2009

State of Being ~Perpetual Motion~ beauty spreading like water

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State of being - perpetual motion:
Beauty spreading like water

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:
Barbara Walton, Co-major Professor
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

2009

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is to document the May 11, 2009 thesis exhibition, State of Being: Perpetual Motion, including 20 works hung in the Gallery in the College of Design at Iowa State University. This paper then serves to explain how the body of work was created. The intention of this exhibition is to move the viewer toward a new relationship with art, a relationship where art can and does play an active role in human life. This interaction, may even possibly remove the boundary, between art, and the viewer, that is my goal in making of art. Ultimately I would like to produce art that can transform the viewers’ perception of their world.

Artist’s Statement

As an artist I would like to create art that will help people perceive and experience the world as a better place. Painting is my contribution to a world where art and life come together as a holistic journey. I would like my art to lift people’s spirits; just as music brings the celebration of life to the listeners.

Painting for me is dancing. Dancers create their fantastic world with bodies and emotions, as painters do with colors, paints and brushes. I paint because painting is physically direct; this is a quality it shares with dance. Physicality is an important factor to me in art making, and I love the direct response of paint. As a painter, I try to let colors visually sing and vibrate to express energy, movement, and space.
Like the dancer, music drives my creative force and helps move my brushes. If you could see me paint, you might think I am dancing -- my feet and my brushes move rhythmically. In fact, I love to dance, and dance. Improvisational dance in particular, informs my painting.

Dance is energy and movement through space. Similarly, as a painter, I am very interested in movement in space; my forms come in and out of space as they move throughout the picture plane. Color transitions produce the foreground space and push the deep space away allowing new forms to emerge. The dynamics of my design create an interplay between the background and the figures that invites the viewer to enter the space. I think of this dynamic as “lost and found.” I paint in layers; as I paint one layer conceals another, then as the layers interact I discover forms in this interaction that inspire my artistic expression and drive the composition. I pull forward forms and colors, continuously revising the form and color interactions in response to what I see developing on the canvas. Just as in improvisational dance, the dancers respond to one another’s movement; painting is action and reaction.

I want viewers to experience my art at an emotional level. The kinaesthetic effect of moving in a joyful way reaches the dancer at a deeper level; moving can alter the dancer’s emotional state. I want viewers to be more than viewers; I want them to be participants in the dance. I would like them to “metaphorically” get into my painting and I want my art to be a part of their lives.
BACKGROUND

Inspiration

**Historical influences**

Oil paint is the main medium of my work, and physical properties of this medium play a vital role in the creative process. The nature of paint allows it to drip and bleed, which happen when the fluidity of the paint interacts with gravity and time. Also my body movement becomes part of the process and part of the painting. The rhythmic dance of my brush flows upward and downward through my body translating the motion of my feet onto the canvas. As inspiration, I look to Hans Hofmann, a painter of painters and teacher. He writes on art:

> I can’t understand how anyone is able to paint without optimism. Despite the general pessimistic attitude in the world today, I am nothing but an optimist. (Kuh, 1962, p.119)

Art is something absolute, something positive, which gives power just as food gives power. While creative science is a mental food, art is the satisfaction of the soul. (Hofmann, 1967, p.56)

Another source of inspiration has been the primitive art of the cave paintings at Lascaux. The cave paintings recall the spiritual centrality of the art in human life. In the caves of Lascaux, in southwest France, 17,000 year-old paintings are still vibrant on a stone wall deep in the cave. They may be some of humanity’s earliest paintings. In the time of cave painters, people were also performing rituals. A shaman, is a dancer, an actor and a painter in the theatre of hunting. Ritualistically, becoming one with animals the art of the shaman ensures the success of the hunt and the survival of the tribe. The paintings and markings on the wall of the cave preserve the collective prayer of the tribe. In another cave in France, “the Cave of Les Trois Frères,” there exists a 13,000 year-old wall painting of what appears to be a shaman, dressed as an animal spirit. At a time when mankind lived by hunting and gathering, art played a significant role in assuring the success of the hunt, and the livelihood of the tribe.
It is this kind of passion poured into art that reaches the soul of humanity. Just as Hofmann painted with optimism, as a hunter and gatherer of optimism, I paint dancing.

Rain Dance

I grew up running around in the rice fields of Japan. My hometown has a tradition of “Rain Dance.” As rice farming country, the fields need to be filled with water for the rice plants to grow. As young plants, rice literally grows in the puddles. When the rice crop is in need of rain, the community gathers at a local Shinto shrine to do a Rain dance. As a child, I was amazed that it would rain magically after the ceremony. Perhaps this explains why, for me, dance opens a spiritual channel that connects to a greater force. As a painter, I wanted to make this spiritual connection visible using the concept of the rain dance. Inspired by the spiritual tradition of dance, I did a video series entitled “Modern Rituals.” The series included “Colors in Water,” and, “Dance of Colors” (Figures 2 and 3)

Figure 2: Still from Modern Rituals: Colors in Water

Colors in Water (Sequence 1)
The “Colors in Water,” piece is about breaking through an invisible barrier after a struggle. The colors symbolize inspiration and courage. (Supplemental materials #1)
Dance of Colors (Sequence 2)

“Dance of Colors.” is about the process of painting. It demonstrates how I paint. Watching paints drizzling is one of the major parts of my creations. I associate the dripping paint with the splashing of falling rain. In a way, I am rain dancing while I am painting. (Supplemental materials #2)

Water

My name ‘Hiromi’ means, ‘water;’ a literal translation of the name is ‘beauty spreading like water.’ Referencing water in both its physical and metaphysical sense, I try to convey its essence with my painting and my dance.

I have encountered the significance of water all over the world. When I was in Daramshara, Nepal, a yogi told me that “enlightenment is a drop of water into a lotus flower in your brain.” He, a self proclaimed peace advocate, put up the hand made sign “World Peace Council” on the front of his hand-made house. He tells people to see the beauty of nature and to plant trees. I spent a week with him and continue to treasure the experience of that time. In 2009, inspired by my experience in Nepal, I painted “Enlightenment- a drop of water in your brain.” This is the piece that I painted at the Design Reading room to protest the possible closing of the Reading Room at the College of Design.
Books enlighten us; I wanted to paint a drop of water in your brain when enlightenment hits you. The Reading Room remained open, and from this experience, I learned that art can reach out to people, and to help change policy.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration generates dynamic energy in the creative process. In 2007, I painted a mixed media diptych entitled “To Make a Better World,” in collaboration with the community of Ames, Iowa. Talking with people in person, by e-mail and on the radio, I collected more than 500 drawings from about 450 people, in response to the request: “could you draw me “peace?” I got a great reaction on the project and ultimately collaged them on canvas. The messages are multi-generational and speak to a variety of subjects; war, religion, education, environment, community and so forth.
I did a painting project with Janice Baker in 2007. Baker did improvisational dance while I painted. While she was dancing, I painted her body as well as the canvases.

The interaction produced four paintings including ‘Dance in Orange 2007’, exhibited at the thesis show. A diptych ‘Dance in Galaxy I, II’ is now happily dancing in the Ballet Studio of the Foker Building, at Iowa State University.

Encouraged by my earlier collaborative experiences, I took part in a Performance Art “Happening” at the 2009 Des Moines Asian Heritage Festival. This time, more dancers, painters, musicians, and a DJ, joined together to create a performance art experience and paintings. I believe in the power of collaboration; one plus one generates infinite possibilities.
Community Interaction

Dancing brings the community together. I learned this lesson from my childhood experience with the Rain Dance and from the historical evidence of the cave paintings at Lascaux. Dance opens up the community, sustains interaction, and conveys optimism. This is what would I like to achieve with my work.

Janice Baker brought her dance class to Gallery 181 during my thesis show, (May, 2009) and gave a dance lesson. I was in awe to see a revival of the Lascaux ritual in front of my eyes. For me, it was the equivalent of hunter-gatherers dancing trance-like beneath the painted images. There was a moment when my paintings played the role of cave painting in generating a contagious and cohesive spirit of optimism. I witnessed this as a class of Ballroom dancers danced around the paintings; Janice staged a fantastic show.
The visual stimulation of the paintings helped the dance. About this experience, Janice Baker said:

The students responded very favourably to the incorporation of art, music and dances. They appeared to leave uplifted and positively ready for their day. (2009)

I dance with Valerie Williams, who organizes Women in Motion. She creates human-computer interaction modern dance concerts, and uses my artwork as part of the projection on stage. Because I see dancing as creative inspiration, and I have always visualized dancing in my paintings, this is my dream come true. On our projects, Valerie Williams remarks, Always working; that’s what we do. Always thinking, feeling, exploring, creating, and producing.

Hiromi and her paintings have been present in my work for 3 years. Sometimes simply as projections for a dance, sometimes as inspirations for the dance, and now for dancing in the painting. We’re currently exploring several different ways to get the dancers into the projected paintings; traditional projections are beautiful, but by using colordepth concepts and 3D glasses we can get even more virtual depth. It is very exciting. Exploring and creating is the best of life. I am privileged to do that every day. Hiromi and I make work that tickles our minds and gives meaning to our audience. (2009)

Opportunity

In fall, 2008, I had a great opportunity to work with Patrick Dougherty for Ames Public Art project at Ada Hyden Park, in Ames, IA. Dougherty created a large-scale environmental sculpture of willow saplings with no nails or bolts. It is the most ancient way of building, and Dougherty said that the method is in our DNA. I participated in the project both in the preparation and in the construction. In preparation, I gathered saplings in Ledges Park, Boone, IA. In the construction, I helped to weave the saplings and shape the walls of the sculpture. Many people volunteered to participate in the project, and I realized how art brings the community together. Dougherty was kind enough to come and see my paintings one evening in October. Patrick and I talked about the spirituality of art and my thesis show and this paper. For the thesis paper, Patrick sent me this quote:
Patrick Dougherty: I am always quick to remind my sponsors that one sculpture can’t save a main street which is run down or a lobby which they consider ill designed. On the other hand, I remember that my real breakthrough as a sculptor came when I realized that people need more than functional chairs or well designed coffee mug to have a rich and sustainable emotional life. It is equally important to have our imagination stirred and our pulse quickened by a provocative idea. Drama, dance, a good novel, all artistic efforts, seem to exercise the viewers ability to feel and give language to the endless nuance of emotion within us. Having conceived how important my efforts to build an evocative sculpture could be, I begin to take my rightful place in the world of work. (2009)

After the completion of the project in Ada Hayden Park, I went back to the site and danced. The “Restless in Nature” video was filmed by Valerie Williams.
Figure 8: Still from a video “Restless in Nature” - Ada Hayden Park, Ames IA, November, 2008
PROCESS

Process of Creation

When I begin a new painting or paintings, I turn on some music and start dripping paint over the canvases. That is my ritual of art making – “let it rain and let it flow.” Then I start dancing with the paints. My process is very simple and not unlike improvisational dance. I keep responding to the marks and the colors. Since the work is process oriented, I have no finished images in my mind at the beginning. I just let my intuition go wild; I let my body move and see what happens.

Inspiration comes from energy, space and movement. I paint just like a dancer who is improvising the dance on a stage. On the stage the dancer responds intuitively and simultaneously to what is going on around him or her. To do this, one needs a razor sharp sensibility. Then somehow there comes a moment when everything resonates miraculously. It is ecstatic. I am in search of that moment as I move through the chaotic creative process of painting. The reason I say the process is ‘chaotic’ is because there is no sketch or storyboard for my paintings. I just let paints dance and see how it works as a whole on the canvas. Every canvas is the creation of a new space, and to create this space, I have to go through a “Big Bang” at the beginning of each and every painting process. Hofmann writes about his space:

Space expands or contracts in the tensions and functions through which it exists. Space is not a static, inert thing. Space is alive; space is dynamic; space is imbued with movement expressed by forces and counterforces; space vibrates and resounds with color, light and form in the rhythm of life. (Hofmann, 1967, p. 66)

Sometime in the depth of creative chaos amid the numberless repetitions of trial and error, suddenly, something starts to shine. It could be anything, perhaps colors, brush marks or even drips. This is the moment when I suddenly see the music on my canvas. Colors and marks appear to dance and sing. The music becomes the light I discover in the depths of chaos. I want my paintings to sing. It is the joy that overcomes my struggle with the creative process.
My brush marks look very similar to ENSO; the circle/symbol of Zen. It symbolizes Japanese aesthetics, enlightenment, the universe, and the void. It represents the expressive and momentary movement of the spirit. Since I make marks with the movement of my whole body, I had never even stopped to think that I grew up with a brush in my hand learning calligraphy. From my early childhood, making marks has been a part of my life. In my practice, calligraphy should be done without editing or overlapping of the strokes. At my thesis exhibition, quite a few of people remarked about a resemblance between the mark making on my paintings and Japanese calligraphy. Now, I use more colors than Sumi ink, but am still holding brushes and using them to make marks. Another image I often contemplate in terms of mark making is Ouroboros, the image of the sacred “circle” made by the serpent biting its tail. Ouroboros symbolizes the circular nature of the alchemist’s opus. In alchemy, the art of transformation, attempts to achieve the ultimate enlightenment. Ouroboros is a magic symbol of purification. Here I see a link between Ouroboros and water.
Water is the media of purification in Japanese culture. It is myself, Hiromi. It is the content of the life giving rain. In these ways my spontaneous mark making connects with universal imagery and thought.
On Work

Studies of paint and water

This body of work, I have entitled “State of Being: Perpetual motion.” It is an expression of my manifesto to be an artist and hunter-gatherer of optimism using the iconography of water. As preparation for this series, I shot several hours of videotape recording the motion of paint on a glass and in water. This imagery served as a source for my video project and digital drawing. While editing the video footages, I kept staring at the flow of paints over and over again day after day. Eventually I became so involved in this study that I had little time to paint. I did, however come to understood the movement of water very well because of the extended periods time viewing video.

The accident

During the developmental process, I had an accident that forced me to take two canvases off stretcher bars. A Napthol red acrylic paint tube had slipped into my oil paint box, and I combined it with a Hansa Yellow oil paint to mix various hues of orange and paint all over on two oil paintings which were almost finished. After spending more than two months on the paintings, it was extremely hard for me to take them off, but I had to do it. It was a bitter lesson I learned: always be aware. I suppose I should have known, the weight of the red tube felt strange when I held it in my hand. It was too light for oil paint.

When I saw the surface of ‘Perpetual Motion I: Alchemy’ begin to wrinkle and bleed in front of my eyes, I thought “No way! Not the third one!” The wrinkling and bleeding was caused by a chemical reaction resulting from the application of an alkyd walnut medium that was too strong. I put the medium on the surface to speed up the drying process of the oil paint. Since the layers of paint beneath were so thick, and the medium was too strong, the top layer started to dry rapidly and the rest of the layers could not catch up to the process.
The time was past three a.m. so I decided to let it go until the following day just to see what would happen.

The next morning, I was pleasantly surprised by the beautiful result caused by the chemical reaction. Then with more confidence, and the determined mind of experimentation, I decided to use more walnut alkyd medium, glazing medium, walnut oil and mineral spirits on the painting to see what more would happen. Saved by a happy accident, I am more than happy with the result. Because of this chemistry of experimentation, the painting, ‘Perpetual Motion I,’ also got the nickname, “Alchemy.” (Figure 12).
‘Perpetual Motion II’ and ‘Perpetual Motion X’ are about the Rainbow Serpent making splashes to bring water as rain. In other words, this is about the Rain Dance of the Rainbow Serpent. In this painting, water is playing with spectrums of light to generate rainbows. In Japanese myth, snakes and dragons symbolise water and creation, and they are seen in writing, art and religion. I combined ancient mythology with scientific knowledge about the anatomy of light, and the spectrum. Valerie Williams gave me a pair of 3D glasses and I love them; they allow me to fully experience the spectrum. Valerie and I are now planning the visuals for her upcoming fall concert, 2009. The concert will feature the anatomy of light and color theory.
“Perpetual Motion III” is about the dynamics of the movement. Drips of paints create upward movements and brush marks add the aesthetic tension described by Hofmann:

Hofmann: The product of movement and counter-movement is tension. When tension — working strength — is expressed, it endows the work of art with the living effect of coordinated, though opposing, forces.

‘Perpetual Motion I’, ‘Perpetual Motion IV’, ‘Perpetual Motion VII’ and ‘Perpetual Motion VIII’ are, in a way similar efforts, created on the concept of physical energy made visual with colors and brushstrokes. The size of the canvases facilitated this translation of physical energy into paint, because metaphysically I feel I can just jump into the canvases and dance around. Hofmann’s remark applies to my practice of dance as well. That is how I feel when I am improvising with dance to create the dynamics of space and energy.
‘Perpetual Motion V’ is about the transformation of water. Water is able to transcend its own mode of being. In this piece I incorporate with water symbol of alchemy. The same symbol is used in the astrological and meteorological systems, where it signifies water and rain showers. It seems to me that the sign denotes the downward movement of liquid.
Water also can transform itself into any of the three states of matter; solid, liquid, and gas. I played with the shape of the sign by manipulating its direction to symbolize the transformation of water from one state to the other. Especially, on this work I tried to express the upward evolution water as humanity and vapour. I see a unity between humankind and water; the human body is more than 80% water. I wanted to convey the constant development and upward expansion of the spirit and with it the upward advancement of human life.

‘Perpetual Motion VI’ is about reflections on running water. You can see the stream of moving water and your reflection in the painting. The movement of the stream is presented with a wash of paints. After I brought my work up in the gallery for the exhibit, sitting alone in the space on the first day, I started to see my work very critically because I did not know what to do after I stopped painting. Up to this point in time, I always had work in process. Then I
thought I could use one more brushstroke on this work and brought it back to the studio. One stroke here, only one more there…followed by an extra million strokes, and eventually I lost the original work. So I had to start all over again. It was May 11 and I kept painting till May 21, two hours before the reception. You might have seen a couple of drips on the floor. A live performance of paint was in progress on a wall of the Gallery. In 2006, I made a mixed media painting “The Pond Within You.” That work was about looking into your heart in spreading ripples. This work, Perpetual Motion VI, is part of the same quest, but accelerated in speed; this time you are looking in running water, not ripples.
‘Perpetual Motion IX’ is about water as an awakening state of mind. This is a subliminal painting on which to meditate. “Subliminal” means “beneath a limen (sensory threshold).” As your mind, awakens, threads of thoughts come to you. Water is the symbol of unconsciousness in alchemy and psychology, and physically it is the sign of LIFE. As we all know, spaceships to other planets to look for a sign of water to see if there is life. In this painting, the viewer is placed comfortably in a water-unconscious state of mind, searching for solutions and answers to riddles. Emerging along the limens, you start to sense the new understanding of enlightenment.

‘Perpetual Motion XI’ was originally started in 2004, when I was painting sunflowers on the canvas. Since it was not finished yet, I painted more and decided to include this painting in the show. This work has a stained glass quality though, that was not my intention.
The glazing technique was applied here is to maintain the colors and marks of my original painting, "Sunflower." Additionally, it has an important message, sunflowers are used to extract and to neutralize toxic substances from mother earth. They were used after the Chernobyl disaster to remove nuclear chemical elements from the earth. In this perspective, sunflowers and water connect in the concepts of purification, cleansing, and motion. At the same time, sunflowers remind me of my grandmother, who was praying to the sun every morning in her garden. I love sunflowers.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Through my art I try to convey optimism; this is my contribution to humanity. To achieve my intent on a canvas, I keep painting until I feel that the forms and colors ascend to that thought. One reason I choose to work on large size canvases is because I can move my entire body freely so that the motions of painting can resemble, if not become, dance. Another reason that large canvases relate to me as an artist is that, somewhere in my heart, the vision of Lascaux’s cave paintings are vividly imprinted. In my mind’s eye I see all the colors and forms dancing across the humongous ceiling of the cave.

“Art can save the world.” That is the theme, and the hope, that I pursue as an artist. It has been the proper role of art to communicate directly to the human heart and spirit since the time of the cave paintings at Lascaux. As a successor of the hunter-gather, I would like to carry on a spirit of optimism in my work. Agnes Martin, to whom I feel close in my philosophy on art making, speaks to the spirituality of art in an interview with Joan Simon.

(Joan Simon): In what sense do you consider your work spiritual?

AM (Agnes Martin): I think that our minds respond to things beyond this world. Take beauty: it’s a very mysterious thing, isn’t it? I think it’s a response in our minds to perfection. It’s too bad, people not realizing that their minds expand beyond this world.

JS: Did your studies of Eastern thought and religions enter into your work in any specific way?

AM: What I say is that we’re capable of a transcendent response, and I think it makes us happy. And I do think beauty produces a transcendent response. (Simon, Joan, 1996, p. 85)
FUTURE ACTIVITIES

I am going to work on “Generation Rescue,” The Autism foundation supported by Jim Carey and Jenny McCarthy; generationrescue.org. My art will appear on T-shirts to help raise money for their Autism foundation. The promotion is called “100 days to 1 million dollars,” which starts August 1, 2009. This is another way that my art can become a positive force in human life.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank all the people who helped and guided me in this thesis and exhibition. Thank you to my major professors, Barbara Walton and Brenda Jones, and my committee, Janice Baker. I also want to thank Valerie Williams for her expertise in dance and computer engineering, and Paula Streeter, whose help made everything possible. I would like to thank Jane Venes for editing my writing. Finally, I would like to thank my family, friends, and all my teachers. I could not make it without you. Thank you.
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