THE MEDITATIVE EXPERIENCE IN ART AND AESTHETIC

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Department of Art
Abstract

of

THE MEDITATIVE EXPERIENCE IN ART AND AESTHETIC

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This graduate project explores the importance and significance of the meditative state in creating works of art that unite viewers and the maker in the “moment” of artistic creation. Through personal exploration with various materials and approaches over the course of five semesters, the significance of the meditative state as a vehicle for achieving this union with viewers is developed. The final project reflects a successful blending of creativity with the meditative state to allow viewers to understand the significant moment of artistic discovery while allowing the artist to develop the skills and ability to define how to achieve that moment.

____________________, Graduate Coordinator
Andrew Connelly

____________________
Date
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Through physical labor and often a repetitious act, creativity can be enhanced, allowing a disconnect between the mind and the physical/active labor. If this can be achieved, the physical act can yield results while the mental exploration can continue beyond the individual result. I explore this disconnect in much of my work, both in my two dimensional work and in my sculptures.

I believe that if this meditative “making” can be sustained, the extent of the mental exploration is limitless. The goal is not just to have the clear meditative thought process, but also to yield some physical artifact, whether it be a drawing or a sculpture.

*The meditative experience in drawing: Path to discovery*

Drawing can be the most direct connection between mental exploration and physical evidence. Every drawing begins in an empty environment. Choices must be made by the artist as to the reality of this environment. An artist might be thinking about something specific and represent that thing in a manner that can be perceived by others as well as increasing the artistic essence of the conceived form. Or, the artist may begin with the idea of what it is that he or she is going to draw, but through the process of representing the form and exploring that form mentally, successive drawings will help understand the form and further the artist’s understanding of the original concept. So, the process of
drawing and the repetition in the drawing process together represent the path to discovery of what the concept is to become.

Drawing allows for the rapid processing of image without need for materialization. It allows for the greatest freedom to rapidly move from one concept to another or even to explore the same concept over and over again. The speed that a drawing can be conceived of and explored allows for artistic discovery without being limited by physical production. I find that ideas can be explored through drawings and refined; those refinements can lead to sculptures or they can exist as complete entities on their own. Sometimes by repeating an idea for a sculpture dozens or hundreds of times in drawing, it becomes “finished” and no longer needs to become an object.

I also find that a drawing can exist as a magnified view or as a component piece; the entire, three-dimensional realized object that could/might be made does not always need to be drawn. And this component piece can be drawn and redrawn over again until it becomes the piece I visualized. The repetitious process of drawing something – even a small part like a circle or some other form – over and over again is a way of training the hand to draw what the mind sees and wants. It’s the essence of finding production through the meditative process.
The meditative experience in sculpture: The lounge musician

One analogy to the mental-physical relationship in the artistic process is the piano lounge musician. This is an artist who is engaged in the creative act (playing the piano), being aware of his audience and constantly being open to input. The musician is able to keep a friendly dialog going, while seamlessly transitioning from one song to another. The seamless continuum of the music is evidence of the musician’s ability to sustain a physical process while the conversation and recalling of historical information allows for the limitless mental aspect. Though sculpture is not considered a performing art in the traditional manner, there is an argument to be made that there is a performative aspect to the creative process.

Whether the making process is undertaken in solitude or in a public setting, the resultant physical object(s) have a place in a shared world; whatever form this making takes, the resultant object becomes performative by virtue of its interaction with people in the world as they experience a new object. The artist who goes into the studio and makes an object and that object is never shared beyond the studio walls – that piece of art still takes on a life and performs for the maker. If the object is shared beyond the studio walls, the object continues to perform to whatever audience it comes into contact with.

The meditative process in Object Making

The difference between sculpture and object making is that object making is a process that is undertaken with a desire to make something through a physical process whereas
sculpture can be the act of giving dimensional form a concept. A drawing placed on a table begins to develop sculptural qualities. Object making, by comparison, suggests a physical translation between and transformation from a concept and its representation with dimensional qualities of its own. Sculpture can exist with an artist’s hands merely squeezing a lump of clay. The remnants or interaction of the artist with the material takes on the sculptural form, but may not necessarily be object making. When the initial process of interaction with the material is furthered by a desire to turn this material into something other than its raw form, this is object making.

Based on my experience with the meditative process in art, object making can be achieved in any number of ways. Through the repetition of a physical act, the mind can separate from the physical production allowing the mind to explore broadly. This is similar to the meditative state in drawing, except that instead of practicing the line over and over, the artist is practicing a different more dimensional movement. There is a great deal of freedom for the artist that can achieve the physical repetition of making at the same time as the meditative state of imagining. This mental disconnection allows for any number of paths of mental exploration, either along the same lines as the physical act or exploring new directions.
Chapter 2
THE ROOTS OF THE MEDITATIVE PROCESS

I received my Bachelor of Design Sciences from Arizona State University (ASU) in 1991. The program at ASU had a very strong engineering influence as well as being patterned after the Bauhaus model for education. In school, we were encouraged to pursue creativity and originality in the solutions to design “problems” we were assigned. The products and projects we developed were measured as successful or not against strict design criteria including how inventive and distinctive or unique they were.

Fundamentally, I am an object maker. As a result of my undergraduate experience, I discovered that I enjoy making objects. The program at ASU encouraged creativity, so I began to explore art in addition to studying and pursuing design exclusively. In the end, my desire to make objects of art has outlived my desire to create objects of function. (Design is the practice and creation of objects that fit a given set of criteria and are for a specific user group. Art, by contrast, is the personal expression of creativity sometimes taking the form of objects, and other times being conceptual in nature.) Art allows me to create an object that may take on a life of its own and exist for only its own sake. The objects I had been making in design school always followed very strict guidelines for function and manufacture. For me, the creation of objects free from design criteria and end-user requirements is appealing and mentally liberating.
Representation and the beginning of exploring objects of modern myth

After design school, I focused on developing my own art and aesthetic. In the absence of the formal criteria used in design I began to impose my own hierarchy of criteria. The objects created could be described as objects of a modern mythology. I chose to represent common ideas and package them into a form that perhaps had not been seen before. This desire to make an artifact of my own mythology often took on a representational form that relied heavily on craftsmanship. In my work Femininity, which is a bronze chain mail gown, I sought to create a piece to symbolize the power and invulnerability of women by representing a full size chain mail dress. I selected the medium of chain mail because it historically was used to protect warriors in battle. It was my intention to unite this medium with the invulnerability of womanhood. The meditative process for this object was intensive. I hand crafted over 10,600 individual bronze rings, each one nearly identical to the next. Despite the size and mass of the piece, the focus required for the manufacture of these rings was minimal – the physical act of the meditative process doesn’t require much effort at all.
In the end, the measure of success of this dress in my mind was the execution of the chain mail and the overall level of finish; the concept and accompanying myth were carried by the finished piece.

After years of artistic exploration on my own, I felt the need to return to school to gain a better understanding of art making and the difference between art and design. In the beginning of my graduate experience, I was introduced to art theory. This thinking was new to me, and required a great deal of thought on my part to understand how to infuse these concepts into my work. By way of example, prior to graduate school, I imagined that objects could be of a nature so much greater than that of human measure that their making was an unattainable goal. I also believed that there was a beauty that was common to everyone and could be greater than that measurable quality. I believed there was the idea of something that could be universally beautiful. These thoughts led me to believe in the concept of creating a masterpiece. I believed that a masterpiece was an object that would be completely unified in its conception, execution and presentation. I also thought that it had to have an essence, like a soul, of its own. I believed that the maker needed to strive towards giving the object a soul of its own rather than imparting his will on the object. I believed that in this definition, the masterpiece would be unique and would exist on its own rather than relying on a body of work or a reputation of a maker or critical reviews.
Chapter 3

AN EVOLUTION IN MY RELATIONSHIP WITH ART-MAKING

After five semesters in graduate school, I have come to view my work and my approach to work differently. I’m still interested in creating objects of modern myth yet the literal quality of these objects is no longer as important to me. I feel that I can now approach the creative process in a different manner. Rather than trying to conceive of the “perfect” object, I am content to accept that it exists without trying to conquer it with every piece. This new approach frees me from the immediate concept of audience at the beginning of the creative process, allowing my ideas to evolve without the notion of external measure. The most profound evolution in my thinking has been to understand that evidence of the clumsy, repetitious artistic process, not just a final artistic outcome, is one of the most valuable aspects of art making. The ability to recognize the changing quality of line is important; over-reliance on technical skills can often diminish the artistic expression.

During my first semester I completed a piece entitled *Cosmos I*. This was the beginning of this new direction for me. The inspiration for the piece grew from a continuing exploration of very simple geometric shapes working in conjunction with one another.

Using the computer as a tool for graphic exploration before committing to a three-dimensional medium, the substance of *Cosmos I* was
refined and completed. In comparison to my approach to art prior to graduate school, the making of this object was greatly simplified in detail while still allowing the evidence of the maker. After its completion, I felt that it had both a complete concept and execution; using measures of success new to me (an increased focus on process and less on perfected execution), I found it to be, simply, a pleasing object. It is not representational and exists purely as an abstract composition. With the completion of \textit{Cosmos I}, I found myself in a different place in that I began to feel that my work could be weighed against itself and not always against some literal idea or direct translation.

Despite my growth to this point, I felt that my abstract content may not have been as rich as when I was creating representational pieces. For example, I believe \textit{Cosmos II} to be more successful than \textit{Cosmos I} in that I was able to successfully represent my personal journey in the simplest graphic abstract form. \textit{Cosmos II} is both abstract and representational; the representation is that of emotion and life experience. This piece brings together a complex personal mythology to a very symbolic object. \textit{Cosmos II}, in its simplest description, is an arrangement of three circles and three ovals. The first circle represents the positive aspects of existence. The oval contained within the circle describes a path around this positive circle. The second circle symbolizes the negative

![Figure 3: Cosmos II](image-url)
aspects of existence, and the oval contained inside represents a path within this negative world. The two ovals create an infinite interconnected path. This path has one quiet moment – the moment of tangent between the two worlds. A third circle is centered on this point with an oval of its own. This oval is a path that experiences both the positive and the negative, but remains whole unto itself. The meditative experience in this work is in the final result. The work functions as a symbol for meditation rather than having required repetitive action during its creation.

Current Work: An Intersection

I decided to approach the final body of work with a new mission and with a different frame of mind from any work I had previously done. I wanted to try and capture the dynamic aspects of my process. I felt that through use of diverse media I would be able to represent the hand, the emotions and the overall life force of me as the artist. The biggest difference between my final body of work and all the previous work in graduate school is the lack of initial concept as I prepared for this final step. Throughout the making process, I attempted to limit my thinking as to an end result and tried to sustain the “moment of making” throughout the process, which for me is about describing what elements are not present during the making. In the pure artistic moment, the moment melts away, time becomes irrelevant, food and drink are unimportant, ideas and energy seem to be limitless within this creative sphere. This desire, to explore and represent ideas dispassionately and deeply at the same time, I found to be more similar to my approach to drawing but I wanted to create a body of work that was also sculptural.
The cardboard box as canvas

I spent a lot of time considering what form a dynamic representation of creativity could take. In the end, I settled on the interior space of a cardboard box. This cardboard box was of a particular size – one that could allow for a viewer to walk around it, peer down into it and even imagine themselves inside of it; not so large as to become a “sensory chamber” but large enough to allow for a one on one relationship with the viewer. The box began to represent the compartmentalization of many things to me. The interiors of the boxes are an attempt to capture ideas, time, emotion and memories. While I limited my palate to increase my productivity and help unify numerous paths of exploration, I began to discover that by working on the boxes in different configurations I was able to transform two dimensional drawing and low relief sculpture into a contained space that added a sense of time and emotion to the final experience.

Limiting the Palate: Materials and Media

I have explored and presented many different media during my time in graduate school such as steel fabrication, large-scale tape drawings and incorporating cardboard into these large-scale compositions or using it as its own visual tool. The desire to reproduce these compositions led me to printmaking. Through the silkscreen process, I began to explore
the representation of lines and form in a sculptural way while trying to capture a two
dimensional, reproducible representation. While trying to represent line with different
color, I began using different types of line – yarn and tape, in addition to twine, paint
pen, permanent markers, and oil sticks. One significant innovation that came through my
silk screening process was the use of commercial Stretch Wrap as a surface. I found that
I could use any number of media to create line work on the Stretch Wrap, and the Stretch
Wrap could be used broadly – some times I just drew on it, some times I built up layers
with it, some times it contained sculptural objects, some times it formed a transition from
one element to another, and some times it took on the characteristics of the box itself; the
transparent nature allowed for the objects to gain dimension and layering.

The Life of the Drawings and the Lines

Some of my drawing work has taken on a cartoon-like quality. I think that the quality is
not truly that of a cartoon such as an animated children’s story. I think that the quality is
better characterized as a description of the life represented by the drawing. I think the
audience is responding to the fact that each line has a life to it, and each image has a
sense all its own. Some are more representational and others are more abstract. This
essence is characterized by this final body of work. The lines contained in the dynamic
spaces within the boxes are different but they all have a life that is building toward the
whole experience.
Chapter 4

THE RESULTANT MEDITATIVE STATE

The boxes are perhaps the purest representation of meditative making that I have completed to date. The meditative process is sought through each material, at any given moment during the boxes’ creation. Not fixing on an end result and intentionally relying on the finite palate allowed for this meditative making to be far more focused and representative of my vision and approach. Each decision was considered; it was considered against itself as it evolved rather than the end. The meditative act of making is demonstrated throughout the boxes whether through the repetitious forms fabricated from steel, or the wrapping of the yarn around these steel forms, or tying twine circles that appear in plain view and as part of the layering of Stretch Wrap, or as line work demonstrated through any number of representations (sometimes tape, sometimes directly through paint pen, and even the reproduction and repetition of the silkscreen process).

This final body of work did a number of things that I could not have anticipated if I had tried to plan a finished product. First is the apparent universal similarity of experience by viewers – the people who interacted with the boxes were able to understand the art making process in a different way than they have experienced my art in the past. Perhaps
the boxes show an immediacy in the ideas becoming realized; that demonstration of concise speed to actual production is often hard to find in a finished piece of art.

Second, the work has allowed for greater discovery in myself and in my approach. I discovered interconnected materials, and uses that I would never have found working in my traditional manner. I learned to allow decisions and creativity to happen naturally, and this allowed for greater interaction among the materials of my palate, enhancing the final result from the combinations of materials.

Finally, I believe the boxes genuinely create a representation of both my style and emotion. They act as a genuine artifact of me as a maker and they represent the time, emotion and energy of my pursuit. They unify every aspect of my artistic interests – they represent the artistic experience more than artistic production, and while they are objects, they are less about object making and more about the energy and life of the process. ###