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St. Mary's Project in Studio Art/Art History

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Awareness of every detail of life becomes mentally taxing throughout the day. My mind is in a constant scattered state due to the impetuous demands of everyday life. The act of painting; however, provides a temporary outlet for me. Creating artwork requires sustained focus on the present moment and the elimination of internal and external distractions. While painting, I am focused, present, and attentive. Painting is a form of gaining a mental balance by mentally removing distractions. Thus, the final product serves little purpose when compared to the process.

Indeed, the understanding of my artwork's nature evolved from the basic sense of *needing* to create for the sake of creating. The reasons for this motivation had not yet been uncovered. My artwork's evolution began with my interest in the emotive experience evoked by abstract expressionist paintings. Specifically, I was interested in the *act* of automaticity in which raw emotions of the artist dictates the painting's becoming. I struggled with verbally explaining my reasons to create abstract expressionistic paintings due to the limits of our language. Visual language has no bounds, and is capable of being ubiquitously understood, even if words cannot perform an articulate explanation. W.E. Kennick explains the nature of abstract expressionism and the limits of explanation in the journal article, *Art and the Ineffable*, "The reason for this ineffability is not that the ideas to be expressed are too high, too spiritual, or too anything-else, but that the forms of feelings and the forms of

discursive expression are logically incommensurate, so that any exact concepts or feeling and emotion cannot be projected into the logical form of literal language” (Kennick, 1961). In abstract expressionism, the conscious and rational mind is meant to be disregarded, allowing for the deeper and more emotional part of the brain to perform the creating (Gibson, 1988). As a student studying biology in conjunction to study art, I am seeking to find a balance between the rational mind and the deeper, subconscious mind. Producing artwork has always provided me with a way to remove myself from the demands of biology by releasing my personal creative spirit hidden in the deepest areas of my brain. Art provides me with relaxation of the conscious while exercising the unconscious portions of my mind. This concept of abstraction is an important aspect to the nature of my artwork and an important reasoning supporting my motivation to paint.

The experience of color and its psychological effects is an important aspect to the abstract expressionist. Color choice, often personal, still maintains a myriad of culturally constructed associations and symbolism. In order to understand my own color preferences in relationship to abstract expressionism, I did extensive research on the artwork of Wassily Kandinsky who had felt strongly about the symbolic significance of color (Fingesten, 1961). The infusion of spirituality was an important aspect to the nature of Kandinsky’s abstract pieces. Kandinsky’s ideas of spirituality and color were concerned with the visual harmony constructed with matching shapes and colors appropriately (Kandinsky, 1977). For example, a triangle was most fitting with the color yellow, whereas the color blue was fitting with a circle. The ideas of Kandinsky confirmed that my color choices are completely unrelated to establishing

visual harmony or spiritual significance. In fact, I am uninterested in how others perceive my color choices; rather, my color choice is an automatic reaction to my own emotional state that is most congruent with the ideas of the automatic process in abstract expressionism. In I choose my colors automatically without rationality, based off of my own intuitive color preferences.

My initial paintings were produced with the ideas of “automatism.”

However, the concepts responsible for my artworks’ formal elements required further elaboration. I began to become interested in using cutout shapes that were repeatedly painted over so that only the edges of the shape appeared. The final product was entirely composed of the impressions made by that one shape. This process was attractive to me due its calming effects; however, the reasons for the calming feeling through the use of repeated structures remained obscure. My color began to take on forms reminiscent of paintings created by the abstract expressionist artist, Hans Hofmann. Hofmann was interested in the “push-pull effects” evoked by certain color combinations (Dickey, 2011). Through Hofmann’s manipulation of color relationships, a painting may not be limited to the space of the picture plane. As a consequence of the “push pull effect,” a spatial rhythm is established in which blocks of color become energized and colors appear to pulsate forward and backward (Dickey, 2011). In this way, only with the viewer’s active participation does the painted object move, breathe, and become alive. For me, color is a reaction of my past knowledge and experiences. It has only become an intuitive choosing process based off of that.

Although color relationships are an imperative feature of my artwork, my personal gain of enjoyment during the act of producing the art piece is far more important

to me. I came to the understanding that my process was in fact my subject matter mid-way through my St. Mary's Project. The reason why I initially chose repeated structures presented in optically active combinations was because doing so provided me with sustained focus and the elimination of choice. In order to emphasize removal of choice and control, I constructed a detailed set of rules to follow prior to creating the artwork. In this way, I didn't have to attend to decisions in regards to how the art piece would be constructed as I did so.

While creating this particular art project, I learned what is necessary for me to maintain single pointed concentration. To me, painting is a form of "tunnel vision" allowing for the clearing of the mind. My approach to painting is consistent with the ideas of mediation. I find direct therapeutic benefits to both the mind and body after I have had a successful session painting. A successful painting is not how satisfied I am with the finished product. In fact, the finished product does not hold a strong importance to me at all. A painting is alive in the moments that make up its creation. I deem a successful painting if time ceased to exist during the process and if the painting provided me with a sense of calmness upon finishing a particular session.

I became increasingly interested in the artwork made by Agnes Martin due to her emphasis of process. Martin produces artworks composed of light color washes and thin graphite lines that are precisely and lightly drawn onto the surface (Anfam, 1993). Her process was very contemplative, evoking the senses of calmness, softness, and peacefulness. Her graphite lines were somewhat out-of-this world. Martin states that making art is intuitive and it is not the artist actively attempting to pull out particular emotions. Rather, it is solely reliant on the viewer's response. Martin, my creating

artwork is my form of mediation. It is what provides me with emotional release as I am communicating my “inner-self” that cannot be represented any other way. Like Martin, I am interested in “emptying my mind” and freeing myself from the constant distractions that plague everyday life. Agnes Martin quote, “when I think of art, I think of beauty. Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not in the eye, it is in the mind.” For me, beauty is a purpose for producing artwork. I find beauty in the process rather than the finished product. So unlike Martin, I feel that a painting becomes alive, it breathes, only during the moments of creation.

The excess information that my mind must take in and process can lead to mental exhaustion. This information often requires me to make small but accumulating decisions. I did not have to endure the experience of having the need to go back and rework a painting because of a potentially “bad” decision. My highly systematic rule set provided me with very little choice in the creation of the painting.

My most recent artwork demonstrates my emphasis on process. In order to eliminate distraction and choice, I decided to first make a set of rules to be followed as illustrated below. The artwork is constructed of 50 individual 180X180 mm paintings on wood panel. I chose the perfect square as the picture plane of the artwork because the square facilitates to my 2:1 ratio presentation of the final piece very well. I began the art piece by first toning each wood panel individually with cool and warm hued colors in approximately equal proportions. Next, I placed ten individual toned panels in front of me and flanked acrylic paints beside me. Masking tape was uniformly placed in the same direction, as straight as possible, onto the surface of the ten chosen wood panels. I chose one paint color and applied the paint onto the open spaces lying adjacent to the taped

portion of the panel. After the paint drying process was completed, I removed the previous layer of tape and placed new tape onto the panel's surface in the same methods as described above. The process was repeated until multiple layers of color overlapped on top one another. I considered a painting complete when the optical busyness appeared adequate. Thus, some paintings are far more complex than others. This process was repeated five times to total the production of 50 individual panels making up one complete artwork. The final product was composed of a size ratio of 2:1: 10 columns: 5 rows composed of perfectly square paintings. Upon the completion, I had to organize the 50 paintings into one unified piece of artwork. Rules, once again, became an important aspect to my determining the relative positions of the individual paintings. Although I have deemphasized the importance of the final product to a great degree, I wanted to create a painting that provided the viewers with an understanding of my process. I placed the paintings of high optical activity directly adjacent to low optical activity paintings. Additionally, I avoided placing paintings composed of similar color schemes next to one another. A primarily green painting, for example, was surrounded by highly different color schemed paintings.

An important aspect to my process of my final art piece was the removal of the tape. Considering that I painted the entire "free spaces" being the areas that the tape untouched, I was completely unaware of how the actual color combination would result upon the tapes removal. The act of removing the actual tape provided me with a sense of excitement and surprise. Even if the color combination did not necessarily look "right," my rules prevented me from going back to fix it. Rather, I would repeat the process with an entirely new color as an addition to the already established color scheme. In this way,

the painting would be completed only when another additional color supported the other colors enough that I could consider the painting visually pleasing. There was no set rule to this. Additionally, placing the masking tape at differing intervals provided me with some experimentation in regards to the design of optically active color combinations. Thin rectangular structures that were adjacent to thicker rectangular structures resulted in higher optical activity. I learned this after removal of the tape of many paintings. Each individual painting was comprised of an interesting composition as a result of differing placements of the tape. Thin shapes appear to recede back into the back of the painting while the thicker and bolder shapes moved forward. The visual stimulation as a result of the color orientation and choices provided me with the interest needed to sustain and support my focus on the present moment.

My color choices in my most recent artwork were bold and optically active. They are placed into an orientation that creates visual tension through vibrational movements reminiscent of “hypnotic” images. I am unsure as to whether the visual experience is a means to enter a trance-like state of mind *or* if my own color perception is altered *due* to a trance-like state of mind. Scientific studies have suggested that color perception is altered during states of hypnosis. The brain processes color differently based off of one’s state of mind. Therefore, color choice may be a consequence of my hyper-focused state of mind while painting.

When I consider the final product, I feel that it is important to create a work that best facilitates the experience of mediation and hypnosis because this helps sustain focus and eliminate distraction. When the visual field is completely occupied by the painting(s), objects in the periphery are removed, thus enhancing the experience of color interactions

by the viewer. However, in order to keep myself focused, it is important to constantly introduce novel paintings. Thus, by making 50 individual paintings and combining them into one, I am still able to always remain focused.

Annotated Bibliography

Dickey, T. (2011). *Color Creates light: Studies with Hans Hofmann*. Boston: Trillster Books.

Color Creates light by Dickey presents an argument by Hoffman on how art was used to change the world before mass media become the prominent means of informational transference. Additionally, the book provides the reader with many written visual teachings that was used by Hoffman. The book discusses the life of Hans Hoffman (1880-1966) and how Hoffman taught many art students through his visual writings. Hofmann believed that art could generate “forces of creation equivalent to forces of the physical world”. This idea describes how value and the cost of a painting can be skewed.

I was unable to read the entire book; however, I read many of the more important aspects of the book in regards to my own work. Most helpful were names of artists that were taught or strongly affected by the teachings of Hofmann. Some of those artists include: William Ronald, Don Jarvis, and Margaret Peterson. Overall, the historical approach and social issues regarding the meaning of art, I found to be least helpful. The best part about the readings was the quotes presented by Hans Hoffman. I would find it helpful to pin some of these quotes on my studio wall as both inspiration and directional purpose in regards to where I would like my SMP to go. Some of the most helpful quotes that pertain to my own artworks include:

- “In nature, light creates the color. In the picture, color creates the light.
- Every art expression is rooted fundamentally in the personality and temperament of the artist.
- Color is a plastic means of creating intervals... color harmonics produced by special relationships, or tensions.
- We differentiate now between formal tensions and color tensions, just as we differentiate in music between counterpoint and harmony.”

Gibson, A. (1988). Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language. *Art Journal* , 47 (3), 208-2214.

Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language speaks about the nature of visual language in abstract expressionism. Many of abstract expressionists were viewed as "Artists' refusal to chart the meaning of their work as elitist..." This existed mainly due to the language barrier between the elitist and "lower" socioeconomic classes. In order to "understand" abstract expression, an individual must have the ability to criticize or articulate the genre of visual arts because there was no easily identifiable image. Part of the reason abstract artworks is so difficult to understand is because language is a limiting factor in general. Words simply cannot do justice an idea that is not of "this" world. Interestingly, many abstract expressionistic artists such as Irving Sandler, T.J. Clark, and Serge Guilbaut, had a sociocultural idea in mind.

I found this article to be exceptionally dense; however, very eye opening in regards to an area of art that I have developed a profound intrigue for. My artwork has always been about "not having any particular *meaning*." Interestingly, I seemed to have been attracted to an area where there certainly *is* meaning and purpose. Identifying those meanings, however, is an "abstract" concept due to the nature of the artwork; thus, the artwork is particularly difficult to understand and explain. Although I have identified the formal elements that I am trying to better understand in my current work, I am reluctant to understand why I am attracted to those particular elements. For example, why a square? Why is my process so systemic and important to me? Perhaps the reason I cannot answer these questions lies with the limited vocabulary/language available to describe such abstractions. Overall, this reading has improved my general understanding of how abstract expressionism functions in the world.

Kennick, W. E. (1961). Art and the Ineffable. *The Journal of Philosophy* , 58 (12), 309-3020.

"There is probably no conviction more deeply rooted in modern aesthetics than this, the works of art express what cannot be expressed in ordinary discourse." This reading went into depth of the philosophical understanding that is vital to the life of abstract expressionism. As the previous reading discussed the language barrier that isolates expressionism, this reading discusses the language that innately exists within this type of artwork. Expressionism is a language in which "feelings and emotions" are at the forefront, exposed in their most raw form. "The reason for this ineffability is not that the ideas to be expressed are too high, too spiritual, or too anything-else, but that the forms of feelings and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate, so that any exact concepts or feeling and emotion cannot be projected into the logical form of literal language." In this way, I feel that abstract expressionism is an outlet that provides both the artist and the viewer the potential to connect spiritually. "If all feelings could be named, if all meanings could be adequately expressed by words, if the forms of feeling and the forms of discursive expression were logically commensurate, then there would be no reason for works of art to exist at all, works of art would not exist, and there is no reason for their existence, and we do not have need for them."

Of all the readings thus far, this reading has been the most helpful. Oftentimes, I find a need for "logical" and "systemic" that likely stems back from my need to place

everything in a category as is often employed by the “scientific method.” However, unlike science, art is not limited by boundaries. Expressionistic artwork is the ticket to allowing an individual to go anywhere they want (so to speak). This reading was truly inspiring because I for once, I feel like what I am doing is something of true importance in my life.

Fingesten, P. (1961). Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art. *Art Journal* , 21 (1), 2-6.

Kandinsky is attempting to find expression of the “pure spirit.” This is what inhabits the terms of “pure aesthetics.” Interestingly, Kandinsky’s artwork was compared to the ideas of Mondrian who believed that the universal was an “illusion and that everything is spirit.” Both of the artists believe in the ideas of spirituality’s incorporation in geometric shapes. Kandinsky states...” we recognize the spirit of our time in the realm of construction, not as clear ‘geometric; construction, which is immediately noticeable, rich in possibilities and expressive, but as an inscrutable one, which inadvertently lifts itself beyond painting; and which, therefore, is meant less for the eye than the soul.” I found this interesting with my own intuitive sense of artwork. I naturally feel more drawn to geometric shapes; however, I do not believe that there is a spiritual component to my own geometric designs. In a way I do feel that my designs were creative in a “meditative” type mind frame- and thus, there is a distinct possibility that my artwork is spiritual given the definition of spirituality in previous sources. Regardless, I am interested in how formal elements such as shape may possess significance in their creation. Many of my interests are solely focused on the incorporation and understanding of color, neglecting the significance of shape.

Kandinsky, Wassily. Concerning the Spiritual in Art. Trans. M.T.H. Sadler. Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977.

Kandinsky discusses in his book “Concerning The Spiritual in Art” that “...He seeks in a work of art...some inner feeling expressed in terms of natural form... fulfill their purpose and feed the spirit...where the spectator does feel a corresponding thrill in himself” (Kandinsky, 2). For Kandinsky, abstract expressionism provides the vehicle in which the human spirit can be transcended through the harmonious rhythm of form and color (Kandinsky, 28). Color, which cannot stand alone due to the limiting edges of the surface of the canvas, relies on form. Form can have spiritual aspects, where color possesses raw emotion, creating a color-form harmony that takes on mystical aspects. He discusses “essential connection” between the two elements. For example, he constitutes yellow as a “sharp” color to the human eye. According to Kandinsky, sharp colors should remain alongside “sharp” forms, such as a triangle or square (Kandinsky, 29). However, deeper colors, such as blue, function harmoniously with the smooth outer form of a circle. A yellow triangle or a blue circle, are in perfect spiritual harmony (Kandinsky, 29). Kandinsky states, “Form is nothing but the separating line between surfaces of color-that is its outer meaning. But, it has also an inner meaning, of varying intensity, and properly speaking, form is the outward expression of this inner meaning... form-harmony

must rest only on a corresponding vibration of the human soul.” In the artwork, Composition VII (1913), Kandinsky uses a palette dominated by the optically active colors of blue and yellow (Kandinsky, 37). Yellow oscillates towards the viewer, whereas blue recedes into the depth of the picture plane. The expressive combination of colors, and the forms in which the colors are presented, evoke a rhythmic, emotionally moving piece. The materiality of the artwork appears subverted; however, the strong underlying forces, that reside beyond the surface, becomes captivating to the viewer through the art piece’s rhythm and harmony of the human soul.

6. Martin, Agnes. Perfection is in the Mind: Interview with Agnes Martin Joan Simon. 1995.

Agnes Martin discussed the ideas of transcendence and abstraction. She states that our minds are capable of going beyond this world. For example, Martin talks about beauty as one of the mysteries of life. She believes that beauty is a response in our minds to perfection. She considers her paintings as nonobjective, as the horizontal lines are removed from the natural world. The fact that people are able to respond to her artwork proves the idea of transcendence from this world. Thus, according to Martin, beauty is the form of transcendence because we are seeking perfection even though perfection is not of this world. In relationship to my own artwork, I would have to disagree completely. I identify myself as scientist in addition to artist. I do agree that beauty is synonymous with happiness. A depressed person finds no beauty in the world, because they do not find happiness. I am unsure if happiness is a reaction to beauty or vice versa. Regardless, beauty is a reaction to the very tangible world that we live in. I don’t believe us capable of entering higher thought than what biology has programmed through natural selection (as a result of our environmental selective pressures). I feel that my artwork is beautiful because it is one of the truest forms of happiness to me. In that sense, I would agree with Martin.