it is important to insist on a basic rate for one's writing that considers the level of experience attained. The Professional Writers' Association of Canada (<http://www.pwac.ca/>) has numerous resources on their website regarding rates and contracts. Just as craftspeople want to be seen as professionals, writers, too, need to insist on fair treatment and fitting remuneration. Writing for the "exposure" can be a trap. As artist Erica Grimm Vance once wrote: "Canadian artists can die of exposure".