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Artist Statement and Research

SMP in Studio Art, 2012

### Draw of Light: Transformation Taking Form

Though the unpredictable, dive-bomb fluttering of moths frightens me, one night during the course of SMP, I found a moth perched hauntingly still with a damaged wing that I thought was dead and allowed myself to take a closer look. I began sketching, and through the meditative state known to drawing I became absorbed viewing the moth as interconnected forms; powdery, rust colored wings held together by the framework of a fan or fragile wishbone.

When I finally awoke, the moth was gone.

Drawing the moth represented, for me, looking into something unexamined, as I had never studied this creature that I seemed to irrationally fear. It was not in spite of my fear of moths that I chose to paint them, but because of it – I was perplexed by the immense power in a common creature about the size of my thumb to elicit a physical reaction from me and to make me feel uncomfortable. By deceiving me with stillness, the moth had allowed me to see it as intricate designs and varying textures; art became a means of positive means of detachment.

As for the moth, leaving only a sense a mystery with the twinkling light of morning, its' fate was left to be wondered: would the moth even live?

During my SMP, examining such a small, seemingly insignificant creature has made the divide between life and death more ambiguous. Each piece in my *Luna/Sol* series represents an intermediary state of change, pushing and pulling from the light that

summons it. Though my earlier work also concentrated on the ambiguity of life and death, instead of focusing on natural light's relationship to obscuring these boundaries, the work focuses on artificial light.

Moth's circle artificial light because they naturally navigate by moonlight, so their distraction is representative of following a false path on a journey. The tragedy of moth's death from light is possibly a result of innocence or possibly a result of ignorance, but either way it is self-destructive. In observing moth's attraction to artificial light, I wrote in my journal,

“The light is merciless, deceptive, man-made. It does nothing but tempt and distract, and ironically, as it lights, it allows the human viewer to take witness. I look at the lights in my art studio and despite my uneasiness of fluttering moths, my uneasiness of even death itself, there is a constant bug funeral hanging above my head to which I am completely indifferent. From this distance their bodies look like abstract patterns or stars.”

Ultimately, the nocturnal moth's place of refuge is darkness, with darkness usually being associated with danger and the unknown. This place of moth's gathering, as portrayed in the work *Refuge*, is safe in that it is a place where a “moth can be a moth”. Overall, moths symbolize the parts of ourselves we are not always willing to show – the delicate, intricate parts of ourselves. When paired with the universal, divine associations of light, moths represent vulnerability in spiritual discovery.

Contrasting my older works with my recent works, I have made some vastly different choices regarding size, paint type, and color choice. With each of the images *Flock*, *Extend*, and *Refuge* measuring at least five feet in both height and width, I wanted the image to impose on the viewer's personal space; for the viewer to feel small in comparison to the images like the moth itself may feel when confronted with the outside world. On the contrary, some works in the *Luna/Sol* series magnify moths even larger, but on a smaller surface, inviting the viewer to intimately view the details to consider the world of moths. With *Flock*, *Extend*, and *Refuge* I chose to work in a combination of acrylic and oil paint to play up the lightness and heaviness of each medium, and to contrast a drier look with a more luscious look, respectively. Whereas in the *Luna/Sol* series I stuck to primarily oil paint and built it up slowly in layers to focus on the illumination of light. Another change was working in black and white on *Flock*, *Extend*, and *Refuge*, which allowed me to play up the contrast or shading, and therefore drama, in each piece and concentrate on the idea of darkness versus light, while the works in the *Luna/Sol* series use colors that are symbolic of the vitality of life.

Since I was a young teenager, I began identifying myself as “spiritual but not religious”. This phrase that has growing popularity among my generation with one study estimating 19% of people in the United States identify themselves this way (Fuller). Overall, the term “spirituality” versus the term “religion” places an emphasis on intuition and has even been compared to the contemporary term “emotional intelligence” in psychology (Stanczak 2). There are other similarities between individual's ideas of spirituality, such as the idea of “transcendence”, focusing on communication with the sacred, and spirituality being “an active and ongoing process” (Stanczak 3). The process

of art, in that it addresses emotions, aims to communicate, and takes time to develop, can be a spiritual pursuit. Art involves its' own rituals in preparation that show devotion to the task at hand. For me, even in the act of painting itself, frequently my hand moves freely as if from another source, or as contemporary artist Susan Rothenberg puts it, my hand "moves like [on] an Ouija board" (Auping 123).

Despite the growing commonness of the phrase and despite its' general characteristics, each individual who describes himself or herself this way has a different personal idea of the term. My own idea of spirituality does not reject religion completely but instead borrows from various ones to form a hybrid religion, which sees a sense of oneness between living things. Similar to Eastern tradition's concept of reincarnation, science tells us that energy is never created or destroyed, so parts once identified with oneself can physically become other things or go on without the body.

This interest manifests in my *Luna/Sol* series that shows the physical life cycle changes of a moth from a caterpillar from an egg. These stages of a moth appear completely different, yet we are able to link them conceptually as the same self. Especially when magnified, the forms in *Luna/Sol* have a sense of ambiguity through light skewing perception time and place. There is stillness in the moment of each frame, as forms pull to and from the light to suggest emergence into or dissolve from life. Yet, by the suggestion of a series itself, these moments are strung together in continuance.

My other specific interest in spirituality resembles personal superstition, in that I am very aware of irony and often take ironic moments to be "signs" that warrant attention as cause for reflection and that have even influenced my decision making. Many times I have had an experience where I will dream of an acquaintance out of the blue only to run

into them the next day at a grocery store. Such coincidences are subtle but unlikely, and are accompanied by a feeling of relevance.

A high school teacher mentioned to me that irony is god's sense of humor. I find this true to the actual encounters with moths I had over the semester. When I was painting the large, black and white paintings *Flock*, *Extend*, and *Refuge* of moth's



attraction to artificial light, one night I noticed the moth featured in the picture to the above right perched on my light switch to which he would have no inherent attraction.

Another night, a small moth appeared resting slightly above a large moth design in a tapestry in my living suite. The actual black and white, geometrically designed moth was similar to the design of a swirling black and white patterned moth below it, as if the moth was jokingly comparing itself to a larger one. My persistence in painting these creatures was influenced by these moments that seemed to confirm a witty purpose in painting moths. Photographing these moments that were to me visually unlikely became proof in the physical world of a deeper meaning behind the moths I was observing. For now in my journal I wrote,

“For me, where there is faith, there too is doubt. That is to say, faith is not a blind subscription to an idea, but rather, a committed exploration of an idea.”

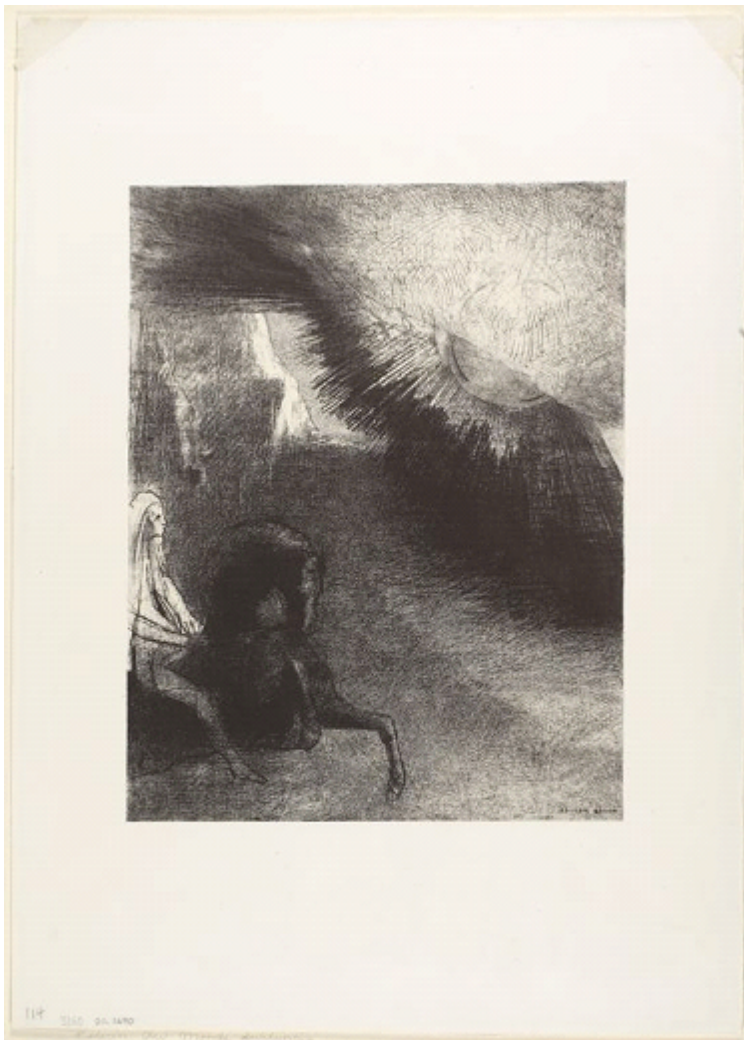
Much more than a question of whether or not I liked my subject matter, painting moths was now an act of faith just to see where this symbol should take me and what else it may come to mean.

According to linguistic sources, the word “sign” can be understood through either an icon or a symbol. Generally, the term “icon” means to have a physical resemblance of what is being referred to (Icon). For example, the image of a crossed out cigarette represents the idea that you should not smoke a cigarette. Icons express an idea in a literal way. In a work of art is generally told through the “facts” of the painting rather than mark of paint itself.

On the other hand, the meaning of a “symbol” has to be learned as it bears no direct, observable correlation to what is being shown, and instead focuses on associations to be learned (Icon). For example, an image of a heart shape represents the abstract word love.

More than any other artist, the Symbolist painter Odilon Redon has been a relatable reference source for me over the entire year. His spiritual philosophies all the way from the early 1900’s in France seem to bear striking similarities to my own in a vastly different society. In his work, Redon has incorporated motifs from various religions, including Buddhism and Christianity, sometimes even in the same piece. Varieties of motifs are also present in my own work, with, for example, the image *Extend*

loosely referencing the crucifixion. As author Richard Hobbs puts it, Redon creates images in a “deliberately confusing manner, so they combine together to suggest affirmation of values that are mystic and idealist without being attached to any definite context” (Hobbs 108). Though Redon’s imagery is highly subjective and personal, it operates on a universal level, and in fact Redon had many supporters including those who referred to themselves as Catholics (Hobbs 126).



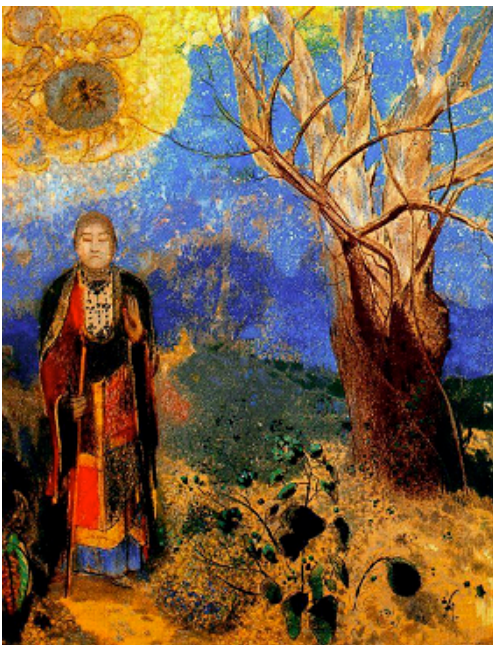
Redon, Odilon. Pilgrim of the Sublunary World. 1891. Lithograph.

Redon’s piece on the left entitled *Pilgrim of the Sublunary World*, shows an unspecified robed figure on a horse to imply a journey, as the figure is looking toward the source of light for guidance. Vaguely referencing to spiritual themes without iconography in this work, Redon asserts that his inspiration actually comes from looking at the physical world (Hobbs 20). Redon would go so far as to look under a microscope to influence his source material. Looking at a specimen broken down into its’

vital parts made its’ appearance more subject to abstraction which “participate(s) in the

indeterminate nature of his vision” (Gamwell 89, Selz 68). Even in his pieces with supernatural qualities, such as a giant spider with human eyes, there is a grounded in reference from the physical world.

Generally, Redon’s work imposes new connections between subject matter while mine depends on seeing established ones. I have adopted the Buddhist philosophy that “to be free from convention is not to spurn it... but it is to use it as an instrument instead of being used by it” with which the viewers of my work can relate their knowledge of the world to my paintings (Watts). On the topic of convention, Redon has used the phrase, “place an unknown next to a known” with the aim to create tension within a work, and he does this by interchanging fact and fiction and using his medium to unify the two (Redon 30). I, contrarily, “place an unknown next to a known” by contradicting a cold fact of life, such as the light kills moths, with the way the paint is handled, in warmer, luscious colors and textures. In Redon’s work the triumph of light over dark is of importance, but in my work light and dark are questioned of their usual positive and negative connotations.



Redon, Odilon. The Buddha. 1905. Oil Pastel.

At times Redon did uses more iconic symbols like *The Buddha* in the pastel image to the left, but did so while impressively creating shimmering effects of light and other atmospheric qualities within his works. Throughout the semester I experimented with dripping paint, layering paint, working with small amounts of color, and trying various types



of paint such as gouache, acrylic, and oil to connect with a viewer of my work on a more visceral level. Many of my early works as well had iconic elements to them, such as the depiction of the lamp as a light source, or a target representing the feeling of being pinned down. Understanding how and when my work function as an icon or symbol has been the most difficult aspect of my SMP, but generally, I have come to desire my work to be symbolic. I feel I have achieved this in works such as *Refuge* or the *Luna/Sol* series. The *Luna/Sol* series was a particular success in this way in that the Luna moth is the most distinguished, iconic moth, yet my depictions of the Luna moth are magnified in a way that sometimes even makes its' life stages unrecognizable, similar to Redon's observational work under a microscope. In Redon's work *The Buddha*, the viewer becomes so captivated by the light and mood of the piece that the presence of the actual Buddha becomes second to this. The incorporation of the icons in Redon's works is flattened to remove emphasis, such as the Buddha's face and hands.

On the contrary, throughout the year, I came to understand the importance of form within my work to mimic the structure behind moths, emphasizing their qualities of life and adding to the perception of moth's dynamic nature. Although moths are relatively flat to begin with, even their wings fan out in different directions when looked closely at. The artist Giacometti says, "the measure of the formal qualities in art is only a sign of the measure of the artist's obsession with his subject; the form is always in proportion to the obsession" (University).

The contemporary Vija Celmins is a highly obsessive artist, who mentions her desire to focus on one painting for the rest of her life (Vija 40). She makes works with emphasized form and space through slowly and tediously building up mark-making.

Although Celmins has a detailed sense of form on the surface of her works, to her, this is second to the actual flatness of the paper or canvas she works on. The viewer can look into the surface of the work or look at the work as a whole.

Celmins and I share an overall sense of stillness in our work. My work *Flock* shows moths paused in a contemplative moment of crisp vision where otherwise their movement might obscure their identity as individual moths. My associating flight with freedom comes from the physical separation of body and ground, a sense of weightlessness. Celmins works from photographs to make “another layer that creates distance” between a viewer and a work of art (Bartman 12). This distance encourages the viewer to slow down, carefully and intimately looking at the piece. Working from photographs also relates to the issue of flatness in Celmin’s work because her references are flat. Eventually she started seeing the photographs as her subject matter to paint in and of them, rather than painting what is depicted in them. Although I too have used photographs in my work, I have used them as a reference or tool, rather than as subject matter. This was done in combination with abstracted techniques from my imagination and observing real moths, to try to capture a full picture of moth’s presence.

Though her work is infinitely complex, there is also modesty and humility to the way Celmins reflects on her images. She paints subjects like stars and the ocean which are loaded with universal associations of power and mystery, but Celmin’s steers away from referring to her art as metaphorical to place emphasis on the formal qualities and process of her work (Vija 27). Comparable in some ways to Celmins, the ambiguity present in selected images from my *Luna/Sol* series also allows the viewers to look at my images abstractedly as colors and shapes. But unlike Celmins, when individual images

add up together as a series, I do aim for a metaphoric quality in my work. Celmin's uses the phrase "building a painting" and claims that her images have memory within the layers she creates in them (Vija 26). For Celmins, as for I, the process of slowly adding to an image brings about a reflective state of mind that is as valuable as the art product.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned a moth that I had the opportunity to draw to discover the forms of its' body and wings. This moth had at first made me comfortable with its' stillness and able to draw it directly from life, and then hopeful for its' life with its' disappearance. Moths, whose life span is only a week and who do not even have mouths to eat or drink with, have a life of sacrifice that seems short from the human perspective. The tangible creation of my paintings serves as a personal release of expressing these ideas, but also preserves a moment on paper or canvas to examine the majesty of life forms while they physically exist. My art, in this way, is a process of holding on and letting go.

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