

# Intuition, Emotion and Visualization

A Conversation with Crystal Tiala  
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SUZANNE HEVELONE: You mentioned the other day that you tried to think of scary words to put in your title, and I'm curious about why you settled on intuition, visualization and emotion.

CRYSTAL TIALA: When you're a scene designer, any kind of artist, how you decide one thing is better than another is really about quality, and you have to imagine what things are going to look like: you have to visualize them in your head, you have to make quality judgments. So much of it is just your gut reaction, your intuition, and the emotional value that people are going to get out of those images once it's produced. And artists have to be very keen observers – which is a lot about what this lecture will be about – very keen observers and making those decisions in no other way than just by your gut. It really is that basic.

SH: Do you feel like there have been times when you've had huge successes, and have there been times when you've had huge failures, or do you feel like it all comes out in the wash?

CT: I don't recall a huge failure, and I'm very happy about that. I think there's always something that's good, something that's better, and something that might be even better. There are always degrees of success, but it so depends on your audience. I remember one time I designed a show. It was a brand new show. The playwright was part of it, and he really liked the set design. I sat beside him during opening night and we watched the show. At intermission I looked at him and I said, you know, I should have designed this totally differently. He said, no way, I really like this set, I think it's great. And I explained to him my new vision of it, and he thought for a moment and he said, 'you're right.' So it wasn't a failure, but there's always something better.

SH: Well, hopefully he took some of your suggestions to the next scene designer he had! I wanted to ask you how you got interested in set design and what sort of experiences you had that led to this calling.

CT: Well, the love of it started way back in high school. I always loved theater, and thought I would be an actress. When I had the opportunity to design a set one time for high school I really enjoyed it. And I went on to college in theater, not realizing

you could actually make a profession out of set design – it didn't really even occur to me – but I was always doing backstage things. I ended up being a stage manager instead, and did that for a while. I guess my life has been a series of trying things out. After stage management I went on to event design - like building parade floats essentially, or working backstage building props, painting scenery. I went into films for a while and started being a carpenter on films, after building houses for a while because I was poor. Going back to school, into interior design – all of it was really great because every time I did something different I learned a different skill or a different aspect of it, so it was all really beneficial. But eventually, figuring out that everything else just simply bored me and I had to be a creative person, I ended up going back and getting my master's degree in scene design and thought I would be a professional set designer the rest of my life. Until I found education, and I love that, too. So it's been a very convoluted path.

SH: Maybe courage should have been part of your title, too.

CT: I tend to go through life fearlessly, thinking that I can try everything. If you put your mind to it you'll most likely succeed, if you really want to.

SH: In what ways do you reconcile the personal and intuitive part of your art with the fact that you create it for strangers? Do you keep this in mind as you design, or do you design for yourself first and then your audience second?

CT: I think there are a couple of parts to that. First of all, I think inherently if an image is true, it's going to read to everybody in a similar way. Of course that being said, there are cultural differences you have to keep in mind. And colors mean different things in different cultures. I'm lucky that I'm designing for the culture that I grew up in. So inherently an image, if it's true, is going to read to everybody in a very universal way in many respects, like music will do. It only can come from one perspective, so I can only use my own intuition in that regard. But I always have a production team, which is the nice thing about theater. Unlike other studio artists, we're not working in isolation. So I have a team of people that I bounce ideas off, and the team comes up with the sort of universal vision for that particular production. And their reactions will guide me as well as my own. So it isn't like I'm designing in isolation either. And you just never know. But what's really great is sitting in the audience on opening night – as set designer, no one knows who you are. You can sit in the audience incognito and listen to all the comments about your set and develop a feedback. It's really quite fun.

SH: It sounds fun. In the Ways of Knowing seminar, the goal is to bring together different disciplines. Having participated in that seminar, are there ways of knowing that are common amongst these disciplines? Is there a way to know or ways to know, and how do you see the way of knowing that you do through studio art as comparing to other disciplines or even other artists?

CT: That's an interesting question and one I've been tackling a little bit. I think in an academic environment, what is prized as intelligence and knowledge is very different than what artists use as quality and research for their own work. So in some respects I feel very outside of the academic norm in that regard. On the other hand, scientists and business people, of all things, are the two groups on campus I feel the closest to – which seems really odd. But the way a scientist has to observe the world and in many regards intuit or visualize what has happened, just as Noah Snyder was talking about geologists visualizing what might have happened a billion years ago to this earth is quite an imagination, and coming up with theories that reflect that or graphics that represent that is very similar to my process even though the product can be inherently completely different. I actually married a scientist, and our processes are so similar it's really quite interesting. And business people as well because there's the sense of creating a product for a public, and so they also have to really intuit and imagine what something new is going to do for the public. So many of these skills are very transferable to different disciplines even though on the outside they look totally different. Marketing is so much like my field. That's probably the closest. I can't say that accounting I can find too many correlations – and even if I call them creative they take offense to that because that's not a good word in accounting. But business people, they're creating a product. Just like theater. We create a product. And we have to appeal to the public, and it's something you sell tickets to, and you have to get your audience to buy into your product. So there are a lot of similarities.

SH: I'm also really curious about your art because your art is transient. I know you spoke the other day about striking set the day after the production closes. How does that contribute to how you visualize things and how you produce your art?

CT: I guess I've gotten so used to that I haven't thought about that much. I've become quite accustomed to my art being very temporary. And the only thing that's going to survive any particular production are probably the pictures that I take for my portfolio, and that's it, which doesn't tell you the timing or the lighting changes or how everything works, or even the expression or how the audience gasps at a moment. All of that will be lost. But I've become so accustomed to it I don't think about it in that regard. I'm just quite used to it. If I were to design something that were permanent I think I would probably be a lot more scared about what I had to do because it would be there forever. Maybe this gives me more freedom.