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A Meditation on Loneliness and the Mind's Limits:

Combining Buddhism and Art to Better Understand Our Relationship to the Unknown

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BFA in Studio Art: Painting

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Abstract:

In this essay, I explain how my art practice instigates inquiry into uncomfortable subjects such as loneliness and how our limits of perception and cognition prevent us from understanding and connecting fully with our environments. I begin by illustrating how I make such subjects more approachable by exploiting the inherent capacity of art to be both pleasurable and painful: a work's pleasing aesthetic can make one more receptive to its disquieting content. I then describe how eastern philosophy and western art have influenced my practice. I highlight how Buddhist insights into the relationship between calmness, security and clarity have informed my compositions to better enable viewers to contemplate possibly uncomfortable content. And, lastly, I discuss how western artists such as Van Gogh have helped to shape the visual vocabulary I implement to simply communicate complex ideas. The paper as a whole is, accordingly, divided into three sections to ease intake of a rather dense argument. First, in the Exposition, I introduce my ideas. Secondly, in the Development, I more thoroughly explore those ideas using my thesis works and reference material I have compiled. Finally, in the Recapitulation, I briefly restate my thesis, summarize my argument and conclude the essay.

My thesis essay is divided into three sections: Exposition, Development and Recapitulation. In the Exposition the thesis is introduced and its different aspects briefly summarized. In the Development a more in-depth exploration of the thesis takes place using artwork and directly referenced sources. In the Recapitulation the thesis is briefly restated and the overall essay is concluded. This structure is appropriated from the Sonata form in classical music. Though the paper only briefly discusses music, arranging it this way gives my thesis the space it needs to be communicated as clearly and comprehensively as possible.

Exposition: Introduction of Methods and Concepts

As of late, I have been preoccupied with the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and emotional pain in art and how our experience of viewing works can meaningfully affect the way we relate to ourselves and our environments. In my coursework, I have encountered and have attempted to resolve the paradox of tragedy, which asks why we are drawn to negative emotions in art that we try avoiding in life. In addition to becoming more aware of the sadness and pervasive sense of isolation in my own work, my efforts awakened me to the fact that aesthetic pleasure and emotional pain can coexist in art and that this paradoxical property is what fascinates us and leads us to engage “sad art”. I soon recognized that the simultaneous experience of pleasure and pain in art is also central to Buddhist practice, which I have been engaged in for a decade: in meditation the breath is made pleasurable to gladden the mind and make it more willing and able to clearly, patiently and objectively engage and contemplate more unpleasant ideas and thought patterns which create suffering (Bhikkhu 3:35). This overlapping of art and philosophy reshaped my conception of my practice so that I now see a new spiritual potential of my art as a form of externalized meditation. According to the inside out perspective

of Buddhism, we meditate to change the way we relate to ourselves, and this, in turn, changes the way we relate to the world. My thesis work maintains its focus on the emotionally painful subject matter of disunity and isolation, an issue that operates both on an individual and collective level, while working more consciously to function as meditation does: using aesthetic pleasure to make disquieting content more accessible, furthering self understanding by allowing us to engage difficult emotions and intimidating uncertainties in a safe, secure and peaceful way.

My works are paintings which use scenes from everyday, American, urban life to depict in a relatable and recognizable way the inevitable loneliness the human mind feels when confronted with its inherent limitations (Images 2-8). Because the mind is logical and existence is not, because the mind cannot explain how or why anything exists at all, there is an inevitable distance which separates it from everything it encounters. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* artfully describes how hopelessly divorced we are from understanding our own circumstance using the visual metaphor of geometry: it is just as impossible for our Euclidean minds to grasp the nature of existence as it is for them to conceive of two parallel lines converging (Dostoyevsky, 250). I appropriate this mathematical metaphor in my works and use lines to act as barriers. I divide the canvas into simple shapes and separate figures who share a common space into their own compositional compartments (Image 2). By disrupting the continuity of the two dimensional painted surface the implied experience of those inhabiting the depicted world is understood as fundamentally fragmented and lonely.

To achieve a balance between pleasure and pain so that the viewer engages in a sort of externalized meditation, color and composition serve as stand-ins for the breath and are crafted

to calm and satisfy the mind. This better enables the viewer for prolonged engagement with the disquieting themes of isolation and fragmentation the work contains. Colors are similar to chords in music in that when certain chords or colors are paired together they give rise to a satisfying sense of resolution. In music, for example, this occurs when the dominant, fifth chord in a major key is followed by and paired with the tonic, first chord of that key (Rogers 1-2). With visual arts, this resolution occurs when colors on opposite ends of the color wheel are paired together. Therefore, in my paintings, colors such as red and green, purple and yellow and orange and blue are frequently coupled to achieve a calming, satisfying effect (Image 2, Image 6).

Binary color schemes also complete the vitally important task of simplifying the scenes. Reductive ways of rendering allow for easier intake of information, reducing strain on the eye and stress on the mind. Compositions are simplified also with geometry. Scenes are blocked into simple shapes with both literal and implied lines (Images 3-8). The structure and balance which these framing devices bring, wrangling and somewhat organizing the natural forms within them, provide the scene with a calming sense of stability and security. Geometry, thus, references the unpleasant concepts of constriction and fragmentation which underlie the work whilst also fortifying the piece's aesthetic structure, creating a reassuring sense of security which better enables the viewer to contemplate such potentially unsettling subjects.

In all, art's unique capacity to have pleasurable and painful stimuli maintain their potency when paired allows for my work's fractured scenes and isolated figures to be sad but approachable subjects. The clarity of mind which accompanies calmness and security makes objective observation and sincere reflection upon the often overwhelming, disconcerting

concepts of limit and isolation possible. Having been supplied with the necessary support through the works alluring and steading aesthetic, the viewer is able to examine and contemplate the works' more painful and disturbing content; As a result, the individual is empowered through art to address questions perhaps too difficult and troubling to have approached previously, such as how the limits of their perception affect their ability to understand and connect with those around them.

Development: An In Depth Exploration of Ideas Through Artwork

For art to function as a form of externalized meditation, it must be established that in art, like in meditation, pleasure and pain can truly coexist. Proving this basic assertion will form the logical foundation upon which the rest of my thesis will stand. To illustrate how two typically mutually exclusive feelings find equal footing in a single artwork, I will examine my watercolor



Image 1.

painting entitled "Display" and focus on the broad emotional spectrum elicited by the work

(Image 1). The main point in looking at this painting is to illustrate how the oppressive and sad qualities of the piece are able to be appreciated alongside its more attractive, serene and satisfying parts.

The Fission Between Concept and Aesthetic

Composition and color for a painter are equivalent to word choice and phrasing for a writer: each are instruments of storytelling for the artist. In this sense, the above painting tells a troubling story but does so in a compelling way. Regarding negative emotions, the downward perspective collapses space and, with few openings, creates a claustrophobic atmosphere. The elevated perspective from which we view the foreground figure makes his grave expression read more as an urgent plea than an imposing scowl. The close proximity of his strained face to the prickly, jagged, lightning-like forms created by the distorted reflection of dead trees implies intense suffering and severe pain. The tone of the work is dark and dreadful. Yet, one can still appreciate and find pleasure in the aesthetic which communicates this dread and misery: the shimmering blue/purple in the upper-right corner, the delicate artistry of the subtle reflections in the rearview mirror and tail-light in the center of the composition, the way the red glasses are activated by, and themselves enhance, the green patch of windshield to the right. Observing and enjoying the positive aesthetic qualities of the work does not prohibit one from detecting or experiencing the negative feelings the piece promotes. This is why, for example, one is able to appreciate the beauty of Shakespeare's language in Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" speech, whilst also feeling the sadness the words communicate. It is clear, then, that art generally, and my work

specifically, has the potential to give the viewer the paradoxical experience of feeling pleasure and pain together.

This fission between art's concept and aesthetic has, in fact, been utilized by artists to achieve specific ends. In a 2009 interview, the prominent composer and singer Paul Simon highlighted the central role of appealing aesthetics in cultivating in the audience the willingness and desire to engage a work's content. According to Simon, "There are certain sounds that are very powerful emotionally. If you can find those sounds... [and] you have something to say, the listener is open. They're drawn emotionally to the sound and now they will listen to words and, if you have something to say, they can absorb it. If you make a sound that they don't like, even if you have words they like, they won't listen" (Simon 3:37). Simon observes that people are more receptive to ideas if they derive pleasure from how the ideas are delivered. According to this logic, people will engage things they'd otherwise avoid, like artwork eliciting negative emotions, when the aesthetics communicating that content are in some way satisfying.

Not only does this observation reaffirm that pleasure and pain can be felt at once when experiencing art without a muddying of the emotional palette, it also echoes insights into the mind made in Buddhist philosophy; namely, that pleasure is needed for the mind to approach, sit with and comprehend thoughts which are painful and often avoided. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, a monk trained in the Thai Forest Tradition of Buddhism, says in a lecture entitled *Pleasure & Pain*, "Because we [don't look into pain], that's why we suffer so much. And one of the reasons we don't look into [pain] is because it's hard" (Bhikkhu 0:20). Later in the lecture he adds that, "Pleasure [is] a tool [used] as a foundation so that we can look at the pain without feeling

threatened by it” (Bhikkhu 3:35). It follows, then, that art itself can function like meditation, using the pleasure of color and composition to get the mind to engage the perhaps painful content of a work.

Information and Persuasion



Image 2

Looking at the painting above, entitled Birds Nest, one gains a better sense of how this insightful meditative technique is manifested visually on the canvas. One can see in this work what upsetting subject matter my thesis centers around as well as what strategies I employ to communicate my content pleurably. In short, one grasps how the viewer is informed of content and how they are persuaded to engage it. The notion of togetherness and aloneness is at once evident when observing the pair of figures: their silhouettes mirror each other, implying a relationship, but neither acknowledges the presence of the other, suggesting that, in spite of their close physical proximity, they are mentally removed and somehow distant. Composition and concept converge with the vertical lines dividing the picture plane: their prominence interrupts

the viewer's intake of visual information, fundamentally influencing their understanding of the represented world, and signaling to the viewer the centrality of boundaries and limits to the work's concept. Just as the mind's relationship to the painted world is inescapably fractured by the barriers inherent within the scene, so too is one's relationship to life interrupted and defined by the inherent limits of perception.

The inability of the mind to access an unobstructed understanding of life, to answer the question of how and why we exist, creates a type of distance between the individual and everything around them. All that is encountered in life is at once immediately accessible to the senses, yet forever mysterious to the mind, and it is this contradictory, paradoxical existence which creates the latent, ever-present sense of isolation depicted in the work. This feeling and its cause are what I intend for the viewer to contemplate.

The strategies I employ to visually persuade people to engage my pieces involve using color and composition to create coherence and balance and give rise to a sense of comfort and security. Again, to initiate the type of introspective contemplation one finds in meditation, I adhere to Buddhist philosophy. In addition to Paul Simon's observation that pleasure makes a person more receptive to content, Buddhism provides the insight that the tranquility of calmness and the stability of peace give rise to clarity and comfort in the mind, better enabling it to discern and decipher unpleasant concepts (Bhikkhu 3:35). If one refers again to Birds Nest, they will see how the prominent purple/yellow and red/green complementary color relationships provide a satisfying sense of resolution, similar to tonic and dominant chords in music. What further contributes to a sense of calmness and peace is the balance and stability of the composition: the

aforementioned vertical lines which prominently feature throughout the work appear like columns, while the figures are arranged to create steadying triangular compositions. According to Jill Galloway, educator at the National Portrait Gallery, “the triangle shape is strong and stable in that its forces are evenly spread throughout all three sides... From the earliest art movements the triangle shape has represented security and strength” (Galloway 0:50). As can be seen across



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5

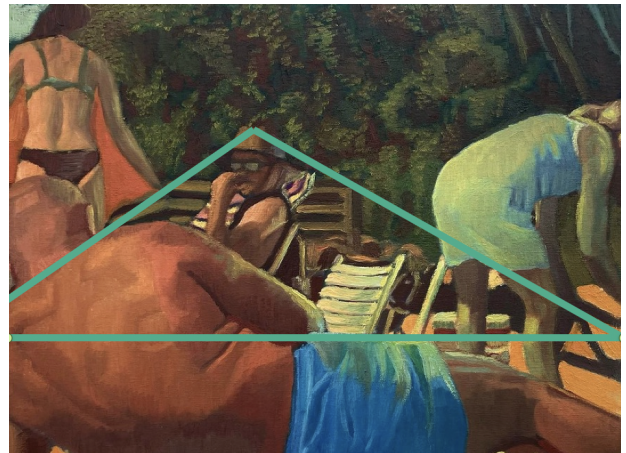


Image 6



Image 7

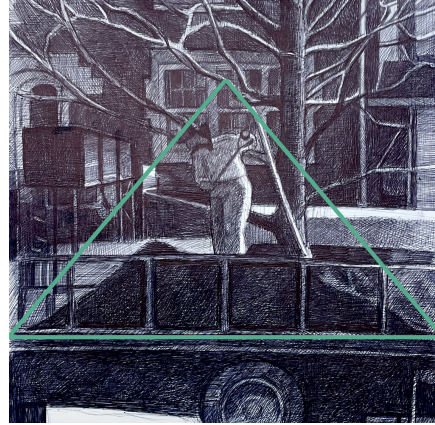


Image 8

almost all my thesis work, the triangular composition plays a central role in making the painting a comfortable, secure place to approach otherwise daunting ideas (Images 3-8).

Clarifications

The preoccupation of the work with the mind's limits has been established. The emotional implications of these limits preventing us from fully understanding and connecting with our environments have been identified. The visual techniques used to inform the viewer of the content and persuade them to engage the works have been explained. With this general understanding of how my paintings function to externalize the meditative process, using pleasure to get people to contemplate painful subjects, it is now worth clarifying a few things.

First of all, while my work is conceptually grounded in and largely shaped by eastern philosophy, its aesthetic is distinctly western: the subjects and settings I depict, as well as the visual vocabulary I use to depict them, are all informed by western culture. The decision to use specific representational language is motivated by the desire to communicate directly, succinctly and unambiguously with a specific group of people: my overwhelmingly western audience. I developed an appreciation for the value of mundane, simple subject matter in communicating complex feelings and ideas from acclaimed Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In his novel

The Brothers Karamazov he states that “the stupider, the more to the point, the stupider, the clearer. Stupidity is brief and guileless, while reason hedges and hides. Reason is a scoundrel, stupidity is direct and honest. I brought the case around to my despair, and the more stupidly I’ve presented it, the more it’s to my advantage” (Dostoyevsky 251). Dostoyevsky’s invaluable insight is that complex language obscures complex thought. The best way to communicate difficult ideas is with easily digestible language.



Image 9

In the above painting entitled *Reflection*, much is said with very little (Image 9). Just the central figure's gaze, which directly looks out towards the viewer from within the surrounding group of seemingly preoccupied figures, communicates the central ideas of societal fragmentation and the disturbing sense of solitariness one can feel within a community. Even the notion of “limit” is suggested in the reclining foreground figure who acts as a barrier between the viewer and the world they are attempting to access. The accessibility of the scene is not limited, however, to the ways in which the work succinctly conveys complex ideas. The familiarity of the

summertime scene to a western audience - many people frequent beaches and depictions of beach leisure in art, cinema and advertising are even more common - makes the imagery more easily digestible, less of a hurdle to be overcome, and allows the viewer to move quickly and with little effort to focusing on the work's content.

With respect to the visual points of reference from which my works draw from, there are none more significant in influencing my appreciation of complimentary colors, mundane subjects and simplified aesthetics than nineteenth century Dutch Painter Vincent Van Gogh. Perhaps the most formative figure in post-impressionist painting, communicating emotion through color defined his artistic practice. Van Gogh used the people and places around him as subjects and as things onto which he could project his subjective sense of what it meant to be a living being.



Image 10

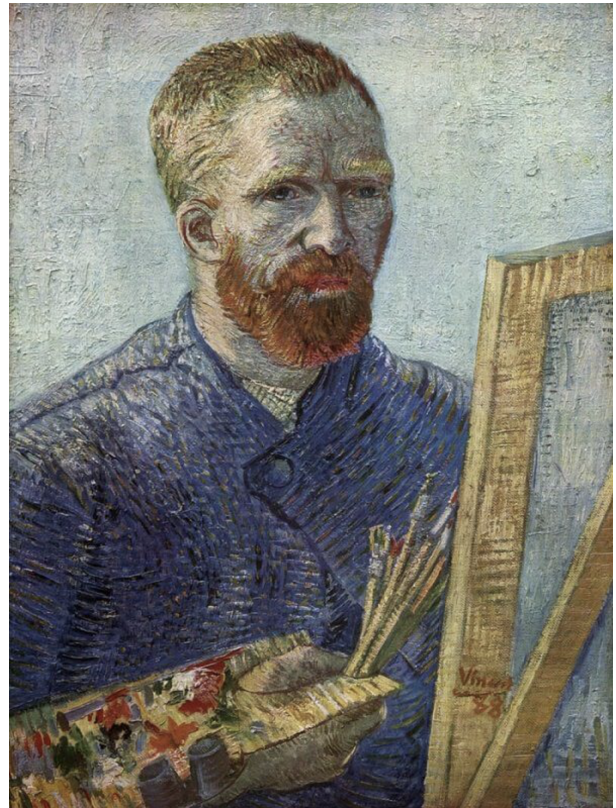


Image 11

Van Gogh, who also expressed the conflict of togetherness and aloneness, presence and absence in his work, says a lot with very little. He has greatly informed what I have noted earlier to be a central component of my practice, namely, the simple communication of complex ideas. If one looks at my painting above entitled *Love* alongside an 1888 self-portrait by Vincent, one immediately notices the shared orange/blue complementary color schemes (Images 10 and 11). Soon after, one may discern the use of the same symbolic gesture to imply connection: the boy's bent arm prominently embraces his sister just as Vincent's bent arm positions his palette and brushes nearer his heart. The color of Vincent's hand is indiscernible from the color of his palette and brushes, reinforcing their interconnectedness; the folds in the jackets of the two figures on the left, meanwhile, mirror one another in a similar way, implying a similar bond. The centered face on each canvas emphasizes the individual while the distant gaze of the two figures implies a sort of detachment from what they embrace and the activity they partake in. It is Van Gogh's visual language which allows for the directness Dostoyevsky cites as essential for clarity. And it is this clarity of simplicity that cultivates and sustains the calm, measured attention needed for the meditative contemplation my work aims to produce.

Recapitulation: A restatement of the thesis and a conclusion to the essay

In summation, I set out with my thesis work to develop an aesthetic conducive for introspective engagement with a set of difficult, perhaps emotionally painful ideas: namely, how our limited capacity to perceive and understand our lives creates an isolating distance between ourselves, the individuals we know and the activities we engage in. The Buddhist belief that there is inherent value in addressing painful ideas, and that such ideas are made easier to approach with pleasure, which calms and stabilizes, gives form to my practice and helped me realize the inherent potentials of art to help further self

understanding. My use of pleasing aesthetics to communicate displeasing content and simple language to convey complex ideas are therefore intended to make a subject often felt to be too intimidating to approach, more accessible. The result hopefully is that, by helping to initiate and sustain engagement with difficult ideas, my depictions of life and its challenges help us contemplate our limits and better understand our relationship to the unknown.

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