

Art as a Reflection on Nature  
A Process of Self-Discovery

My work is not about seeking to create a copy of nature; instead it focuses on capturing my expression of an experience in the landscape. I am interested in art, psychology, and nature. My art is a process that leads me to reflect on my experience and decipher my emotional relationship to the world. From a psychological standpoint, I view art as an experience and a source of expression. I identify with Lee Krasner who believes that nature is within the creator. The meaning of her artwork is not solely based on the final product but emphasizes the process of creating. She paints by relying on her impulses, unconscious desires, and life experiences. Along with Lee Krasner, the work and ideas of Vincent Van Gogh, Piet Mondrian, and Jackson Pollock have been inspirations to me as I have established the framework for my artistic ideology. Similar to these artists, my artwork is a tool for self-expression and portrays my reflection on landscape.

Philosopher Guy Sircello believes that individuals convey ideas through art.<sup>1</sup> He states, “works of art are like expressions.”<sup>2</sup> Both verbal and non-verbal art are sources of expression; they illustrate the creator’s beliefs, ideas, and emotions. For instance, “when one is seeking to express oneself, one is seeking to discover what his own fundamental nature—his ‘self’—is.”<sup>3</sup> From this view point, art is subjective because it functions as a person’s expression of the objective world. Individuals use art to exhibit their emotions and ideas. I connect to the art physically via a pencil or paintbrush and emotionally with my mind and memory. I express myself through work that examines my experience with in the landscape.

I find beauty and power in nature and use it as inspiration for my artwork. Van Gogh chooses to represent landscape in his artwork; he observes nature and responds to it with varying brushstroke and color. He is known as a Post-Impressionist artist who aims to represent an environment with a focus on expression through exaggerated mark and hues. To Van Gogh the essential quality in art is to express oneself and the subject one is portraying. His work stays relatively representational throughout his life and is based on practice. He never assumes that he is finished learning and making art. He states, “It is a hard and difficult struggle to learn to draw well.”<sup>4</sup> Through constant observation of and aspiration to express the natural environment, Van Gogh applies an art procedure that is structured on the idea that improvement can only be obtained through practice. However, there are times when a subject matter, such as nature, has the power to inspire the artist, as Van Gogh states, “Ideas for my work come to me in swarms, so that although solitary I have no time to think or feel, I go on like a steam engine at painting.”<sup>5</sup> It is during these artistic moments when Van Gogh is able to create work full of expressive technique. I am interested in his art because he relies on nature for artistic creativity. His work

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<sup>1</sup> Sircello, Guy. 1978. *Mind and Art: an essay on the varieties of expression*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Sircello, *Mind and Art: an essay on the varieties of expression*. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Sircello, *Mind and Art: an essay on the varieties of expression*. 311.

<sup>4</sup> Stone Irving. 1937. *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent van Gogh*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Barr, Jr. Alfred H. (1970). *Vincent van Gogh*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 33.

and ideas have helped me approach art as a process of discovery and constant practice. I focus on varied brushstrokes and convey myself through color. Even though the color presents less contrast, when compared to Van Gogh's works, it is derived and exaggerated from the specific landscape.

Van Gogh tries to capture the essence of nature and artistically expresses himself through drawing and painting. He states, "what I am trying to acquire is not to draw a *hand*, but the *gesture*; not with mathematical correctness...but the *expression*...In short *life*."<sup>6</sup> He is trying to capture the moment within nature, expressing its significance rather than depicting it precisely. The *Wild Vegetation in the Mountains*, Saint-Rémy 1889 (reed pen drawing, brown ink), portrays Van Gogh's goal to capture the environment surrounding him. Every stroke is unique and their combination creates a harmonious composition of a landscape. The piece presents an atmospheric perspective by having defined marks closer to the foreground and less apparent marks in the background. Therefore the composition presents strokes and objects receding in space. The elements of differing marks in the work reveal the essence of the environment and make up the overall vision of the landscape. The shapes that are composed by the marks represent vegetation, such as leaves and flowers. I am interested in this work because of the way Van Gogh's strokes are expressive and each mark is unique. He is not only expressing what he perceives but, moreover, the mark represents an emotional reaction to the vastness of the landscape. I view the emotion represented as overwhelming and, perhaps, of a "wild" nature, simultaneously driven by the feeling of fascination by the beauty and power of the land.

Similar to Van Gogh, I have approached my art project through drawing and monochromatic painting in order to express my reflection on nature through unique mark making. For instance, *The Search for Landscape (Identity)*, 2008, is a piece created through the use of a limited palette, which helped me focus on the expressive power of the brushstroke rather than the color. The foreground is layered with warm hues of linear marks of different thicknesses that flow towards the right hand side of the painting. The background consists of fewer and smaller strokes, which recede further than the multiple layers of mark that are formed in the bottom of the piece. The work does not depict a specific place; however, it does reference my experience in the landscape through an abstract composition. I am interested in creating abstract paintings that indicate the presence of a landscape.

Van Gogh also approaches color in his work as an important element of expression. The *Wheat Field with Cypressess*, 1889, is oil on canvas and reveals his deliberate use of intense color. The work consists of yellow hues in the foreground representing wheat, greens in the middle ground to form bushes and trees, and the background is full of large white and blue strokes portraying clouds. These large light blue and the small linear strokes of yellow-orange contrast the darker blues and greens on the right side of the work. The brush technique is similar to that of *Wild Vegetation* but it includes color. The somewhat exaggerated color provides the painting with an expressive effect and emotional quality. For instance, *Wheat Field with Cypressess* presents Van Gogh's subjective use of color, which I view as an act of expression. The philosopher Sircello believes the composition's expressive technique relates to the artist's emotional state during the creation. I feel that this piece reflects happiness because of its bright

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<sup>6</sup> Stone, *Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent van Gogh*. 340.

color and gentle mark depicting the clouds. I like this image because Van Gogh represents the vastness of the sky and wants to capture its essence. When I am observing nature I find myself interested in transient objects, such as sky and water. *Blue*, 2008, was derived from the observation of clouds and the piece resembles blue wave-like strokes. The painting captures the imagined sky which I derived from my experiences in nature. The composition presents my emotional connection to the landscape; I view it as an immense calming environment that provides contentment and I wanted to depict that in my work. In the pieces titled *Ephemeral* (2008) and *Transient* (2008), I also aim to portray the fleeting moments of nature, the constant movement of water and sky. The pieces are composed of gentle flowing marks of yellows and blues by which I want to express myself in relationship to the landscape and capture its ephemeral qualities.

I begin my art process by studying the outside environment that is available to me: the St. Mary's Campus. More specifically, I am attracted to the waterfront and the sky in the afternoon and evening when the light, color, and objects attain an ephemeral quality. I have developed a sketchbook of *Nature Studies*, 2007, which consists of quick drawings that aim to capture these fleeting moments during my observations. The work mostly concentrates on presenting the essence of water and sky. I made some of the images with colored pencil and oil pastels in order to create the color palette that relates to what I see within the natural environment. Following this experience within the landscape, I used the sketchbook images to create a larger panorama painting (*Untitled*, 2007). This process led me to reflect on past experiences and recreate them through abstract form. The work portrays a resemblance to the images in the *Nature Studies* and leads the viewer's eye by repetitive stroke and color.

My process of art making has been influenced by psychology. My painting style is a learning process. I view art as an experience, an act of play and action. I believe artists present their transformative powers in turning material into art. Psychologist John Dewey believes that "As the painter places pigment upon the canvas, or imagines it placed there, his ideas and feeling are also ordered."<sup>7</sup> He views art as a way for individuals to express themselves, their emotions and thoughts. Furthermore, Dewey states, "Subconscious maturation precedes creative production in every line of human endeavor."<sup>8</sup> The artist's mark is derived from the unconscious and conscious emotions and past experiences, which are then embedded in the art. The process of creation is illustrated through spontaneity and order; individuals have the freedom (of inspiration) and constraints (of the medium) when creating. However, through knowledge and practice an individual can overcome his or her restraints and develop artwork freely. Dewey refers to art as "nature transformed by entering into new relationships where it evokes a new emotional response."<sup>9</sup> Painters express themselves through their work and respond to the surrounding environment. The act of making art is an experience on its own because it is an act of making and discovering, which reacts to memories and forms new ones. "Each of us assimilates into himself something of the values and meanings contained in past experience."<sup>10</sup> This is why artists express their memories and ideas through creation. The process of making and responding to experience provides an existence of selfhood for the artist. In my work, I love

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<sup>7</sup> Dewey, John. 1958. *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*. 71.

having the ability to manipulate the medium or letting it guide me and create something into art. The experience of making art brings with it a feeling of freedom, freedom to express myself.

My artwork progressed through a series of works titled *Response to Nature (Nature from within)*, 2007. These pieces presented the process of creation as a source of play and discovery. I worked with fast fluid strokes (India ink) on cardboard. This helped me get away from planning my artwork ahead of time and allowed a greater variety of marks to emerge. Since the materials I used were inexpensive I was encouraged to experiment with brushstroke. The works were still based on my reflection on nature; however, they presented me with greater freedom than my previous works on canvas. Working on cardboard led me to discover the power of each mark and its unique form within the composition.

Whereas my work focuses on the varied meditative mark, Mondrian is an artist who provides order to art. Mondrian's work relates to the study of nature but also emphasizes a formal system. He wants to express the ideal art through the structure of line and color. Mondrian's ambition is to "discover external, universal, absolute truth and essential reality, as opposed to fallacious truth of nature."<sup>11</sup> He aims to capture human identity within the artwork, believing that it is the ultimate reality. Similar to my work, Mondrian's art is embedded with the connection between the natural and abstract. He states, "a true conception of the *meaning* of inward and outward, of spirit and nature, shows this *perpetual return* as the recurrence of *one and the same thing*: the *universal inward* which...matures in man precisely through the reciprocal action of nature and spirit."<sup>12</sup> He believes that inner and outside nature are the same thing, together they represent reality. This may explain why Mondrian's art style changes; his early artwork exhibits the expressionistic tendency of capturing light and motion through color and stroke, but his later works reveal abstract and geometric forms.

Mondrian's earlier work, *BOS (Woods); Woods near Oele* in 1908, was created through the process of observing the landscape, focusing on the flow of light and emphasizing the colors. Brushstrokes are large and extend throughout the composition, which is made up of a cool color palette. The foreground is composed of linear strokes that form trees and branches, whereas the background is lighter in stroke and color, and composes more trees in the distance and a sun. I am interested in this painting because Mondrian creates it by observing the landscape and painting the essential visible characteristics, which lead towards abstracting reality. Mondrian's *Composition with Blue, Gray, and Red*, 1913, expresses an abstract depiction of a space. The piece is composed of a blue-yellow palette and consists of geometric shapes that are outlined with black linear strokes. The center of the composition presents the layering of rectangular objects and has an atmospheric perspective; it is perceived that the shapes at the corners of the piece are descending into the background. From this work, it is evident that Mondrian moved on from earlier concentration on light, color, and form to the pure essence of landscape. Both light and color are still existent in the abstract piece; however, there is also the presence of a grid structure that orders the formal elements. Even though, the grid was existent in the environment and in Mondrian's past works, it hid behind the familiar images of nature. Mondrian's goal is to exhibit the essential within the landscape and the self through abstract means, such as the shapes,

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<sup>11</sup> Elgar, Frank. 1968. *Mondrian*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger. 110.

<sup>12</sup> Holtzman, Harry and James, Martin S. 1986. *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co. 48.

light, and color. He feels abstraction to be at the core of universal nature. Mondrian believes that “the modern painter must turn completely away from nature and seek inspiration in his own mind. He must cease to offer an image of the exterior world or the illusion of sensory reality” and instead substitute it for an “autonomous reality” within the self.<sup>13</sup> As in my project of expressing myself and my connection to the outside world, Mondrian references the two worlds and represents them in his art. Nonetheless, my work alludes to a landscape and I am combining the nature of the self and the exterior world, whereas Mondrian concentrates more on abstraction.

The style and theory behind Mondrian’s art is pertinent to my work since the focus in his early work is on representing landscape through abstraction. By examining my environment and reflecting on my experience when creating the work I arrive at abstraction. For instance, *Air*, 2008, is a piece that does not represent a landscape directly but captures my reaction to the memory of one. Even though the color palette is limited, the strokes are lively, varied, and form a composition that presents motion. I believe this piece exhibits a life of its own, which I desire in my work. *Air* invokes a feeling of freedom for me, because of the quick strokes and warm color.

The work of Pollock and Krasner is abstract and based on the self and their experience in the world. They are Abstract Expressionist artists, who emphasize the gesture, the unconscious stroke of the creator. This abstract style has its root in Surrealism, which focused on the unconscious and depicted incoherent dream-like imagery. Abstract Expressionism is interested in representing *the self* mark obtained from the artist’s unconscious impulses. In Pollock’s work, the “method of abstraction began as a process in which images were distorted and eventually dissolved in a plethora of lines,” but eventually abstraction “lead to the total destruction of overt imagery.”<sup>14</sup> Within the book of his psychoanalytic drawings, Pollock expresses himself through the unconscious mark and arrives at a process of exhibiting his emotional states. For instance, “During periods of ‘violent agitation’ Pollock seemed incapable of rendering clearly articulated shapes, and produced impulsive, jagged drawings.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is evident that his emotional state controls the artistic mark. Plate 2 presents shapes with sharp edges stacked together to create a pyramid structure. The piece’s detail is closer to the center of the page. It is necessary to note that he used a black colored pencil, which leads me to suspect that he had color at his disposal, but still chose to use black. This observation provides evidence for the creator’s portrayal of an emotional reaction of frustration within the piece. Even within Pollock’s drip method, there is an expression of emotion and an element of control when he pours specific colors in deliberate ways onto the canvas. Pollock states, “‘I am nature,’ meaning that he acknowledged only one source of inspiration, only one authentic impulse—the one within.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, my own art is based on the inspiration of both the natural landscape and the emotional reaction to the experience with nature. My work is a search for the unconscious mark within the self in relationship to the memory of that landscape. I use Pollock’s drip painting techniques when I begin my work and attempt to find a balance between the spontaneous and the controlled mark.

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<sup>13</sup> Elgar, *Mondrian*. 110.

<sup>14</sup> Wysuph, C. L. 1970. *Jackson Pollock: Psychoanalytic Drawings*. New York: Horizon Press. 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> Wysuph, *Jackson Pollock: Psychoanalytic Drawings*. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Wysuph, *Jackson Pollock: Psychoanalytic Drawings*. 26-27.

My artwork relates to my experience in landscape but also to my psychological awareness during the process of making. For instance, the piece titled *Transparent*, 2008, captures my reaction to the memory of water and air but also portrays my feelings of anger and anguish, irrelevant to the landscape specifically. It is impossible for me to stop my emotional state from penetrating into my work, however, when painting I want to focus my thoughts and feelings onto the memory of my experience within landscape. I think this work is successful because it references my reflection on my experience and my changing emotions. This reflective process promoted the forming of the intense mark and color, such as the sharp dark marks of the under-painting and the flowing strokes of the warm pallet rising from the middle of the work. This represents me overcoming the anger and reflecting back on nature as a calm environment. Similar to Pollock, my project began with figurative forms but has developed into abstract forms. *Wave*, 2008, presents an abstract landscape. It has lightly layered warm color marks in the background. The foreground has a parallel flow of thick blue and green lines that stem from the bottom of the piece towards the right corner. The work portrays my fascination with the beauty and power of nature to surround the viewer. It seems as though the brushstrokes aim to escape from the rectangular form. By viewing this piece I want the audience to understand that nature and art are everywhere and their presence is not limited to the artwork.

Krasner makes a painting by chance, by letting gravity take its toll and dripping paint onto the canvas, then smearing and changing the composition. Krasner states, "I make the first gesture, then other gestures, then observation...Then I just go along with it; its either organic in content, or quite abstract, but there's no forced decision."<sup>17</sup> She is open to change and explores the accidental nature of her art, which develops her work and exposes her history. Krasner herself states, "I think my painting is so autobiographical if anyone can take the trouble to read it."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, her art is not about perceiving the object but about *reading* and understanding it. Her work is derived from her personal life experience and psychological processes. Krasner's piece *The Eye Is the First Circle*, 1960, illustrates the creator's subconscious motions. She let the work show the under-painting because she wanted to express her first impulse. Through this process, the work focuses on the unconscious and resembles an organic object. The even distribution of earthy colors and bold strokes promote the formation of natural shapes. The forms consist of black circular and linear strokes that intertwine through out the piece. A warm palette defines the background, thereby providing contrast between the dark marks in the foreground. The overall piece presents motion and vastness. My artwork relates to Krasner's painting in that I am trying to reach the unconscious and represent it through abstract form by the use of past experiences; in my case it is past visual stimulation from a landscape.

I find it interesting that Krasner has not written anything regarding her art; her statements are taken from interviews. From this observation, I understand her work as self-explanatory; it is the inner and outer natures combined. Krasner states, "the painting in which the inner aspect of man and his outer aspects interlock...are inseparable, transcends technique, transcends subject and moves into the realm of the inevitable."<sup>19</sup> Krasner's work represents the relationship between her experiences and her unconscious through an abstract style of painting. She allows chance and

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<sup>17</sup> Rose, Barbara. 1983. *Lee Krasner: A Retrospective*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art. 155.

<sup>18</sup> Wagner, Anne Middleton. 1996. *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. 154.

<sup>19</sup> Rose, *Lee Krasner: A Retrospective*. 134.

spontaneous stroke to govern her creativity. She states that in her work “change is the only constant.”<sup>20</sup> Krasner’s non-predetermined style of painting examines the unconscious mark but applies it to her life experience. Following Krasner’s example, my work has moved towards embracing accidents and impulses, and connecting them to past experience. For instance, *Landscape Response*, 2008, began with the splattering of paint and uncontrolled smearing of the brush. Nonetheless, I made conscious decisions by choosing a specific brush, color palette, and reflecting on a memory of an experience in the landscape. The foreground consists of thick strokes of browns and blues, whereas, there are smaller varied strokes of thinner paint and a visible yellow hue under-painting in the background. The painting presents an abstract landscape, where the foreground is the land mass and the background is the sky. The combination of the varied marks and the memory of a natural environment portray the connection between the unconscious and the experience that Krasner’s work suggests.

My artwork consists of my experience in the landscape, the reflection of that experience through the process of creation, and the examination of my artistic practice from a psychological perspective. The art process is a way for me to express myself in relationship to landscape. For the artists, Van Gogh, Mondrian, Pollock, and Krasner, art is a tool for expression and discovery. Van Gogh uses nature as inspiration for creating and expressing himself through varied stroke and vibrant color. Mondrian begins with an interest in nature, but then develops a system for an ideal abstract form by representing landscape geometrically. Pollock’s psychoanalytic works reveal the relationship between his emotional state and mark making. Krasner discusses her art as an autobiography and combines her unconscious marks with her experience. These artists’ works and theories have helped me develop my own work. My art is a source of discovery; it is an experience on its own. Moreover, my mark has a meditative quality but it is not predetermined; it functions as a discovery process and focuses on the inner experience between myself and my environment. I want the viewer to realize that art is not limited to the painting, but it exists within the landscape and the self.

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<sup>20</sup> Rose, *Lee Krasner: A Retrospective*. 139.