Art as a self-healing process

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Art as a Self-healing Process

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- Exhibition I (Thesis show)
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I am grateful for the love and the support of my family and many friends while studying at R.I.T. Special thanks to my thesis committee, who helped me successfully to complete this thesis project. They are Professor Edward C. Miller, Professor Philip W. Bornarth, Professor Bob Cole, and Professor Robert Heischman.
As an artist, it is very important to see the vision of our inner world. The vision of the inner world comes not only from our subconscious but also from all the things related to us. From the basic elements to the whole universe, they all relate to us. Like scientists, artists also unravel the mysteries of life and solve problems for human beings. But the difference is that artist put themselves at the center of our universe. From this position, artists may tell what scientists can’t, and see what others can’t.

For this thesis, my purpose is to explore the vision of my inner world, and the relationship between the visual elements and the natural ones. I intend to research those artists who try to explore their spirit at a deeper level by the process of making art. My idea is based on the notion that whenever illness is associated with loss of soul, art is the only soul medicine. I believe that humanity is suffering from loss of soul, and making art always has a therapeutic effect on our minds.

In this thesis project, I am going to explore the relationship between mental influences and my work. I also expect this project to help me have a better understanding about the art-making process.
Illustrations

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2. Thesis committee
3. None
4. None
5. Working in my studio I
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Artist’s Statement:

Art is the path to self-discovery
Art is a self-healing process
Art is a way of knowing for everyone

Art is the path to self-discovery

What are artists? Artists are people who capture a record of their inner life in images, painting, photography, drawings and any other visual forms, continuously throughout their days as a child, a student and an artist. Why do artists need to make a recording? Because, in a way, all people have a desire to know themselves. If the feelings necessary for a sense of meaning were missing, a person’s existence would become marginal, uncompelling, until beginning a personal discovery and recording. Recording in the visual forms is not only intended to keep a memory but also serves as a discovery process of the artist’s inner world. The process of making art is a way of bringing soul back into life. Art is a way of knowing oneself.

Art is a self-healing process

We all have many internal images of ourselves; art making is the process of giving these images form. The record we make in this process of giving form need not be evaluated by any outside criteria but rather by our internal sense of what is true. The art process frees us of conscious thinking and judging. This absorption in the process is what heals. It accesses another part of one-self, where the mysteries of pain and release, grief and anger and despair, longing and hope are present. Through art making people have solved problems, assuaged pain, faced losses and disappointment, and come to know themselves deeply.
Artist Statement

Art is the path to self-discovery
Art is a self-healing process
Art is a way of knowing for everyone

For these reasons, making art is a spiritual path, a healing process. This path is available to everyone and requires no “talent” beyond the talent for living inherent in us all. The gifts of creativity are in no way comparable. Art is a way of knowing for anyone who wishes to contact his or her feelings, intuition, and sense of inner being. It forges a path to the river of the soul that runs below everyday life, becoming more alive in the process. Making art is a way of breaking boundaries, between our conscious and subconscious, loosening outworn ideas, and making way for the new. It is a form of practice for our daily life, through which, like any spiritual discipline, knowledge of ourselves can ripen into wisdom. Everyone can enjoy the art-making process; art teachers or other guides may be helpful along the way but are not necessary to begin. All that is necessary is the courage and curiosity to make contact with the imagination and the means to mark the stories already within you, waiting to be told.

Working in my studio 2
In the first chapter I am going to describe the influences from surrealism in the earlier stage of my personal art making history. The second part of this chapter will describe the theory of Art Therapy and how it affected my idea of the art-making process.

Influences from Surrealism:

Dali, the famous surrealist painter, is the first person that gave me the idea of what an artist and art should be. His extraordinary life and his work expanded the limitations of my imagination when I was suffering to find out my personal belief of art. Art became more meaningful to me after my encounter with Dali and the other surrealists.

Dali and other surrealists who desired a more direct engagement of inner movements, the artist’s art-making process, corresponded to a movement of spirit (Macniff, 1992). The art-making process is a way that surrealism encouraged experiencing “surreality”. Andre Breton described surrealism as “based on a belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought... I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality”.

Affected by the concepts from the surrealists, I started to be aware of mental influences on art and the art-making process. Searching for “surreality”, the vision of an inner world, became the majority of my work since that period. In order to reach the deeper level of my inner-self, art making became a communication tool between my subconsciousness and me.
Background review

Influences from Surrealism
Influences from Art Therapy

Instead of verbal communication, art is used as a means of non-verbal communication. Art activity provides a concrete rather than verbal medium through which a person can achieve both conscious and unconscious expression, and can be used as a valuable agent for therapeutic change (Dalley, 1984). Through the interaction of the art-making process, I was not only able to communicate with my spirit but also communicate with the outside world. The more art activity I experienced the more completely I felt myself.

From those realizations that mental influences affect my artwork and art-making process, I began to consider the interaction between artist, artwork and audiences. Is it possible that people can improve the understanding of themselves through artwork or the art-making process? As we know, the art-making process, can be relaxing, satisfying, frustrating, and even mildly “therapeutic”, as an individual self-orientation process (Dally, 1984). Is it possible that art can go beyond the individual consideration? In other words, can art become a medium or channel that can transfer the transcendental energy between artist and audiences?

To answer these questions, I went in two directions: First, I intended to create works that will have more direct contact with audiences on the spiritual level (this process will be discuss in the next chapter “Thesis project”). Second, I searched for more theoretical support for my idea. In this part, beside surrealism and psychology, the field of art therapy is a very important source for my studies.
Influences from Art Therapy

Since I was interested in the relationship between mental influences and art, I started to discover related topics too. The first discovery was the book “Mandala“ (Judith Cornell, 1994). From this book I started to be aware of the therapeutic power from the visual image. I was inspired by Cornell’s ambition to create an art-making process to activate the latent power of mind. She believes that the art-making process can make the invisible visible—expressing paradoxical situations or patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way. All the creative processes that she mentions in the book seem based on the idea of art therapy. However, she takes a different perspective from the traditional therapist. She believes that the ultimate aim of the art-making process is self-realization—the recovery of one’s authentic self, not the ego-personality bound by one’s individual circumstances. This self-orientation process, synonymous with enlightenment, is the mystical, experiential knowing and remembering in mind, body, and soul that we are one with God.

Although, Judith Cornell’s ideas have a different perspective from the art therapist, they still have strong connection with the concepts of art therapy. I therefore went further to discover the idea of art therapy. The term “art therapy” started to be used in Britain in 1940. Since then the relationship between art and therapy has been discussed till now (Dalley 1984). It has been suggested that art and therapy form an “uneasy partnership” (Champernowe 1971). On the other hand, it has also been suggested that art is synonymous with therapy in the sense that all art activity is necessary healing (Dally, 1984).
Generally, art therapy is the use of art and other visual media in a therapy or treatment. The term “therapy” involves the aim or desire to bring about change in human disorder. But instead of emphasizing the therapeutic effect of the art-creating process, I prefer to emphasize its effect at the spiritual level. That’s the reason why I use the term “healing” instead of “therapy” in my artist statement.

The field of art therapy is a growing field and new theories are still waiting to be proven. In the current stage of my study, I would like to distinguish between my interests and the field of art therapy in order to avoid confusion with this special field. However, in the further stages there are still questions waiting to be answered about the relationship between my study and art therapy. My study is based on a different perspective from art therapy; I am considering that the art-making process could be a self-orientation process (Jose, 1972) instead of a therapeutic process.

Every individual, whether trained or untrained in art, has a latent capacity to project his inner conflicts into visual form (Naumberg, 1958:511). In the art-creating process, which is the rationalization of inner feeling into a comprehensible form, the conflicts are re-experienced, resolved and integrated. Every time we practice the art-making process, we reorient our selves and step further to reach our inner-self. This process of spiritual communication with ourselves (Gablik, 1992) is what I mean when I use the term “self-healing” process.
With the idea of art as a self-healing process, the following idea arose in my mind. Direct participation in art making is always guided by the idea that art is a means to know the self. (Allen, 1995) My interest is how to help other people know themselves through art making and to offer a path back to direct participation in life. Giving guidelines for art-making processes leads people to initiate self-discovery. These guidelines should be available to everyone, and they require no talent beyond the talent for living inherent in us all.

Art should play useful roles both for the individual and for society. However, from the historical point of view, people usually focus on “art for art’s sake”. Recently, some artists are beginning to reject modernist and postmodernist ideals of alienation and isolation in favor of art that is empathic, connected, and alive. Suzi Gablik, the author of The Reenchantment of Art, says: “The necessity for art to transform its goals and become accountable in the planetary whole is incompatible with aesthetic attitudes still predicated on the late-modernist assumption that art has no useful role to play in the larger sphere of things” (Gablik, 1991). Form the point view of an art student; people don’t pay enough attention to art’s emotional influences in the art making process. Education in art is not only to teach people to create art but also to teach people to discover themselves.
Background review

Influences from Surrealism
Influences from Art therapy

The value of education in art is based on the benefits that people enjoy from the art-making process. This study is not only my self-discovery project but also concerned with possibility in art, focusing on emotional influences during the art-making process. This study intends to uncover the psychological process during art-making and to develop a procedure that can be a helpful resource for art students and also for those who want to enjoy art in daily life.

Installing “The Sacred Zone”
In this chapter I am going to describe the process of my thesis project. In the first part, “The process of compound abstraction”: I will explain the evolution of my painting style and those thoughts that affected my painting. The second part “Problems and Solutions”, describes the final thesis project and the way I solved the problems it presented.

The process of compound abstraction

From Perception to Visual From

During the first year of my graduate study, I was interested in the relationship between human beings and Mother Nature. Therefore, I created a series of paintings that showed my belief that there are links between our inner world and outside world. I tried to express my perceptions in the form of visual art. Because I think visually, my communication can break the limitation of language and break the boundary between artists and audiences. By “Visual language” we can “talk” more directly and deeply. This though was influenced by the art of Zen. In Buddhism, the “art of Zen” means to communicate without language. People lives in emptiness and forms are born only in emptiness. When one becomes empty of the assumption, inferences, and judgments he has acquired over the years, he comes close to his original nature and is capable of conceiving original ideas and reacting freshly. From this influence, I deeply enjoy the way of living without any limitation. It has affected my way of seeing things, my daily life, and especially my way of making art.
Basically, through art making, I tried not only to communicate between the viewer and work but also to share my experiences with the viewers. By breaking the limit of language, I expect the viewers to feel stronger, see deeper and hear farther. I decided to work on a form between the abstract and the realistic in order to represent the chaos between the physical world and our emotional world. On one hand the struggle between the abstract and the realistic shows how difficult it is for humans to discover their inner worlds. On the other hand, the struggling is part of the transition and communication between human body and soul. From the discoveries and results of my art-making process, the beauty of our inner world impressed me, so I started to do some research about emotional influences on art making.
During this research, I discovered some ancient references that matched my idea of art. In many ancient societies, art usually served religious purposes. Religious ceremonies always represented the processes of spiritual journey to God (Mother Nature) or to our deeper selves (Barrie, 1996). During those ceremonies participants create images, icons, and installations to symbolize and simplify the process of the inner journey. We can say that there are some similarities between those ceremonies and the process of making art.
The symbol of a Mandala was really impressed me, during the time I was creating my own visual language. A Mandala is a symbol of the practice of making a spiritual journey in a sacred place, and it is the architecture of self-enlightenment (Leidy, 1997). In Tibet, a Mandala is both an artistic form and a meditative ritual emphasizing cosmic integration. The center of a Mandala is the palace of inner being surrounded by circles, each symbolizing a particular phase of initiation or level of consciousness. To Westerners, the popular reintroduction of their idea can be traced to the work of Carl G. Jung. He related the idea of the Mandala as a therapeutic device to the Mandala as a ritual, meditative technique conducive to mystic exaltation (Jung, 1979).

Furthermore, Dr. Judith Cornell pointed out that by focusing on a Mandala, both the Mandala artist and the viewer or mediator can open to the divine energies of deities and to the contents of his or her own spiritual and psychological self (Cornell, 1994). From the moment of understanding these concepts, my art changed from simple personal expression to a process whose goals were healing and self-healing.
1. From Social Action to Self-healing practice

During the second year of my graduate study, I recognized the limit of two-dimensional work for my purpose in creating art. Therefore, I started to do some research and make models for my projects. Then, I realized that a Mandala is a blueprint of a sacred space and a sacred path, it is the idea model of spiritual temple (Brauen, 1992). From this realization, the idea of recreating a contemporary Mandala, a modern sacred space, filled my mind.

The other reason I want to create a contemporary sacred space in addition to churches, temples, and sacred sites is that those sites were built to symbolize the meanings and accommodate the rituals of the particular belief system of particular places and times. In other words, those sacred sites are limited to people who visit for their personal, spiritual healing. My approach is to recognize the ancient sacred site through space-making, constructional elements, spatial characteristics, and ordering in order to create a sacred site that is based on our modern ideology.
My thesis project is concerned with the spiritual path of the viewers. When they start to experience the sacred site they also start to make their inner journey, a self-healing process, to discover themselves. Furthermore, by manipulating the experiences of the audience within the environment that was designed and controlled by the artist, precise messages can be transferred to the viewers. Therefore, “The Sacred Zone” series was created with the idea of recreating a Mandala image as a three-dimensional structure, and then simplifying the structure to become a contemporary sacred space. This gives people a space for thinking, healing, meditating, and enjoying…
Thesis project

The process of compound abstraction
Problems and Solutions

Problems and solutions:
- Exhibition I
- Exhibition II

Exhibition I: Thesis Exhibition

Based on the above background thinking and influences, my thesis project started with idea sketches. These sketches came from the process of visualize my concepts. With these sketches I could have clearer visions about my project.

The next step was to create models from my sketches. These models helped me have a better understanding about the structure and size of this project. In this stage, I began to face some problems. There are three major parts that I discovered during the process of model making.

1. Physical problems
2. Materials problems
3. Process and decision problems

Physical problems

The first one, physical problems, was the biggest problem in this project. Because of the size of this installation, I needed a strong structure to support itself but not so heavy that it would fall down. After the experiment from models and comments from my advisors, I decided to use a pentagon as the basic structure of my installation. Professor Tang from the mathematics department of SUNY Geneseo State University helped me calculate mathematical and physical problems of this structure, so I was able to suspend this structure under the ceiling of Bevier gallery without any problem. Before installation, it is always necessary to make sure I can solve all the major problems due to the limited installation time. So, a complete plan and full support from experts in the other fields—such as engineer, designer—was very important for this kind of big installation.
Thesis project

The process of compound abstraction
Problems and solutions

The process of my thesis project

Perception

Concepts

Thesis Committee

Idea Sketches

Model

Physical Problems and solutions

Materials problems and solutions

Process and Decision problems

Installation Problems and solutions

Final work

Thesis Exhibition
Material Problems

The material problem comes with the physical problem. This structure must be light but strong and easy to construct. I decided to use found objects that can easily be bought in a hardware store. While the discovering the possibilities of using ready-made objects, I was impressed with the new look that these ordinary objects added to my work.

In order to create a place for a spiritual orientation, the choice of material should be close to nature. I used natural fabric for the major part of this installation. Canvas was chosen for the five major parts of the tent, so that I could seclude the outside world and create an individual, private space. But the problem was that I need other material to connect the inside and outside world. I used burlap as the connection between the five major parts of tent and on the top of the tent. During the time I was trying to find a good material for this installation, an unexpected effect occurred. The transparent effect of burlap created a special effect in this installation. If you see this installation from outside, you will not able to see the inside of this installation. But, if you go inside the installation, you will realize immediately that through the burlap between the canvas you can see the outside world and keep yourself in an unknown place. Before you try a new material you will never know how it works. So, I believe the choice of material is also an important part of the art-making process.
Thesis project

The process of compound abstraction
Problems and Solutions

Process and Decision

The basic structure of this installation came from traditional Chinese thinking that our universe is constructed from the five basic elements—Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. Ancient Chinese people believed that the Five elements are the basic element of everything and everything can be simplified to these five symbols.

I used these symbols as topics of my paintings on different sides of my installation. Every canvas is based on one topic. Each painting shows my interpretation of this element. I tried to combine the general thinking and my own particular understanding of each element. I intended to use different colors, composition and even different styles to represent my ideas.

During the creating of these canvases, the major part of this installation, I experienced my personal self-discovery process. To create this big-scale project, I have to concentrated fully on every different stage. When I was working on these painting, I felt that I was being surrounded by the painting and the whole world didn’t exist. As I continued to paint, there was enormous energy leading me through every process. Sometimes, I felt this energy go back and forth between my work and me. This interaction is an invisible dialogue between my work and me. Through this dialogue, my work reflects my invisible vision and my subconsciousness. Just like a mirror, this creating process showed the invisible side of my self. This process accesses to another part of myself and carries me free of conscious thinking and judging. This absorption in the art making process is my term of “self-healing process” (Allen, 1995).

"The Sacred zone" in Bevier gallery
By playing with the colors, space and materials, I experienced a different way to express myself and I saw myself from a different perspective. From the first painting to the last one, I experienced a different way of seeing my work and myself.

Inside the installation, I created a special space for the audience to experience. In order to separate from the outside world, I created a dark space with blue light and surrounded it with simplified Mandala that is symbols of self-orientation. This individual space, I call “The Sacred zone”. I also created a symbolized Labyrinth on the ground of “the sacred zone”, which is circular walkways created from sacred geometry. Walking in them allows you to become part of an integrating Mandala reflecting universal wholeness (Cornell, 1984).

After the audience walks around my installation, which illustrates the five elements, people will finally find an entrance to enter the installation and start their journey of experiencing the sacred zone. When they enter the sacred zone, the interaction begins. This interaction or dialogue between the audience, my work, and myself is expected to go beyond my self-interaction to a different level. By this interaction, I expected to get more perspectives to understand myself from the audiences as well as providing my point of view to the audiences.
Thesis project

The process of compound abstraction
Problems and Solutions

Thesis Exhibition: Geneseo Show

Right after the MFA thesis show, I got a chance to show my work in the Opus Gallery SUNY Geneseo State University. This time I displayed parts of my thesis project and one new work in the Opus Gallery.

Following the idea and experiences from “The Sacred Zone”, I created a new work called “The Inner Journey” This work is based on the same idea and focuses on the interaction between the audience, the work, and myself. “The Inner Journey” is a one-man size installation; it allows one person to enter at one time. I believed this small-scale installation could make the audiences concentrate more on the feeling and avoid the influences from the outside world. The blue lighting under the top of the installation created a special environment separate from the outside world.

Instead of using paint and the other materials, I used rope for the surface of this installation. I believed that simple structure and simple materials could help the audiences concentrate on the energy from my work and I could transfer my idea more directly.
During the thesis exhibition and the Geneseo exhibition, I received a lot of comments from the viewers. That response gave me a direct connection to the audience. Many people keep telling me what they experienced and felt. Most of the audience felt the strong energy in my work and they got the connection with colors, spaces, the scale, lighting, and even smell. Although people felt differently about my work, their feedback is still a good inspiration for me.

To review my past two years, I spent most of the time to search out meaning of art. I was struggling between different ways of thinking about art. However, I believed that it is a necessary process for an art student to find his own way. After this thesis project, I feel that I am clearer about the direction of my art. I believe that this is not only the end of my master’s study but also the beginning of my further study.

As I wrote in my thesis exhibition, My journey has just begin:

*To him who is the Lord of the Center*
*To him who wants to meets himself in beauty*

*Enter your heart and speak to yourself*
*Enter The Sacred Zone and the journey starts*

*In the beginning there is end*
*Do not imagine, think, analyze, and act:*
*Keep your mind in its natural state*

*In emptiness…*
*You are close to yourself…*
INSTALLATION

Installating The sacred zone
Every daisy and sunflower is a flower of other trees and bushes bearing pentagon and its extension, the lines relate to each other in the cut through their girth, reveal from their original flower pattern. (fig. 10)

Each of the triangles in the pentagonal star have two equal sides that relate to the third side as 8 does to 5, or as 1.618 relates to 1. . . . These rectangles also show reciprocal golden rectangles and pentagram is combined with the golden section's complementary rectangle, consisting of reciprocal golden rectangles. . . . with the sides of the pentagram's triangle.
The Inner Journey

To him who is the Lord of the Center
To him who wants to meet himself in beauty

Enter your heart and speak to yourself
Enter The Sacred Zone and the journey starts

In the beginning there is the end
Do not imagine, think, analyze, act.
Keep your mind in its natural state

In emptiness
You are close to yourself.....
The Inner Journey

Thesis Project II Exhibition in Opus Gallery

Inside the installation
Allen, Pat B. 1995, *Art is a way of knowing*. Boston: Shambhala
Kandinsky, Wassily. 1977, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York: Dover
Mcniff, 1992, *Art as Medicine*, Jeanne