The improvised line

Edward Buscemi

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A Thesis Report Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE IMPROVISED LINE

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Edward Buscemi prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction is made.

Date: 5-7-05
DEDICATION

To my wife Marianne.
Thank you for believing in me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank each of my committee members in alphabetical order: Prof. Keith Howard, for his quiet coaching in the studio and knowing, always to my surprise, just what I needed to hear. My thanks to Karen Sardisco for her intelligent analysis of my work and the encouragement that she has been to me. Finally, my thanks to Zerbe Sodervick. Among her many talents is the ability to help people get things done. The completion of this paper is the result of, as much as anything else, her kind and unyielding supervision.
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold: first, to explore improvisation as a creative device and second, to consider the improvised line as the basic element of my process. I have utilized non-toxic intaglio printmaking to create my images and will discuss both the processes employed and the problems encountered. Additional images created as a result of my thesis work will be exhibited to illustrate the continuing development of line and technique in my work.

In discussing my thesis I will begin by explaining why improvisational activity is the basis of my working method. I will then consider the element of line, in particular, the improvised line and explain why it is the basic pictorial device that I use.

In defense of my thesis I will briefly examine both Sumi-e painting of Japan and the development of action painting in America. Since these models exhibit a concern for content and technique that I am attempting to emulate and build upon, it is appropriate that I include them. In addition, examining the history and philosophy of these two schools will serve as a means of further illustrating the fundamental concepts of my aesthetic.

I wish to stress in this introduction that ideological concerns are important to me. Art making is an activity driven by many factors. However, I feel that personal belief (the world view of the
artist) is inarguably fundamental. The influences within an artist's life, to include personality, culture, upbringing, and the time in which he or she lives, determine what can exist as art; ultimately we are defined by our ideas. In the end it is a personal philosophy that drives the art of an individual and collective belief that drives the art of a culture. Even when greatness or genius is evidenced, it only means that the boundaries of an accepted world view are expanded; what constitutes accepted ideology or method has been broadened.

As a part of my thesis work I have created a cohesive body of prints. The experience has been valuable and the images are sufficiently successful. However, placed in the context of the preceding paragraph, the pictures are subordinate to the ideological concepts being discussed in this paper. Although I have the creation of art as my goal, it is important to understand that I am just as interested in the technique of spontaneous action necessary for creating that art. Simply stated, I am seeking to make my art in a manner that is direct and unrehearsed.

My objective is to achieve an artistic expression that is honest, authentic and engaging. Of course I am not implying that this is the only approach to making art but rather I am pointing to the fact that centuries of human creativity have defined some things as being true or lasting and other things as merely being fashionable for a time. In the end, a work of art will be judged according to its truthfulness. Time seems to be the great determiner of this. I am investigating one way in which an artist might attain something of genuineness.

Consider figures 2 and 3, ancient works which exhibit artistic qualities and a connection at a universal level, as examples of expressions of authentic art of the sort that I am striving for. Figure 2 is a detail of a rock painting, from the Lascaux caves dated C. 15000-13,000 BCE. Although the meaning of the work is hidden to the modern viewer the aesthetic is immediately accessible. At one level, it is of no consequence that meaning is absent. Although we are left to speculate and the paintings remain forever mysterious, the most significant fact is that the images speak with relevance, even after all these centuries. They are direct and honest and they are beautiful to look at.
Figure 3 is a small image of a hippopotamus, c. 1985-1795 BCE, from an Egyptian tomb. The piece, an example of faience (a technique in which glass paste is fired to produce a smooth, shiny opaque finish) is at once ancient and contemporary. The animal form is direct and accurate. It is pleasing and engaging. The painted lotus blossoms are both representative of habitat and timelessly artistic. We would not be surprised to walk into a contemporary crafts gallery or exhibit and see a similar item on display. The sculpture still communicates and in a way that is surprisingly effective and intriguing to a viewer in the 21st century.

**SPONTANEITY**

*Spontaneity and Personal Expression:* In working spontaneously I attempt to make art that is as honest and effective as possible. I feel that working in an improvisational manner provides me with a maximum potential to create something superior to what I might otherwise achieve through a more planned process. The reasons for this are certainly complex, and would include temperament, personality and, I believe, even the influences of an Italian-American background. In addition, it is likely that my preference for a non-reasoned approach could be the result of an antipathy towards the tendency in western culture to hold in high esteem the utilitarian
and scientific while conversely relegating the abstract and intuitive issues of life to a lower or even insignificant status. My preference for a non-rational working method then represents a rejection of this viewpoint and is an attempt to artistically oppose it.

The making of art is for me, among other things, an epistemological issue. It is my belief that in seeking to know something, reason alone does not guarantee correctness. (In fact it is my view that the systems and “isms” of the world have hindered objective inquiry). Reason must be tempered by intuition and feeling. Feeling, if it can be defined as the compliment of reason, will help guard against the potential excesses of a logic devoid of instinct.

When intuition is absent there is a strong likelihood that real inquiry will be hindered. Reason must function in conjunction with the intuitive. The creative act, insofar as it is an effort to understand some aspect of existence and express what is discovered, must somehow utilize the entirety of human faculties. For me making pictures is an attempt to better understand myself and the world in which I live. It is also an attempt to question what is important in my life.

The process of communication and the thing that is the communication both represent for me an attempt to gain understanding.

Therefore, in my attempt to achieve greater understanding I choose to elevate feeling and intuition and subordinate my rational processes so that I might counterbalance the effects of a western culture that impose a predominately materialistic and logical view of the universe. I reject that view and insist on an approach that is more intuitive in order to achieve something that is more compatible with my world view.

I also wish to challenge the forces at work opposing artistic expression and authentic inquiry. I believe that these anti-individualistic attitudes are a primary dynamic of all cultures and their
institutions. They must be identified for what they are. The reality of personal vision is that it is viewed as being something threatening in a world where conformity and submission to authority is the norm. Is civilization just a way of achieving ordered existence or is it a system of tyrannies designed to exploit the individual? In examining this issue I find that history reveals that those in control of a society conspire to subjugate its individuals and do so by persuasion or force. I see improvisational action as a means for counteracting those obstructive forces that would hinder me in my society. My search is to create an emancipation that will maximize my ability to make authentic art.

In a more practical vein I should state that after years of researching the issue of a creative process I feel that I now understand myself better. I appreciate the importance of working in a manner that is compatible with my personality. By this I mean that there are things that come naturally and things that do not. I now understand the need to do what is natural for me and to accept those conditions, avoiding artificial or contrived techniques and solutions. Although this concept is probably axiomatic to the creative process, I don’t believe that I have had a sufficient grasp of its importance until recently. Improvisation and direct action are natural creative devices for me to use. They seem to allow me to produce art more easily than in the past. Because of this I find myself wanting to make art. I am also finding that the content of my work is beginning to more satisfactorily communicate my inner vision. Increasingly, I am
realizing an important level of reward that has previously been too often absent. In the past many of my efforts were driven by attitudes that were incompatible with my temperament so that much of my work was fabricated or contrived. In addition, for many years I had no clear objectives established for myself and I was only motivated by a vague notion of the necessity to make art.

In examining the nature of creative activity there is always some element of skill or technique involved. Therefore a controlled or reasoned action is never entirely eliminated. In fact there are times when the demands of technique become the primary issue. An example of this is the decision to use the computer for creating work or selecting a complicated printmaking process for solving a visual problem. However, even when doing this I diligently try to maintain an attitude of spontaneity. To the extent that I can do this my efforts seem to succeed, if not immediately then at least eventually.

**A Brief Consideration of Method:** Certainly improvisation is a creative device that is found throughout the world and is a commonly understood. However what may not be understood is the fact that improvisation is something that is learned, often through extensive practice and effort. The artist or performer seeking to create art through improvisation must gain expertise in a discipline and then learn to express himself or herself through dedicated practice. The objective of this effort is to gain a greater mastery of the discipline and gain a greater confidence in expressing art extemporaneously. Improvisation is successful to the extent that the
artist is familiar with the specifics of his or her discipline and can utilize those particulars spontaneously to shape an artistic statement.

For example, the jazz musician understands the characteristics of musical scales, chords and rhythms and has gained a facility on an instrument. Ultimately the musician learns to improvise simply by practicing. Traditional jazz is in fact a musical idiom that is a highly structured form of improvisation. Other forms of improvised art, including more contemporary forms of jazz, may not be as structured but the need to practice spontaneous creativity is always the same.

My thesis images are an attempt to employ an improvisational technique and to explore the potential that the process offers. Moreover, references to musical models of improvisation are not just analogies. In a fundamental way I view my art making as a performance. The difference is that it will be viewed after the fact. My focus is to see that the finished work embodies the essence and the spirit of the performance. To the extent that this occurs I conclude that my efforts are successful.
**IMAGE DEVELOPMENT**

*First Experiments:* My first experiments with non-toxic intaglio\(^1\) printmaking were simple and direct, using a photo polymer-based process. This art involved the creation of pencil drawings that I transferred to plates prepared with ImagOn, a particular photo polymer printmaking film, manufactured by Du Pont Chemical, that I was using in my research. The practical benefit of the process was that I could use the very familiar medium of pencil drawing to create the positives. These abstract drawings were done quickly and since the plates were small, approximately 9" x 12", I could create proofs quite easily, once I calculated accurate light exposure and developer times.

Achieving a timing or rhythm in the process was very important to me. I had already been experimenting with the notion of improvisational image making and felt that it needed to be the basis of my aesthetic. Therefore, at this time I was primarily interested in working spontaneously and only in a secondary sense was I interested in exploring the printmaking techniques that were available to me. Generally, I avoided more complex process and looked for ways of working rapidly and in series.

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1. The term intaglio is derived from the Italian *intagliare* to engrave or carve (in + tagliare to cut, carve). "A cutting or engraving; a figure cut into something, as a gem, so as to make a design impressed below the surface of the material; hence, anything so carved or impressed, as a gem, matrix, etc." The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.
In this context I found that another advantage of a photo polymer film process was that the layer of film could easily be stripped from the copper, allowing me to reuse the plate. This was important, especially since I was not attempting to rework any plates, but instead I was striving to achieve a quality of immediacy. My method was to work from image to image and develop the particulars of an idea, on successive plates, creating a series of art prints. Also, I soon developed a method of working on plates simultaneously with the intention of facilitating a rapid execution of images. Since I determined that working rapidly was the self-imposed condition which would define the character of the finished prints this was especially important. This process usually involved working on from four to six plates at a time. I will talk more about this grouping strategy when I discuss the production of my actual thesis artwork.

My first drawings were made on tracing paper using soft pencils and then erasing and scraping back into the drawing to further develop the image. I worked spontaneously and rapidly. I make this my self-imposed condition with the intention that this way of working would define the character of the finished pieces. Since the technique was very vigorous, I found that the relatively lightweight paper that I was using did not work well; it tended to wrinkle which interfered with the drawing process, and occasionally would tear. I began to use a heavyweight plastic vellum that I could easily draw upon. I found that this material was very well suited to my working style and to the platemaking process as a whole. As a result, I continued using this material during the early phase of my printmaking experiments.

In order to transfer these drawings to the photo polymer-covered plate and to capture the nuances of pencil and other marks it was necessary to utilize an aquatint screen.\footnote{Keith Howard, \textit{Non-Toxic Intaglio Print making}, (Alberta: Printmaking Resources, 1998. 92), 93. An aquatint screen may be defined as an acetate, Mylar or other transparent material upon which a random pattern of opaque dots have been applied. The density of the screen defines the degree to which the surface of the material is covered with dots. Screens are commercially available or can me made in the studio by spraying ink or paint onto an appropriate substrate. A photographic method of making one's own screen is also described in this section. (See footnote 3 for a brief description of a traditional aquatint). Elizabeth Dove's chapter entitled "A Brief History of Intaglio" discusses the discovery of the traditional aquatint process in the mid-eighteenth century by J. B. LePrince.} This process
is described in Chapter 22 of Professor Howard's book *Non-Toxic Intaglio Printmaking* under the section discussing the wash-drawing intaglio-type. The screen simulates a traditionally etched aquatint\(^3\) by exposing the ImagOn to a dot pattern. The screen that I used was a commercially manufactured film with a 70% density. The process involved first exposing the prepared plate to the aquatint screen and then exposing the plate a second time to the drawing on vellum, which functionally was a photographic positive. The end result was that my work is translated into a dot pattern where the character of the original drawing is captured on the plate. The technique of photo-mechanically transferring the image to a plate is similar to those found in commercial printing environments. After some initial experiments I could determine an exposure time that worked well with my images and I could eventually approach this part of the process somewhat mechanically.

The first step was to expose the aquatint screen to the polymer-prepared plate. Next, I added the image information on top by placing the pencil drawing face down and exposing the plate for a second time. After some initial experiments I felt that the value range of the prints needed to be extended. I was previously shown how this could be accomplished by adding a third "flash" exposure of .5 seconds and I employed this technique. Generally this three-step method yielded satisfactory and predictable results. If I experienced problems, they were more likely to occur in the developing process, where inconsistencies in the strength of the soda ash solution could exist. At one point the usual exposure times ceased to work correctly. This remained a problem until Professor Howard discovered that the bulb in the exposure unit became weak and needed to be changed.

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3. Donald Saff, Deli Sacilitto, *Printmaking: History and Process* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1978). 123. The term aquatint is derived from the Latin *aqua fortis* (meaning strong water, or nitric acid) and *tinto*, Italian for tone. In traditional intaglio printmaking, it is a method of creating tone in a print. The traditional procedure involves covering the plate with a dusting of acid resistant rosin and then applying heat so that the ground adheres to the plate. When the plate is immersed in a nitric acid solution, small, densely spaced pits, somewhat uniform in character, are etched into the plate. In printing the plates, these pits are filled with ink and, under pressure, the ink is applied to paper. The texture of the aquatint can vary from coarse to fine. In practice the procedure is usually used along with other techniques to produce an image exhibiting tonal variation. A complete description of
After producing a number of prints I felt that the images looked too much like pencil drawings turned into prints. As a result of a recent studio demonstration I considered using a spit bite technique to further develop the image. This technique would be compatible with my existing plates since they already incorporated the necessary aquatint pattern. By brushing a strong soda ash solution, of 5 parts water to 1 part soda ash onto the plate, I was able to add a wash-drawing effect and extend the value range of the image. As it was fairly easy to observe the effects of the developer on the surface of the plate, I worked intuitively and directly. Once I felt that the process was completed I fixed the plate, using a lemon-juice solution. Figure 8 is an example of a piece that incorporates the drawing and spit bite methods that I am describing.

Although the value of these areas can theoretically be controlled in a measured way by carefully varying both the strength of the solution and the amount of time that it is left on the plate, my approach was purely intuitive. I merely observed the changes that occurred on the plate surface and stopped the process based on this observation.

Second Generation of Print Experiments

Although I found the technique that I have just described to be compatible with my direct method of working I wanted to develop a way of merging my painting and print making efforts. In my paintings I was employing loose, improvisational brushwork. My art research indicated that the non-toxic process provided a more-than-sufficient opportunity to work improvisationally and consequently I decided to employ painterly techniques even more in the printmaking studio. I began to experiment with different approaches to using pigments and transparency material.

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4. John Ross, Clare Romano, Tim Ross, *The Complete Printmaker*. (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1990). As stated above, an aquatint prepares the plate to print a uniform tonality, so that, for example, if black ink were being used the resulting print would be a black shape that corresponded to the plate shape. The purpose of an aquatint is to provide a tonal base that will allow value development of the image or to produce areas of even tone within an image. Various techniques are ordinarily used in conjunction with the aquatint. The physical effect of these techniques is to alter the surface of the plate, making portions of it more-or-less smooth, and therefore the manner in which ink is retained for printing. The spit bite technique, as it is commonly called, is a way of working with an aquatint to produce subtle wash drawing effects by brushing onto the plate or freely applying acid, or soda ash developer solution, when using the ImagOn process. In traditional print making, the term derives from the practice of dampening a brush with saliva and then using it to apply acid to a plate prepared with an aquatint.
At first I employed gouache and toner solutions as the paint to create loose, rapidly executed works on vellum and tracing paper. However I found that the process resulted in substantial wrinkling of these substrates. This wrinkling began to make it difficult to maintain satisfactory contact between the positives and the plates. Also, I experimented with a technique of cutting my painted images, then piecing them back together. I found that it was difficult to manipulate and assemble the pieces that were wrinkled.

In my painting studio I was experimenting with black acrylic enamel and decided to use the same pigment to create plate positives. I knew that I needed a heavier and nonporous substrate so I began to use a medium thickness, clear Mylar to paint on. I used roles of Mylar in a fashion similar to canvas and spread out large sections of it and painted expressively. This directly related to what I was doing in my painting studio. Also, I used a technique of adding negative areas to the image by removing paint that had been applied. I did this by taking a cloth that was wrapped around a brush handle or my finger, and using it to draw with. This was also something that I was doing on my canvasses. By scraping, rubbing or wiping away painted areas I continued to develop the image. The combination of enamel paint and relatively thick Mylar made this technique appropriate for the process and I found the results satisfactory.

In an effort to be spontaneous I painted in a fluid gestural manner. Using large sheets or sections of transparency I could work in a scale that was similar to painting on canvas. Once the positive was made I then applied the image to a plate that was exposed to an aquatint screen. Figure 9 is an example of a piece that was created using this method.
**A Process Takes Shape:** So far, the techniques I am describing yielded some very effective results and were beginning to allow a merging of my painting and printmaking in a practical way. However, the character and quality of my images remained erratic and diverse. Most of what I was doing in both the painting and printmaking studio remained extremely improvisational and continued to be highly experimental. My primary concern was that I still could not produce a cohesive body of prints suitable for my thesis exhibition. I began to consider the idea of narrowing my focus.5

At this point printmaking professor Keith Howard demonstrated a liquid aquatint technique that I decide to explore. The appeal of the process, a straightforward carborundum screen-filler mixture, was its simplicity and the fact that I could work in a painterly manner. The method was therefore extremely compatible with my improvisational way of working. Because of the direct nature of the process it also appeared to offer the possibility of creating images in a more controlled and predictable way. Importantly, I realized the need to work with film could be eliminated. This was a further simplification that I found very appealing. Overall, the important

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5. During the Spring 2001 quarter at RIT I had an experience that I feel greatly influenced me and finalized my belief in the need to work with line in a fully committed manner. It was during this quarter that I had a conversation with artist Gregory Amenoff, who was visiting RIT and some of the graduate painting studios. Mr. Amenoff, after criticizing my work for lacking contrast, stated that this was an important element in his work, not only as it related to a personal aesthetic, but also because of the practical commercial benefit of creating images that duplicate well in print. I began to think a great deal about the issue of contrast or value in painting and the marketing benefits of creating images that would reproduced well. Since I had spent many years in the graphic arts and marketing fields the concept made immediate sense to me. From that time on I began to fully commit myself to the use of line. Shortly after I began to work with line and consciously consider the commercial reproduction value of a high-contrast image, I had a simple experience that, in my view, confirmed the wisdom of the advice I had received from Mr. Amenoff. During February and March 2003 I participated in a group show, called The TNT Project. Including myself there were eight artists participating. An Internet site was designed to promote the show and as a part of that effort each artist had one work displayed on the site. Prior to the opening night Rochester City Newspaper publicize the show. The newspaper had one example of work for each artist involved and my work (see Figure 4) was chosen to appear with the article. I don't feel that it was chosen because it was the best example, artistically speaking, but it was clearly the best from a reproduction standpoint.
aspect of the studio demonstration was that it introduced me to an appropriate process and move closer to incorporating line as a primary element.

Prior to this demonstration I had begun to work with line in my paintings and my prints. In my paintings I was using line mostly for defining areas or creating shapes or as a way of starting a work. Many of my canvasses were collages containing photo imagery, printed material and objects fastened to the surface. Line was typically a way of organizing the surface of the canvas. Once this was done the line became subordinate to the shapes, objects, and images. In my prints I was beginning to combine line with photographic elements and work in a similar manner. Although these prints were somewhat successful, I did not feel that using photo imagery was the direction that I wanted to explore. Gradually, then, line began to emerged as the primary element that I wanted to investigate. This became particularly important in my prints because I started to realize that by using line in this way I could achieve continuity in my work.

Professor Howard's liquid aquatint demonstration strongly influenced my search for an appropriate image making technique based on the use of line. With the technique I could work Spontaneously and develop bold images. I now realized that I needed to clearly define exactly how I was to use line in my work. In effect I had been experimenting with various techniques and ideas. I now needed to narrow my efforts and realized that my search was for two things: first, a clear idea of how I should work with line and secondly, an understanding of the exact part line should play in my art.
At this time I decided to exclusively use the liquid aquatint technique, mostly because of its simplicity and the potential it offered to work very directly. The process was very straightforward and only involved mixing together carborundum and screen filler and brushing this onto a plate. I began to experiment to find a mixture that was fluid in consistency but also thick enough to produce a rich black line when the plate was printed. In my initial research I applied polymer film to the copper plates as an initial step. This was more the result of habit than necessity. Nothing in the process demanded this. However, I found that the film provided a very comfortable working surface as it allowed the carborundum and screen filler mixture to flow easily. The film also allowed me to easily add secondary marks by scratching into the film. However, given the cost of the material, I concluded that the film was not essential and eliminated it. I then began to paint directly onto the copper plates and in effect streamlined the process. Although the feel of the surface was not as satisfactory, I stopped using the film and conclude that it was more important that I work as expeditiously as possible.  

Painting the plate was done in two stages. First, I coated the entire surface with unmixed screen filler. This had two effects. By brushing the filler onto the plate a textured surface resulted.

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6. I have subsequently, in recent months, begun to experiment with using paper plates in executing my carborundum prints. They are created by using scraps of mat board, which I usually have in an abundant supply, that I make water resistant. I do this by coating both sides of the board with a white gloss enamel paint. Using this method results in a surface that is very smooth or textured depending on how I apply the paint. The surface is also one that accepts the carborundum mixture easily and wipes quite well. The white color of the paint makes it extremely easy for me to read the plate as I am wiping it. Another benefit of using the mat board plates is the ease with which I can create secondary lines and marks by firmly drawing on the plate with a ball-point pen or other suitable writing instrument. Of course using this material would not be substantial enough to create a lengthy edition. However, as I regard spontaneity and variation so highly, I am not at this time interested in making numerous images from one plate.
The character of the coating could be altered by using brushes with a finer or coarser bristle. Moreover, the printed results varied in a predictable manner so I could, in a calculated way, incorporate this feature into my process. This texture produces a more effective figure-ground relationship and yielded prints that were warmer in quality than what I was previously achieving.

Initially coating the plate with screen filler created a second important condition. The moist surface allowed the carborundum mixture to flow much more easily onto the plate. Since the necessary ratio of screen-filler to carborundum resulted in a very thick mixture that dried rapidly, the wet surface helped keep the brush moist. This gave me slightly more control over the line produced. However, since the screen filler also dried rapidly I found that I needed to work quickly and not linger over the images.

Figure 13. Juan Miró. Self-portrait. 1937/38-1960. Oil and pencil on canvas.

Figure 14. Edward Buscemi. Mid-Way. 2002. Carborundum print. 9-7/8" x 7-7/8".
An unanticipated result of having to work in this fashion was that my spontaneous method was facilitated. The images that I made were immediate and more authentic than what I would otherwise produce.

As a part of my process I occasionally made small sketches before beginning my plates, and attempted to use these as reference. However, I found that the actual execution of my images demanded an immediacy that prevented me from benefiting very much from these ideation drawings. In fact, when I attempted to actively use these sketches as guidelines in my process, I found that my image making was hindered. By trying to copy my sketches it became too difficult to achieve the spontaneity that I was seeking. Once I started a plate the entire process had to be completed quickly enough so that nothing short of a direct, immediate approach seemed to work well. Eventually any sketching that I did was not an attempt to create a usable composition but rather an effort to explore new ideas and to mentally prepare me for the task of painting plates.

Initially it was challenging to achieve a correct ratio of carborundum and screen filler. The mixture needed to be fluid enough to flow off a brush but also needed to contain enough carborundum so that the dry line could hold sufficient ink to produce a solid black. I would have preferred that a slightly more liquid solution would work but this was not the case. However, the need to use a mixture that was only slightly aqueous proved to be a minor problem when compared to the benefits of simplicity and the ability to work directly that the process offered.
In fact, the simplicity of the process was such that my most difficult challenge was obtaining the correct proportions for the mixture of carborundum and screen filler. At first I attempted to use a system of ratio and measure. I eventually abandoned this and began to work more intuitively. I found, with the help of professor Howard, that a desirable mixture was the consistency of yogurt. When dry, the carborundum held a great deal of ink and was therefore capable of producing a very rich black. In addition a degree of embossing resulted during the printing process. This added a relief quality to the print that enhanced the overall appearance of the image.

As I have previously mentioned, one element of my process was to add marks and lines that were subordinate to the primary image. The intent was to create a layer of information that expanded on and added to the primary image as well as providing a counterpoint to the heavier plate lines. This was done in the following manner: after brushing on the carborundum mixture I used a sharp object, usually a pin or studio knife blade, to scratch through the screen filler and create drypoint lines. These lines were also drawn spontaneously but with some reference to the existing image. I found that these marks were very easily executed when I initially prepared the plate with polymer film. The material was responsive to this level of mark making

7. Donald Saff, Deli Sacilitto, Print making: History and Process. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1978). 128-130. Drypoint is perhaps the simplest intaglio method. All that is requires is a sharp instrument that is used to incise a line into the plate. In traditional intaglio process this device can be any needle-like instrument that will withstand the stress of such a procedure and can include anything from a simple hardened steel needle to diamond tipped or saphire-tipped tools. Depending on the angle of the needle a drypoint line creates a burr on either or both sides of the line. This produces a distinctive fuzzy line when printed. The disadvantage is that this burr can become flattened during inking and printing making it difficult to produce a consistent edition of any length without applying a steel facing or turning the drypoint into a drypoint engraving by removing the burrs.
because the film provided a relatively soft surface and was easily incised. However, as I mentioned, because of its cost, I considered routine use of the material to be an extravagance to the process.

**Developing a Style**

During the first year and for most of the second year of my graduate studies, my studio efforts, in both painting and print making, were oriented towards exploring processes or experimenting with creating various imagery. I did not attempt to narrow my focus in any sustained or disciplined manner. The consequence of this approach was that I failed to achieve continuity in my work in time to create an acceptable thesis exhibition in the Spring of 2002. Although my course work would shortly be completed, I still needed to create a body of work that successfully demonstrated methodical research and image continuity.

Fortunately I had committed to a solo exhibition that was scheduled to open during the early summer of 2002. This commitment would allow me a second opportunity to create works that could address my MFA exhibition intentions. In order to do this my exhibition needed to be comprised mostly, if not entirely, of intaglio prints. At first I responded to this restraint grudgingly but at the same time understood that it was necessary. In a relatively short period of time, I needed to refine a process and produce imagery that was artistically authentic and clearly addressed my research intentions. I understood that if this was to happen I could not indulge in any superfluous experimentation.

I had approximately eight weeks to prepare for the July exhibition. Furthermore, I needed to create around twenty images in order to fill the display space. The academic calendar year was now in mid Spring cycle and I could continue working in the print studio into early summer. The printmaking studio was reasonably quiet and I worked in an almost uninterrupted manner.
with full access to equipment and tools. If the environment had been less supportive it is doubtful that I could have achieved the results that I did.

I knew that my first challenge was to focus on a particular direction in my work. If I was to develop a body of art work that exhibited strong continuity I first needed to master a particular print technique. After some initial hesitation, I realized that I needed to become fully committed to using the liquid aquatint technique that I had been researching. There would not be time to change processes and still be able to meet the exhibition deadline confronting me. I needed to remain committed to my decision and trust that the process was correct for my purposes.

Over the next few weeks I made many plates using the carborundum and screen filler process but without a clear notion of image expectation. So far, I was not satisfied with my images. With the exhibition deadline approaching I was growing increasingly apprehensive and considered abandoning the prints and resorting to a previous successful non-intaglio solution, that I had mastered in my studies, in order to meet the summer exhibition commitment. It was at this time that I presented some of my prints to professor Howard. As a result of our critique and some subsequent experiments, I began to focus on using line in a more defined way to create shapes. With previous production I had been painting areas of the plate and using line only as a subordinate element. It was at this time that I produced a breakthrough plate (Figure 12). The print demonstrated that a refining was beginning to take place.

At first I was intellectually hesitant to accept the results. The successful image was an abstraction and somewhat figurative in character. I had been working in a non-objective manner and was trying to move away from images that exhibited a clear figure-ground relationship. As I gradually consented and allowed the spontaneous process to work, a visual language emerged. I began producing a kind of pictograph. I needed to believe that the process of working intuitively had begun to yield results. I began to accept the fact that what was happening was in fact the very results that I was seeking. Practically speaking, my efforts were producing a tangible, intellectually satisfying style that accurately reflected my way of working. Moreover I found that I could enjoy reasonably consistent results.
Commentary on Style

Presently I can say only two things with certainty about my work: First, it is rooted in a spontaneous or direct way of working and secondly line, or the improvised line, is the basic device that I employ. My general feeling is that what I am doing is correct for me.

In recent months these factors have defined themselves as being central. In effect they continue to re-emerge and I draw or paint images with spontaneous line regardless of failures or successes. Why I have defined this as my fundamental criteria for art making is not something that I fully understand. What matters is that these techniques and concepts are natural for me. I have come to believe that success for an artist is, to a great extent, the result of selecting and employing techniques and concepts that are relevant to the individual artist.

In my situation something took shape that was different from what I had intended and ultimately the process of artistic self-discovery produced imagery unique to my way of seeing and thinking. My final art was the product of thought and activities that were highly compatible with who I am. The process reflected a serious investigation that has successfully evolved into a meaningful solution.
Influences

In some ways I feel that graduate work has brought me back to my artistic roots. As a young art student at the State University of New York at Brockport I studied with three professors who were particularly important in shaping my fundamental attitudes about art and art-making. These were William Stewart, Robert Marx, and Albert Paley. Each of these professors were not only accomplished artists but also forceful personalities.

William Stewart

In studying sculptural ceramics with William Stewart I learned to value artistic play and witty narrative. These qualities were intrinsic to much of Professor Stewart's work at that time and to his pedagogy. His creatures were imbued with a magical quality. On one level they existed in a fanciful world of play and frivolity, but on another level they functioned as metaphors for something darker. For me his work was both provocative and resonant. On the surface I was drawn to the creatures and was entertained by them; I could enjoy them for what they were as something entertaining. I was also aware that there was a deeper meaning inferred. I sensed that much of this content was beyond my full comprehension. However, I was not intimidated by the mystery of meaning but rather inspired to search and gain an appreciation for the art.
What began to take shape was a personal epistemology that eventually became a vital component of my art. Making art would become a questioning process and an attempt to understand the deeper issues of life. Art became a means to make visible those things that are hidden to the casual observer. It also became clear to me that one of the functions of art was to stimulate viewers to have a similar interest in uncovering meaning in life. In that way art can potentially counter the ever present process of degradation. I realized that art must work in opposition to the forces that are bent on producing intellectual lethargy and uniformity of thought.

Professor Stewart's work also spoke to me of struggle. I believe that existence is rooted in struggle and each of us deals with that fact to whatever degree fate or will dictates. My art, at its most basic level, is concerned with the reality of that struggle. I believe it was during the time, when I was a student at Brockport, that I began to understand that if my art was to be honest it needed to address this issue. Professor Stewart's influence not only helped me understand this aspect of myself, but also provided a model rooted in a dichotomy of play and serious commentary that I found engaging and appropriate.
In studying design with Albert Paley, I developed a belief in the efficacy of the curvilinear and the idea of art rooted in organic reference. Professor Paley was a strong advocate of line. I was accordingly influenced and came to view line as something necessary to the art making experience.

It is clear now that this belief in the necessity of line became, at that time, an inextricable part of my thinking. My efforts to disregard or sublimate it, over the years, have always failed. My graduate studies have compelled me to resolve the issue and define the place that line should have in my work.

Ultimately, I have come to understand that the use of line is for me something fundamental to my way of seeing. I cannot sublimate or ignore it. Through the use of line I am able to achieve an artistic experience and give shape to a personal vision that might otherwise be unobtainable.

I don't understand why my personal artistic struggle unfolded as it has except to conclude that rebellion is often an aspect of human experience. Why was I, at first, inclined to reject the use of line? In my case the struggle likely involved resistance to the thing that seemed natural or easy in the belief that such a condition must be in error. Perhaps I regarded line as too much of a contrivance. I do not have a clear explanation. However, for many, self-defeating tendencies are also a common aspect of human experience. I work hard to recognize and address mine.
Professor Robert Marx

Probably my most important influence, at least from the standpoint of studio art, was Robert Marx. Under the tutelage of professor Marx I received a thorough introduction to intaglio printmaking and experimented with screen printing processes. In addition, in Marx's classroom I studied drawing extensively and learned some basic drawing principles that have stayed with me throughout my professional career. Much of what professor Marx communicated, in his austere and reserved manner, I came to appreciate only years later. In retrospect, I have concluded that his particular teaching philosophy was aimed at developing insight in his students. He was always intent on teaching concepts about what art should be.

One concept that Marx periodically mentioned was that a work of art should tell a story. I wasn't sure at that time what he meant but I could see that storytelling was somehow not the same as illustration. That concept has remained with me over the years, partly because I have remained fascinated with the notion and partly because I remained only partly persuaded as to its truth.

Over the years, in spite of a conscious effort to suppress the idea and practice of storytelling, my work has become increasingly narrative. Although this fact contradicts notions of what I wanted my art to be, that is something essentially non-objective, I am currently experiencing a sense that this storytelling quality is very meaningful and essentially motivating for me. In particular I have extended the notion of storytelling to include the addition of text with my images. By adding text I am able to use words as visual elements and symbols while adding another dimension to the art making process that I find satisfying and appropriate.
In the context of studying drawing with professor Marx, I was influenced by the pedagogy of Kimon Nicolaïdes. The particular concept of importance is expressed in the following quote from the introduction of Nicolaïdes' well-known work entitled *The Natural Way to Draw*:

> There is only one right way to learn to draw and that is a perfectly natural way. It has nothing to do with artifice or technique... They (students of art) must discover something of the true nature of artistic creation -- of the hidden processes by which inspiration works.

For Nicolaïdes the right way to draw, and by extension the right way to make art, was rooted in a direct and unlabored manner of working. I have increasingly come to believe in the connection between this uncontrived way of working and artistic success. Technique itself is no guarantee that art will be produced. However, for me, gesture drawing became a fundamental way to explore and understanding the creative process. I eventually expanded my exploration to include a method of working that is essentially improvisational and rooted in the spirit of gesture drawing. My thesis work seeks to further develop this concept.

**Current Issues**

In my attempt to further develop a spontaneous process I am seeking to explore some less tangible aspects of the creative process. The nature and meaning of experience, as it constitutes the existential flow of our individual and collective worlds, is a subject of interest to me, particularly as it relates to the understanding of the creative process. As a result I have begun to explore the following: 1. Phenomenal reality (things known or derived through the senses), 2. The temporal fact of existence (time as a physical property) and 3. The duality of consciousness and unconsciousness.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a development of these ideas. I only mention them to support my belief that improvisational action is an effective way to bridge the conscious and unconscious thought processes in search of inspiration. I am interested in
the relationship between experience and art-making. I see experience as a continuous reality rooted in a realization or awareness of being, of thinking and feeling. This reality of being occurs moment to moment with the conditions of the moment and the specifics of experience constantly shifting.

The fact of experience is that it is rooted in unrepeateable particulars. If existence is continuous in its reality, changing from moment to moment, then the making of art should attempt to reflect this reality of existence. I believe that art-making should be an authentic experience as free as possible from artifices and contrivances or anything that will hinder the sort of connection to the moment that I consider essential to the creative process.

Because of this I have generally found collegiate or group studio arrangements to be unsatisfactory. This is particularly true of printmaking studios where the sharing of space and equipment is the norm. If work involves anything other than the execution of a mechanical process I have found it quite difficult to realize a desired level of autonomous action and concentration in a shared space arrangement. My studio work preference is a solitary, not a social one.

My object is to transcend common experience in a way that allows me to access my subconscious. I have found that any intrusion into my physical or mental space usually violates spontaneity, the basic prerequisite of my art-making.
On one level my work is about the interaction of experience and the moment and what can happen within a flow of moments in time during which a creative process is imposed. Because of this the conditions in which I create become very important. The creative result is as much about the experience in time as it is about the art work that is created. The work of art should be a summary of the unique experiences that led to its final creation.

**Artist Statement**

On another level, my work is a struggle for independence and self-validation. I have come to appreciate the relationship between art-making and individualism. I have also come to understand that this realization has been long-delayed because the forces of society work to hide the truth of individualism. It may be that a society always lives in fear of chaos and therefore seeks to quietly allow itself to be subject to the tyranny of consensus. Individualism is quietly viewed as being a threat to the existing order. Notions of conformity predominate and we live and act accordingly, believing that only sociopaths do otherwise. In the end we suffer spiritual and intellectual depravation and defeat. If we fail to comprehend the forces at work we moreover ultimately suffer a loss of our humanity.

For the sake of humanity the artist needs to be at odds with society. Insofar as the artist is true to self and not society, making art will be something anti-social, at least if it is art-as-art and nothing else. The underlying aesthetic that I am referring to is modernist and is rooted in
the spirit of the Avant-garde. Conforming to society without question is counterproductive for the artist. Conformity is encouraged because society does not, generally, value individualistic thought. To some extent the history of art shows that great art was made in spite of the servile conditions imposed upon the artist by both society and patrons. The extreme examples of artistic control and suppression in totalitarian societies are an example of how the artist espouses a non-conformity and therefore in these circumstances becomes a particular threat.

In his essay Art-as-Art the artist and art critic Ad Reinhardt wrote the following:

*The one assault on fine art is the ceaseless attempt to subserve it as a means to some other end or value. The one fight in art is not between art and non-art, but between true and false art... between free art and servile art.*  

Art must not be produced to serve a particular function but it must exist as art. This is a simple truth. Art must challenge the status-quo even if it is sound because it may be that tomorrow it will become corrupt. In this way art becomes a guardian of the culture's soul. Art should not be generally understood, particularly in a world that is used to thinking according to the mundane. Good art should never be plainly understood by the person on the street because popular culture does not seek the inventive or the challenging; it does not like the unpredictable but expects the ordinary. Popular culture does not, of its accord, seek art but rather seeks the art of anti-art. It is an aesthetic of banal utilitarianism and crass exploitation. It is taste defined by the enemies of art. If the artist does not suffer some ridicule what is his or her art worth? There must always be difficulty for the true artist since the very essence of good art is that it is individualistic and contrary to the expectations of a collective culture and often even the collective expectation of the artistic community. At a certain level being an artist means being able to exist outside of all societies and their judgments.

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

The American abstract expressionist movement of the 1940s and 1950s embodies aesthetic concepts that I find personally relevant. The movement was for instance a search for an essential and completely spontaneous way of working. It has been referred to as the "first truly unmannered and untrammeled and unentangled, styleless, universal painting." 9 In addition abstract expressionism's abandonment of all subject matter produced a "technique which allowed an even greater freedom of gesture that the freest painters in western art had ever achieved." 10

There is another level at which I feel connected to the abstract expressionist artists of the mid twentieth century. This has to do with the self-affirming nature of spontaneous action as it relates to as existentialist philosophy. By 1945 the world view of these artists had been permanently altered. The century had so far produced a great economic depression, two world wars and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Furthermore the colonial model, which had imposed a level of stability throughout the world was beginning to deteriorate. The climate was one of uncertainty. The concept of angst had become a modern reality and for many the search for personal meaning and validation became extremely important.

Ironically, this climate of uncertainty actually helped free these artists. The reality of the moment began to take on a new significance and they began to consider the notion of spontaneity, particularly in the context of existentialist thought. This view holds that "...in the area of reason everything is absurd, but nonetheless a person can authenticate himself

by an act of will." For the abstract expressionists this meant that the act of making art was as important as what was produced. Spontaneous action became something vital and affirming and came to symbolize the rejection of western rational values that "had succeeded in developing technologies and principles of organization that threatened human life and freedom on an unprecedented scale." 12

As these artists embraced spontaneity they also began to revisit notions of surrealism and in particular a surrealism that emphasized the exploration of unconscious structure. In conjunction with this they also began to explore the possibilities of automatism and a connection with the subconscious (non-reason). The artists of the abstract expressionist movement rejected the use of dimensional space as it had been defined by the Surrealists, in favor of a space that was devoid of falsehood. There was no place for illusion in this new view of art. "It was from this determination to integrate anti-illusion with psychic automatism that the unique qualities of Abstract Expressionism emerged." 13

The connections between philosophical flow, cultural consensus, and artistic commentary rooted in the non-reason of the unconscious was the basis of their aesthetic. There were

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11. Francis A. Schaeffer, How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture, (Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway Books, 1976), 167. Here the author is discussing an important aspect of Existentialist philosophy which views everything in the area of reason to be absurd and that a person can be validated in this life only by taking action. Furthermore since reason is not involved, action is essentially something amoral. Existentialism is of course a philosophy that had a significant impact on the Abstract Expressionist artists of the mid 20th century.
13. Ibid., p. 37.
other attitudes within the abstract expressionist movement that were also important. For instance a belief in the notion that all is chance was prevalent. Therefore, in response to the foundational humanistic and mechanistic philosophies of the west, rooted in the Renaissance and age of enlightenment, it became appropriate to explore the relationship between spontaneous action and accident. In fact, it may be that this was one of the most meaningful areas of exploration undertaken by these artists and it should be no surprise that the artist most clearly associated with the abstract expressionist movement is Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). Indeed, his mature work completely embodies the spirit of the movement. The fluid, free-flowing quality of his paintings fully expresses the essence of spontaneous action, unconscious flow and exploration of chance that were the basis of the movement.

In some important ways, for instance in the area of exploring the notion of an unconscious flow, these artists were significantly influenced by the writings of Carl Jung. As a technique, automatism was used to explore these notions, and as a way of developing a spontaneous approach to painting that would allow the suppression of conscious in favor of the subconscious. The subject of their paintings was the structure of the unconscious and ultimately the very act of painting. Abstraction was taken to a new level to include pure unconscious thought and the non-objective: There was no longer any connection to the identifiable world. Nietzsche's ideal of Art for Art's sake had more than ever been realized.

For me, Abstract Expressionism represents an ideology that was devoid of compromise, and one that produced authentic art. It was a movement that encouraged the artist to work according to an inner vision and not according to the expectations of popular taste. I view these ideals as being foundational to my aesthetic and therefore hold the works of these artists in high esteem.

**SUMI E AND JAPANESE BRUSH PAINTING**

Before beginning my thesis work I knew very little about Japanese painting and nothing about Sumi e. At the suggestion of professor Keith Howard, my primary instructor for non-toxic printmaking, I began to investigate this approach to painting and was surprised to discover concepts that were deeply relevant to my work. My surprise was not just in discovering parallels in method and even philosophy but by reading about Sumi e painting I was able to better understand the artistic merit within my own art. By briefly considering a few aspects of sumi e painting and Japanese painting in general, I could readily identify a few applicable parallels and gain a greater understanding of the process that I was exploring.

**Sumi e:** Sumi e literally means black ink picture. (sumi, black ink; e, picture). The practice employs a direct brush technique, based on specific lines and dots. These paintings display two main qualities: simplicity of design and visual strength. The illustration shown above (figure 26) is an example of this basic technique and style of painting.

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The practice of Sumi e is rooted in specific disciplines and attitudes, particularly in relation to mastering the various brush marks that are used. The manner of applying the brush marks is direct and done according to a defined method. The execution of a Sumi e painting is almost always completed in one sitting.

An important reason for this is the need for the artist to become a part of the subject and paint according to a "stirring". This stirring can be defined as a feeling of high emotion towards the thing being painted. There is in effect a window of time where the connection between subject and artist is optimum and the work needs to be done while the level of stimulation is high.

Other important and related factors include the artist's ability to eliminate unnecessary details and to communicate the essence of a subject. However, for me the concept of peak connection is an aspect of Sumi e painting that is critically relevant. Understanding it has helped me formalize an important aspect of my aesthetic. The goal of completing a piece in one session is important to me, both as a means of keeping the image fresh and as a way of presenting a unified approach towards the subject.

In the case of canvas painting or when constructing larger projects, once I initiate a working session a complete image is formed and if I rework the piece something entirely new takes shape. The new image may in some important way relate to what has gone before or it may be that the previous work will exist simply as an underpainting. Another result might be that no relationship is evidenced and the rework is a new thought and new painting.

The reason for this is my belief, like the Sumi e artist, in the importance of achieving a connection with my subject, which in my case is often just the art itself. This is not something
that usually occurs in stages or by working in a sustained manner over a long period of time. The reality of a direct and spontaneous method is that each session is a new experience with its own unrepeateable variables and effects. The American Philosopher John Dewey, in his 1934 work entitled *Art as Experience*, offers the following commentary on this phenomenon:

> Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environment conditions is involved in the very process of living...
> For life is no uniform uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement towards its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement; each with its own unrepeated quality pervading it throughout.  

My emphasis on a spontaneous and direct art making is rooted then in the belief that each art making session is unique in time. I expect that the character of the experience, including the particulars of the environment and my mental state, will help shape the art that is made by determining how I will connect to the subject and how I will respond to the materials that I am using. This concept is formally expressed in the canons of the aesthetics of Japanese painting as SEI DO, or kokoro mochi, and means "living moment". "Whatever the subject to be translated--whether river or tree, rock or mountain, bird or flower, fish or animal--the artist at the moment of painting it must feel its very nature".  

This principal is foundational. The intent of the brush stroke is to communicate the strong sentiment of connection, feeling or oneness with the subject.

If there is an overriding factor to my process I believe that it is my desire to connect with the subject and to act during the peak of connectedness. The purpose of my improvisation is to

free myself from preconceived attitudes and be able to respond to the subject in as unhindered a manner as possible. In researching Sumi e and understanding how the technique incorporate the same premise I feel that my concept is validated. In addition in looking at the Sumi e model I have been able to better understand my own process.

CONCLUSION

I have determined that my art needs to be rooted in spontaneous action and improvisation. Since these things require a degree of meditative engagement I have discussed why making visuals is for me for me a solitary experience. In fact I have found that all environments that do not facilitate an introverted and focused process are generally unacceptable to me. I have engaged in other forms of art making where the opposite is true: acting, the creation of music, and constructing three dimensional forms such as sculpture and ceramics. In these situations I find that interacting with others is usually positive and is stimulating to the art making process. I believe that this is so because of the predominately physical nature of the activity that I have mentioned. Under these conditions a group synergy is beneficial. But if I am to make visual art, there needs to be a level of insulation established which requires the privacy of a studio.

For as long as I can remember I have made art. It is an activity that is perfectly natural for me. Moreover I have come to appreciate that making art is something necessary; it is something that I need to do to maintain a personal equilibrium. However, it is also an activity that usually
involves struggle. Sometimes the struggle is so great that I find little satisfaction in making art. It is merely something that I need to do for emotional or professional reasons. My graduate work and thesis research in particular has helped me better understand why I make art and the nature of my personal struggle. I have defined a creative process and a personal aesthetic to a degree that I can move forward as an artist with a clarity and understanding that previously would not have been possible. Making art is an activity that is now much more within my grasp.

To the extent that optimism can be enjoyed in this life I am optimistic. I have many things to be thankful for. In particular I am presently realizing two life-long ambitions: making art, that is beginning to provide me with a sense of reward, and teaching art. My only regret is that it took me so long to get here.

I view life as a bittersweet experience; we take the good with the bad, the victories with the disappointments. In the end my concepts of life are defined by a particular religious view for which I make no apologies. What will anything that I have done matter in the end? Or to say it more accurately, how will what I have done be judged?

In the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 1 verse 2 we read: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."\(^{19}\) I have realized that life is short and its rewards fleeting. In

\(^{19}\) Ecc. 1:2 KJV (King James Version)
the end the most important task that confronts me is to order my priorities. Art is something that I do, but it is by no means the most important thing that I do. How long will I be remembered after I am gone? How much of what I have done really really matter except for how I have affected people that will carry on after me? What is my real purpose here?

I have quoted from the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes and to answer my question I wish to quote the end of the book: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."20

20. Ecc. 12:13, 14 KJV (King James Version)
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