

THE ARTFUL EYE:

DRAWING AND PAINTING AS CONTEMPLATION

Lisa Lipsett, Ed.D.

“Art is contemplation.” – Auguste Rodin



In August of 2008 I attended a weeklong Vipassana meditation retreat entitled *Awake in the Wild* www.awakeinthewild.com facilitated by Mark Coleman. In addition to attending the silent meditation sits, walking meditation and Mark’s activities which inspire deeper connection to nature, I set myself the task of painting daily to give shape and colour to my experience.

It became immediately apparent that the combination of meditation and art in nature enhanced my feeling of connection both to my inner process and to the living world. I felt and saw myself change from the prickly contained arrival to someone entranced with rainbow dew balls on the wet grass by the end. I developed attachments to a large catmint plant and a white moth, and have since come to appreciate the ability to remember the retreat experience through images.

Beauty, meaning, joy, serenity and belonging can be ours when we approach art-making as a contemplative practice. To contemplate means not only “religious musing” but is an “act of looking at”, “to gaze attentively, observe,” as we purposely “mark out a space for observation”. We don’t just see more fully, we feel the communion of self with other. What keeps contemplative art distinct is its reduced emphasis on the finished product. Instead we commit to process over time, strengthening our ability to easily shift into connection in more daily moments.

Art-making as contemplative practice helps us to engage holistically with ourselves and our world. We engage our thoughts, feelings, senses and intuition and go beyond to a realm of synchronicity and mystery. John Loori in the *Zen of Creativity* (2004) illuminates various elements that awaken our creativity and support our participation in what he calls the artless arts. Among them are opening to a still point, simplicity, spontaneity, a sense of trust in the unknown, creative feedback, and art koans- exercises based on paradoxical questions that can be resolved only through artistic expression. To these key characteristics I would add: in the moment presence, attention, intention setting, receptivity, actively using more than one sense simultaneously, following what attracts, cultivating joy and wonder through reflection, and opening our hearts. It is in this way that we learn to see through the artful eye.

Beauty, meaning, joy, serenity and belonging can be ours when we approach art-making as a contemplative practice.

We don’t just see more fully, we feel the communion of self with other.

The Artful Eye

In his book *Integral Psychology*, philosopher Ken Wilber (2000) describes three different ways of seeing: the eye of flesh (sensibilia), the eye of mind (intelligibilia) and the eye of contemplation (transcendelia). The eye of flesh perceives the “outer” material realm, the eye of mind or reason is engaged in the conceptual realm of symbolic language, the contemplative eye experiences the transcendent realm. Sufism calls these three eyes: the eye of flesh, the eye of fire and the eye of art. In his book *An Art of Our Own*, Roger Lipsey states:

“Eyes of flesh focus on the thing itself, eyes of fire on facts but still more intently on their participation in a larger meaning by which they are raised. Eyes for art strike a balance between these two.”

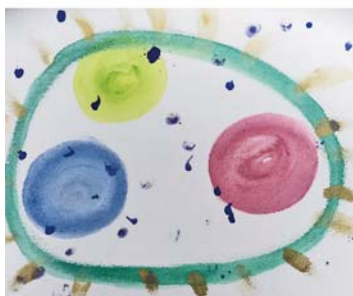
Contemplative art practices can in general be defined by their starting intention. Some practices focus on how to open to mindful connection to self, others teach attention and mindfulness in relation to the world, and finally a few marry connection to self and other in a seamless process. All engage the artful eye as a way to open and commune.

Connection with Self

We can paint and draw as a way to commune with self. Drawing and painting can give expression to body sensation, emotion, dream imagery, intuition and ideas. Contemplative art couples the stillness of meditation with the movement or action of art making. In her book *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1957), Joanna suggests that in the doing of contemplative art there is the realization of an entirely different almost universal way to know that transcends our preconceived ideas of things. Images have a life of their own that we can connect to as both self and separate through what she called contemplative action. This is similar to what Laura Sewell describes in *Sight and Sensibility: An Ecopsychology of Perception* (1999). We come to see and feel our own nature as it is revealed in a language of shape and colour simultaneously fresh yet somehow familiar.

“We see our own patterns rise to the surface as we find ourselves meandering along the relations, as we begin to get it; to see and understand that we too are natural, that we too are truly of the earth.”

Opening to what is present



1- Prickly Container



2- Energy Inwards



3- Unbounded Heart



4- Melding

We often find words pouring out during the time the images are created and later when they are reflected upon. It's as if a lid has been pulled off and we can engage in dialogue with ourselves. Dreamworker, Jeremy Taylor speaks of the power of dream work to bring the "not yet speech ripe" into view. Contemplative painting and drawing can do the same.

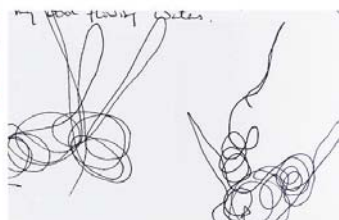
The first four paintings created during my Awake in the Wild retreat were initiated by opening to what was present for me each morning. I started with a quiet meditation in my tent having organized my paper, paints and water beforehand. I closed my eyes to choose the colours and painted with both hands keeping my eyes closed. The images mirrored my original shift from feeling contained and prickly, to finding energy and heart that energized and dissolved my bound state.

Below: following the Create Cycle

Bottom: catmint painting last in series



5- Painting with Cat Mint



6- Eyes closed Drawing



7- Drawing Cat Mint



8- Intuitive Drawing of Cat Mint



9- Cat Mint Painting eyes opened

Connection with Nature

In the tradition of Shambhala Art (www.shambhalaart.org) based on the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, art wakes us up when done with attention and mindfulness. To attend is to stretch one's mind toward something, to reach out and meet the world. According to Archetypal Psychologist James Hillman, attention to the qualities of things resurrects the old idea of "notitia" as a primary activity of the soul. "Notitia" refers to the capacity to form true notions of things from attentive noticing. It is the noticing on which knowledge depends. Ecophilosopher David Abram feels this attention is reciprocal.

"We can learn a new reciprocal way of seeing. If the surroundings are experienced as sensate, attentive, and watchful, then I must take care that my actions are mindful and respectful, even when I am far away from other humans, lest I offend the watchful land itself."

In his book *Zen Seeing and Zen Drawing*, Frederick Franck describes meditation in action- a kind of contemplative doing that softens our gaze and opens our hearts to the beauty of the world. We can engage our wakeful attention anywhere at anytime. Physicist David Bohm describes this as "artamovement", a kind of fitting together of self and world through art making.

In Creative Nature Connection (CNC) we are supported to make the shift from thinking about nature to directly engaging by following the Create Cycle (I describe this in my Introduction and Eight Day Practice PDFs).

On Day 4 of the retreat I found myself attracted to the catmint outside the dining hall. I loved the tall fronds of purple blue and how full of life the plant seemed. I drew



10- Light Balls



11- Moth Drawing and Painting



12- Flight and Light Balls



13- The Knowing I



14- Dew Balls

Top: painting with my moth

Above: rainbow dew balls on wet grass

and painted with eyes open and closed using both hands in sequence.

This image is the last in the plant series and was done completely intuitively with closed eyes. I love the dynamism of the lines and the intermingled colours.

Connection to Self and Nature

When we weave both ways of working together we can connect with both self and nature in a single session. We express the inner “not yet speech ripe” and connect with and express our relationship to a natural pattern, plant, animal, or element (like earth, air, fire or water).

In my book *Beauty Muse: Painting in Communion with Nature* (www.LisaLipsett.com) I share how over time creating with self became fused with creating with nature. We began to see myself mirrored as J Ruth Gendler in *Notes on the Need for Beauty* so aptly describes:

“We expect to find the world outside the window, expect to find ourselves in the mirror. But I am interested in what happens when we let the world be our mirror, go deeper into ourselves and find the world, go out into the world and find ourselves anew.”

As the retreat wound down I had a day that began with lightness, a sensation of ease. I brushed my teeth and was immediately attracted to a beautiful white moth on the mirror. That same moth or same kind of moth sat on the wall during that morning sit. So afterwards I quickly grabbed my art supplies and drew and painted with the moth. I painted again at the end of the day revealing flight and ball image, followed by the sad face and the observing eye.

On the last morning of the retreat I found myself mesmerized by the iridescent rainbow dew balls in the wet grass outside the hall.

Learn more about Lisa Lipsett's work at www.LisaLipsett.com

Creative by Nature Art- classes and event information: www.creativebynature.org

This article originally appeared in Sage-ing Journal Fall 2014