

Awakening Within: The Joy is in the Discovery

By

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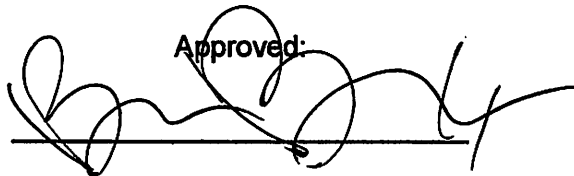
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**Approved:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Benjamin Britton', written over a horizontal line.

**Benjamin Britton, Major Professor**

**4/22/19**

**Date**

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(Fig. 1) Chang, "From my heart," 2018, graphite and colored pencil on handmade abaca paper, 11" x 8.5".

## Prologue

“Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world.  
Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” --Rumi

### I. Introduction

Breathe in  
Breathe out  
Breathe in deeper, fuller  
Let it out slower, easier  
The breath exists all around, between, within us  
A vital force, that links you and me  
Letting go; exhaling  
In order to fill up; inhaling  
To know contentment is to be rich, according to the Tao Te Ching.

I seek a sense of inner peace through love and gratitude of daily life. I find meaning in a journey of discovery into what lies within me. My work addresses an intentional way of living through a combination of formal elements and material choices. Inspired by Taoism and Zen Buddhism, I strive to balance positive and negative space in a harmony of image and ground. I begin my work with the slow and physical processes of creating a substrate using papermaking and natural dyeing. Using marks of childlike, simple gestures and delicate color choices in a minimal manner, I strive to evoke a space of contemplation for the viewer and emanate the nonverbal and abstract essence of my spiritual practice. I attempt to visually capture positive energy, or *qi*, through subtleties in form. The ground is just as important as the marks due to my desire to give space to the viewer to breathe and enjoy the moment. Through simplicity, intuition, and fluidity, I wish for the viewer to open their heart to feel a sense of delight in the unknown that exists in each piece. The search for joy, peace, happiness, and love is what gives life meaning. The joy of life is found in the flow of the moment.

### II. Practice and Discipline as Motivation

I practice yoga, qigong, breath awareness, meditation, and journaling in an effort to harmonize my mind, body, and spirit. My daily actions reiterate my goal of celebrating the joy of living. My morning routine, which consists of warm lemon, honey, and ginger to nourish the

physical body, and qigong and journaling to nurture mind and heart, allows me to start my day in a grounded structure that prepares me for the messiness that life may bring. “The miracle is that we are here, that no matter how undone we’ve been the night before, we wake up every morning and are still here. It is phenomenal just to be.”<sup>1</sup> Waking up each day with an awareness of just being alive is enough. Through ritual, I weave meditation into even seemingly mundane daily activities.

Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh explains that living in the present moment is a miracle and that peace is all around and within each of us. “Many of us, although alive, are not really alive because we are not able to touch life in the present moment.”<sup>2</sup> By focusing on the breath, one can come into the present moment. “When we touch peace, everything becomes real. We become ourselves, fully alive in the present moment, and the tree, our child, everything else reveals themselves to us in their full splendor.”<sup>3</sup> Through my rituals and routines, I cultivate peace through living in the present moment as best as I can. This translates to how I approach my studio practice; I create each piece by discarding all thought and attempting to be as much in the present moment. Thich Nhat Hanh also says:

Touching the present moment does not mean getting rid of the past or future. As you touch the present moment, you realize that the present is made of the past and is creating the future. Touching the present, you touch the past and the future at the same time. You touch globally the infinity of time, the ultimate dimension of reality. When you drink a cup of tea, very--deeply, you touch the present moment and you touch the whole of time. It is what St. Francis did when he touched the almond tree so profoundly that he could see it flowering even in the middle of winter. He transcended time.<sup>4</sup>

When making, I acknowledge the sensation of past, present, and future meeting together, rather than discarding the past or future. By slowing down and becoming more aware of the present moment through my daily meditative practices and rituals, I am able to more fully live in the present and be at peace.

### III. Materials and Process

#### A. Journaling

Journaling has been an important practice to me for so long that it seems as if it almost defines me. At around age five, I made my first hardcover book out of photocopy paper, scotch tape, and popsicle sticks glued together as the book board. From childhood until now, I have longed to record, archive, and account for my thoughts, feelings, experiences, and the minutiae of the everyday.

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<sup>1</sup> Lamott, *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*.

<sup>2</sup> Nhất Hạnh, Thích. *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*. Parallax Press, 2009. p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

I struggle with the idea of constantly recording the past while simultaneously trying to live in the present. The two modes seem especially at odds the more that I delved into my graduate research about mindfulness as a means to attain inner peace. I wanted to bring my journaling practice into my studio practice, but originally could not find a link. While my journaling tends to be narrative and illustrative in nature, my wall-based handmade paper works are abstract and do not convey a sense of specific time; the time and space pushes forward, back, and against the sides of the picture plane. However, the shorthand personal code that I have developed in my temporally oriented journaling practice relates directly to the abstract visual language that I use in my handmade paper pieces.

In Alain de Botton's *Essays in Love*, the author highlights an Arabic saying that "the soul travels at the pace of a camel. While most of us are led by the strict demands of timetables and diaries, our soul, the seat of the heart, trails nostalgically behind, burdened by the weight of memory."<sup>5</sup> This passage really struck me, that our soul becomes weighed down as we inevitably live. Through journaling, I can unburden my soul, little by little, and attempt to live fully in the present moment. When I haven't journaled for awhile, I hold onto those memories to be recorded, attempting to keep the memories fresh in my mind. Once I do start to journal, I feel as if I've lightened my load to the point where I don't have to hold on to those memories anymore. I can go back to my journals to explore these memories, thoughts, dreams, and ideas at a later time without trying to hold on to every bit. Of course there are those few beautiful memories we hold on to very dearly, but at the end of it all I feel like there are only flashes of certain memories in our mind, most remaining subliminal until something triggers their recollection. I originally thought journaling and living in the present moment were contradictory, but I have come to realize that journaling actually helps me live more mindfully in the moment because I can lighten the load off of my soul, thereby feeling renewed and open to life.

## B. Drawing

Drawing as visual inquiry is integral to my investigations of meditation in art and daily life. Lines dance across the picture plane, while negative space is equally if not more important than the marks themselves. (Fig. 1) Viewers can make the connections between the gaps and attempt to find a sense of wholeness visually, as I do metaphorically. The Gestalt visual grouping principles of closure and continuity exist in my work as well. The psychological tendency to make forms complete through implied closure ties the mechanics of formal perception to my concept of representing a search for peace.

### a. Agnes Martin

Agnes Martin believed in following her inspiration to achieve the perfection that she saw in her mind. Through an awareness of the mind, happiness, and life, Martin lived a life of solitude to cultivate an "untroubled mind," in which to see the source of her inspiration. For Martin, the untroubled state of mind is not a constant, but in the moments of an untroubled mind

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<sup>5</sup> De Botton, Alain. "Ellipsis" from *Essays in Love*, p. 195.

one sees inspiration. To Martin, children have more inspirations because of their untroubled minds, but she believes that everyone has inspiration and therefore observers can respond to an artwork through their own sense of inspiration. Through inspiration and desire to represent perfection, she stated that "...awareness of happiness, beauty, and life is what inspires us to live."<sup>6</sup>

Much of her work, visually and conceptually, resonates with me. Her use of subtlety, subdued color, minimal imagery, and emphasis on line to illuminate feelings of beauty, perfection, and happiness align with my own visual and conceptual goals. I agree with her thoughts concerning happiness and life through cultivating an awareness of the two. I admire her dedication to the use of grids, but desire another manner of portraying these ideals that is more organic, fluid, and intuitive. For me, the grids are too stable, too explainable, and leave insufficient room for complexity, feeling, and unknowing. Additionally, I am skeptical of the need to live in solitude, because although artists may work in solitude, I believe humans are social creatures and need social interaction and connection to survive. Agnes Martin's writings about life and art appear to teeter from positive to disheartening, though perhaps at the end of it all, the purpose is just to keep going.

b. Cy Twombly

Cy Twombly's expressive, energetic mark making and visual imagery touches upon a place of deep feeling for me. Twombly developed a personal poetic language that alludes to art, mythology, and history.<sup>7</sup> My work contains visual similarities to Twombly's in my use of scribbles, smudges, blobs, and emotive mark making that discharges energy.

Acknowledging abstract expressionism and edging towards minimalism, Twombly's expressive works are not sentimental nor personal. Yet his "unpredictability of the wayward line," "bolts of energy" that "shoot through squiggly mass" and "erotic playfulness" of his marks are not devoid of feeling.<sup>8</sup> Twombly's work activates and extends beyond the edges of the canvas. My work recognizes both abstract expressionism in its spontaneous energy and concern with the spiritual and unconscious and minimalism in its phenomenal experience for the viewer and its aesthetic forms of beauty, simplicity, and purity of form. Degas, another artistic influence of mine, wished to be "illustrious and unknown," which is what Cy Twombly became.<sup>9</sup>

C. Printmaking

a. Richard Tuttle

Richard Tuttle's work can be described as philosophical and "a perfect Romantic fragment; complete in itself, a fragmentary image of the infinite, the return of springtime, the

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<sup>6</sup> Martin, Agnes. *Agnes Martin Writings*.

<sup>7</sup> Nicola del Roscio, et. al. *The Essential Cy Twombly*.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Schama, "Cy Twombly" from *The Essential Cy Twombly*, p. 11-13.

<sup>9</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia" from *The Essential Cy Twombly*, p. 61.



renewal of desire.”<sup>10</sup> I relate to Tuttle’s interest in printmaking and handmade paper to address beauty and wonder. He uses printmaking to tackle an in-between space through the print matrix, which inherently creates a mediation of the actual drawing and final print. “A difficult to define ‘in-between’ surfaces” is often used to describe Tuttle’s work as is his use of “material with seemingly minimal interventions,” which show the viewer “poetic and philosophical dimensions only gradually.”<sup>11</sup> Christina von Rotenhan describes Tuttle’s work as one with transitions and ambiguity that are “occupying a space between vision and cognition” and “attend to the ‘unsayable.’”<sup>12</sup> The process of printmaking inevitably has an in-between of things and a transition from the artist’s original mark making on the matrix to the final image, thereby bringing about ambiguity of its origin. The delay in printmaking from process to final outcome adds to a sense of the unknown in my work.

Madeleine Grynstejn connects Tuttle with the mid-19th-century American Transcendentalists, who were interested in spiritual matters and “radically heightened consciousness in direct encounters with the immediate, physical world.”<sup>13</sup> Tuttle also collaborated with Agnes Martin in her book, *The Religion of Love* which was written by Martin and illustrated by Tuttle. With love as the governing religion and subject of the book, the illustrations are simple, minimal, and abstract. Von Rotenhan describes Tuttle’s work as “convey[ing] knowledge of unknown realms and phenomena not through words, but visual representation...an impression of the ‘unsayable.’”<sup>14</sup> Tuttle’s subtle, often intimate work of various mediums, particularly printmaking, touch upon ideas that I am similarly interested in such as his material choices of everyday objects, drawing, printmaking on handmade paper and Chinese Xuan Zi paper, and use of fabric to address the nonverbal.

#### D. Papermaking

Papermaking as process and handmade paper as vehicle for the mark making are important to my work. Paper, invented in China thousands of years ago, has been used to record details from the profound to the mundane. There is a Chinese saying that “life is as fragile as paper.” I print and draw on paper to reference paper’s physicality and delicacy. Paper is resilient, but when not properly cared for, can easily be destroyed; this can also be said about life. A vigor for life and search for inner peace through the active mark making rests upon a surface balance of yin and yang; strength and fragility.

The process of making paper beckons one to slow down and be present. An act of attentive labor, papermaking requires patience. Created out of simple materials of the earth, water and plant fiber, handmade paper is at its core, natural. Like humans and the planet,

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<sup>10</sup> James Cuno, “Fragment” from *Richard Tuttle Prints* quoting Charles Rosen.

<sup>11</sup> Christina von Rotenhan, “Something In-Between: An Introduction to the Prints of Richard Tuttle,” *Richard Tuttle Prints*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Madeleine Grynstejn, “A Universe of Small Truths,” *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, exh. Cat., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco 2005, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Christina von Rotenhan, “Something In-Between: An Introduction to the Prints of Richard Tuttle,” *Richard Tuttle Prints*, p. 13.

handmade paper too is composed mainly of water. Water is essential to life, a Taoist metaphor for suppleness that defeats stone, or the traditionally strong. Water flows and transcends.

I make paper in a range of sizes, but currently at a large-scale with a custom-made deckle box, a papermaking device. The width of the deckle box is exactly my height, five feet, five inches, and over seven feet long. I begin by soaking abaca fiber overnight and then overbeat the fiber for eight hours, turning it to pulp to make the paper more translucent. I leave the unbleached abaca in its natural state, or dye the pulp using organic food scraps that I collect and save. From there, I pour the pulp and water into my deckle box. Making the paper by myself at such a large-scale, I need to walk around all four sides continually throughout the process. Circulating around the deckle box in this way nods at the abstract expressionists who walked around all four sides of their paintings. I make paper outside, exposed to the natural elements of earth, air, and sun. I feel immense joy in creating a simple object in nature.

Translucent paper is beautiful and pure, allowing light to penetrate partially yet still retaining its form. The translucency also highlights its tactility and importance as a partner to the marks or imagery I add later. The inherent light within the paper heightens a sense of airiness and lightness, an ethereal transcendent quality in the substrate that supports the marks on top for a sensation of openness in the work. Due to the subtlety and minimal marks on the page, the paper's physicality and luscious surface quality is emphasized. For my work, marks and surface imagery harmonize with paper and support as partners in a dance, as unified whole.

#### IV. Nature

Life unfurling  
I marveled  
at crystalline corners and edges

Nature has been my first source of inspiration and continues to be an integral factor in my work. Perhaps this stems from a recognition of my position as a being; a small part of the much larger universe, nature itself. I use organic, free-flowing, varying, curvilinear lines and forms in my work, varying degrees of line quality combined with organic shapes to evoke the natural world. Nature informs my color choices. I use my food scraps to naturally dye my fabric and handmade paper to imbue the supports with color and residue from nature, giving my work physical properties derived directly from the earth.

I am interested in the connection between Romanticism and Taoism in terms of the expression of the lack of complete satisfaction of civilization and modern day society. I hope to convey an experience of living with vigor in harmony with the natural world:

Thoreau wanted only one thing: to see and hear the world around him. When he found himself interested in writing, he hoped to find a way of writing which would allow others not to see and hear how he had done it, but to see what he had seen and to hear what he had heard. He was not the one who chose his words. They came to him from what there is to see and hear... in a rather significant

way, as his *Journal* continues, his words become simplified or shorter...  
Thoreau's own experiences become more and more transparent. They are no  
longer his experiences. It is experience..."<sup>15</sup>

By paying attention to the world around me, the lived experience becomes the work, or increasingly more evident. Taoist philosophy and many Eastern traditions also cite the lived experience as important, more so than the reading and knowledge acquired from others. I hope to highlight the natural world in a Taoist manner of understanding that we must live in harmony with nature to be in harmony within ourselves and with one another.

## V. Spiritual Philosophy

### A. Yoga

Yoga, a Sanskrit term, means to “yoke”, “attach”, or “join.” Some believe that the word yoga means to unify the human spirit with the Divine, while others deem that the word means “to concentrate.” In essence, yoga is the union of body, mind, and spirit. Although many schools of thought and yoga practices exist, the main stated goals of yoga are to attain inner peace, unite with the divine, expand consciousness, and restrain the senses and the intellect to reach the highest state, or enlightenment. Traditionally, one would complete the physical postures, known as yoga in the western world, but defined as *asana*, before finding stillness and meditation.

In yoga classes, “namaste” is the final word of the session, indicating the closing of the class and a way to honor one another. In Sanskrit, “namaste” means the light within me honors the light within you. The concept of the light and love within the heart is visible in my work in the lightness that is palpable in my work. The colors, lack of distinct forms, and abstract space contribute to an overall feeling of lightness and airiness. Minimal marks and expansive negative space allude to the space and expansion of breath.

A lineage of meditation and yoga from India can be traced to China and Japan in later years. The earliest documentations of meditation, known as *Dyāna* in Sanskrit, arose from Hindu traditions during the Vedic periods of around 1500 BCE. Around the 6th to 5th centuries BCE, meditation practices developed in Taoist China, Buddhist India, and eventually Zen Japan. *Dyāna* led to *Chán*, the Chinese term for quietude or meditation, which then led to *Zen*, the Japanese term for meditation. The goal of inner peace and enlightenment through a meditation practice evolved over the years and in various parts of Asia through different practices, but ultimately searched for the same result.

### B. Taoism:

#### a. Introduction

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Millar, Roger Malbert, and Clementine Hampshire. *Every Day Is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*.

I first learned of Taoism in 2014 through the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) doctor, Master Nan Lu, the founder of the TCM World Foundation organization in NYC. I became interested in Taoism in addition to my yoga practice. Both a religion and a philosophy, Taoism originated in China around the 4th century BCE as a way of living in harmony with the Tao, or the unnameable, unknowable, mysterious process in the universe that flows through everything. Through different practices, one can find a union with “the unplanned rhythms of the universe”, or “tao.”<sup>1617</sup> The main principles emphasized in Taoism are *wu wei* (“without exertion”), a natural flow, simplicity, spontaneity, and the Three Treasures: compassion, frugality, and humility. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu were two of the most influential Taoist philosophers. “The subtle, sophisticated, mystical Taoism of Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu has left a permanent mark on all Chinese culture and on the Chinese character itself.”<sup>18</sup>

#### b. Tao Te Ching and Lao Tzu

The Tao Te Ching can be translated as “The Way and Virtue Classic”, Tao meaning “The Way”, Te meaning Virtue, and Ching meaning “tome” or “classic.” Written by Lao Tzu or Lao Tse, which means “Old Master,” he is thought to have been one or multiple people. As a philosophy that has influenced Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and other religions, the Tao Te Ching is a difficult, complex book to read while describing a simple, effortless way to live. Modern Chinese readers have difficulty deciphering the text because it is free-verse poetry written in ancient Chinese. It is even more difficult to understand once translated into English, due to the fact that there is no punctuation; the emphasis is different each time, depending on the version of the text. It is as if the text is hard to decipher and flow together as one, just as the Tao is supposed to be complex and flow through everything. Lao Tzu says that the Tao is not understood with intellect, but is easy and simple to understand if you listen to your heart.<sup>19</sup> I see my work as a similar way of understanding, one that is more complex if one tries to attempt it literally, but more easily achieved when allowed to just feel and be present when looking at my artwork.

#### c. Chuang Tzu and Tao of Pooh

Chuang Tzu (550 to 250 BCE) influenced Chinese thinking and philosophy, but particularly Chinese Zen Buddhists of the T'ang period (7th to 10th centuries A.D.). Similarities in spiritual teachings in Zen stem from Taoism. Through poetic writing that conveys the immediacy of direct experience, poetry and the arts were considered a type of spiritual practice.<sup>20</sup> I too, make use of the poetic in my work and attempt to approach my art like a spiritual

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<sup>16</sup> Pollard; Rosenberg; Tignor, Elizabeth; Clifford; Robert (2011). *Worlds Together Worlds Apart*. New York, New York; Norton, p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> Woodhead, Partridge, & Kawanmi, Linda, Christopher, & Hiroko (2016). *Religions in the Modern World*. New York: Routledge, p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Merton. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. p. 15

<sup>19</sup> Lao Tzu, *The Tao Te Ching*.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Merton. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. p. 8

practice, with simplicity and *wu wei*. “Instead of self-conscious cultivation of this good (which vanishes when we look at it and becomes intangible when we try to grasp it), we grow quietly in the humility of a simple, ordinary life... it is more of a matter of *believing* the good than seeing it as the fruit of one’s effort.”<sup>21</sup> Chuang Tzu’s proposition is *wu wei*, or non-doing. Rather, “if he can only ‘know when to stop,’ be content to wait, listen, and give up his own useless strivings, ‘this melts the ice.’ Then he will begin to grow without watching himself grow, and without any appetite for self-improvement.”<sup>22</sup> Chuang Tzu is against the idea of cultivating an interior life or self, but believes the happiness and freedom in Tao is everywhere. But rather than inactivity, it is “perfect action” that defines *wu wei*, and understanding everything is in flux, including the idea of the pivot of Tao. A visual balance of marks and surface strive to convey the balance and flux of life. “Happiness, when pushed to an extreme, becomes calamity. That beauty, when overdone, becomes ugliness. That clouds become rain and vapor ascends again to become clouds. To insist that the cloud should never to turn to rain is to resist the dynamism of Tao.”<sup>23</sup> I attempt to create work that embodies *wu wei*, or non-doing by placing simple, spare gestures that allude to flux and flow and a balance of doing and non-doing.

In *The Tao of Pooh*, author Benjamin Hoff explains the Pooh Way as a way of describing *wu wei*, which means “without doing, causing, or making.” *Wu wei* is said to be like “water flowing over and around the rocks in its path... that evolves from an inner sensitivity to the natural rhythm of things.”<sup>24</sup> Hoff explains that, “when we learn to work with our own Inner Nature, and with the natural laws operating around us, we reach the level of *wu wei*. Then we work with the natural order of things and operate on the principle of minimal effort. Since the natural world follows that principle, it does not make mistakes.”<sup>25</sup> Pooh exemplifies this effortless way of being and allowing things to occur spontaneously and naturally. It’s about a sensitivity to the circumstances and listening to his intuition. Similarly, I make art that is as spontaneous and naturally occurring as possible by listening to my intuition and embracing chance incidents that may arise.

Interestingly, Chuang Tzu also is critical of those who try to give knowledge about the Tao, because it is unnameable, and the person may not be able or ready to receive the instructions. Merton explains: “Tao cannot be communicated. Yet it communicates itself in its own way. When the right moment arrives, even one who seems incapable of any instruction whatever will become mysteriously aware of Tao.”<sup>26</sup> Merton states that Chuang Tzu’s teachings can be summed up as two levels: “that of the divine and invisible Tao that has no name, and that of ordinary, simple, everyday existence” (32). I strive to visually grapple with the two in my work. To me, Chuang Tzu’s words embody the goal of living with both the invisible Tao and ordinary, daily life in mind: “Flow with whatever may happen, and let your mind be free: Stay centered by accepting what you are doing. This is the ultimate.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Merton. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Merton. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.

### C. Zen Buddhism

“Gazing at the flowers  
of the morning glory  
I eat my breakfast.” --Basho

#### a. Introduction

Zen Buddhism came about as an intensified version of Taoism and melded with Buddhism.<sup>28</sup> Mostly practiced in Japan, Zen Buddhism suggests that every individual can achieve enlightenment, whether gradually through meditation or through awareness and practice in daily life. John Cage was a proponent of Zen Buddhism in relation to his art practice and life. For Cage, Zen meant:

...belief in the interconnectedness of all people things, and events big and small; the accommodation of paradox; privileging the comic over the tragic; valuing immediate experience in the present; a unidirectional view of time moving toward an enlightened” or (in Cage’s case, improved) future; and the importance of rituals. He embraced “a spirit of acceptance rather than a spirit of control.”<sup>29</sup>

Many other artists have been influenced by Zen ideals, perhaps because of the attractive notion inherent to that system of belief that each of us can reach enlightenment in this lifetime.

Zen art differs from Western art in terms of thought and communication. Western art attempts to use linguistic symbolic communication while Eastern Zen art tries to convey with the simplest manner the “inherent nature of the aesthetic object.”<sup>30</sup> Author Suzuki believes that Western art “depicts form” while Eastern art “depicts spirit.”<sup>31</sup> Western art represents nature with man made forms to make nature conform to man’s ideas, while Eastern art “accepts the object as is, and presents it for what it is, not what the artist thinks it means.”<sup>32</sup> Author Guilick notes that in the West, nature is used and analyzed while in the East, nature and man are in affinity and the beauty of nature is mysterious and embraced.<sup>33</sup> Communication through form and content, and specifically a connection between the artist’s feelings and the landscape through various techniques are Western ways of artmaking. For Zen Eastern art, anything can be expressed by:

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<sup>28</sup> Hinton, David. *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, p. 5 Counterpoint: 2014. p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Millar, Jeremy, Roger Malbert, and Clementine Hampshire. *Every Day Is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*. London: Hayward Publishing, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Fredric Lieberman. “Zen Buddhism and its Relationship to Elements of Eastern and Western Arts.” UC Santa Cruz. <http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/lieberman/zen.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Daisetz Taitaro Suzuki., 1957, *Mysticism Christian and Buddhist*. New York. p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Watts, Alan IV, 1957 *The Way of Zen.*, p. 174. New York..

<sup>33</sup> Gulick, Sidney Lewis. 1963 *The East and the West: A Study of their psychic and cultural characteristics*. P. 253-255. Tokyo and Rutland, Vermont

suggest[ing] the essence, the eternal qualities of the object, which is in itself a work of natural art before the artist arrives on the scene. In order to achieve this, the artist must fully understand the inner nature of the aesthetic object, its Buddha nature. This is the hard part. Technique, though important, is useless without it; and the actual execution of the artwork may be startlingly spontaneous, once the artist has comprehended the essence of his subject.<sup>34</sup>

I embrace the method of making in Zen Eastern art, while also understanding that due to my Western art education, expressivity through form and content still plays a role in my work.

The traditional way of Zen painting, *Sumi-e*, uses a horsehair brush, black ink, and paper or silk. The story exists of a Chinese painter asked to paint the Emperor's favorite goat. He studied the goat for two years until the Emperor asked for the goat back, upon which the artist had not started the painting. He then took an ink brush and drew eight strokes, "creating the most perfect goat in the annals of Chinese painting."<sup>35</sup> Zen painting uses an economy of means for "purity and simplicity of the eternal nature of the subject" and uses space in the visual image that "makes one think beyond reality into the essence of reality."<sup>36</sup> I attempt to work in a simple way with traditional drawing and printmaking mediums on paper and silk to convey similar ideas about the abstract essence of reality. Living fully in the moment and translating this fullness of my existence on earth through purity and simplicity with respect to the space aligns my work with a Zen way of painting.

#### b. Hakuin

Hakuin is one of the most well-known Zen masters and known as "the revitalizer of Rinzai Zen in Japan" due to his modified Zen training practices, "post-enlightenment" training, and the acceptance of lay practitioners.<sup>37</sup> Hakuin expressed his teachings through his calligraphy and painting, using playfulness and humor. He emphasized the idea of integrating meditation with daily activity, though this idea originated with Chinese master Ta-hui Tsung-kao. Hakuin defined the idea of meditation in daily life in more detail than previous Zen masters, promoting meditation while the body is in action, such as completing everyday activities rather than suggesting silent, seated meditation. Hakuin believed that the mind and body worked together for an "optimum result."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, over the course of my spiritual practice, I have increasingly deepened my meditation in daily activities. Like Hakuin, I hope to convey my spiritual practice in my artwork by creating a space for viewers to experience mindful contemplation.

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<sup>34</sup> Fredric Lieberman, *Zen Buddhism And Its Relationship to Elements of Eastern And Western Arts*.

<sup>35</sup> Fredric Lieberman, *Zen Buddhism And Its Relationship to Elements of Eastern And Western Arts*.

<sup>36</sup> Fredric Lieberman, *Zen Buddhism And Its Relationship to Elements of Eastern And Western Arts*.

<sup>37</sup> Audrey Yoshiko Seo & Stephen Addiss, *The Sound of One Hand: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin*, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Audrey Yoshiko Seo & Stephen Addiss, *The Sound of One Hand: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin*, p. 9.

### c. Sengai

Sengai, a Zen Master who rejected this title during his lifetime, created free-spirited, humorous drawings and calligraphy that showed his enlightened way of living. Furuta writes that Sengai was able to represent his enlightened awakening through visual form:

Whether or not such an experience could be depicted might be argued, but this problem is not relevant to Sengai. His experience of enlightenment quite naturally took a visual form, expressing itself directly in his drawings and calligraphy... there is no artificiality in his work; rather it is a direct expression of the experience of enlightenment itself.<sup>39</sup>

Writer Furuta acknowledges that other talented artists have lacked Zen and allowed talent to drown out the Zen in their artwork. The author goes on to explain that Sengai is able to reveal Zen, though it is “formless, figureless, and bodiless.”<sup>40</sup> Furuta denotes that Sengai’s work is unique, comical, and effortless; “enlightenment is there, but it is enlightenment without pretense.”<sup>41</sup>

Described as timeless and embodying enlightenment, Sengai’s famous drawing consists of a circle, triangle, and square. Sengai was familiar with *Mikkyō*, or Esoteric Buddhism, in which the circle means water, the triangle means fire, and the square means earth. Though circles are often used in Zen, with enso circle drawings a regular practice, triangles and squares do not typically appear. Furuta suggests that the drawing is similar to modern abstract painting in its novelty. The author attempts to unpack the meaning of the circle, triangle, square composition, but ultimately believes it is open to “unlimited interpretation”<sup>42</sup> and the expression of enlightenment. I hope that the forms and shapes that I use in my work are open to interpretation and does not limit the viewer’s expansiveness to feeling and experience. Circles and blobs appear often in my work, as does an implied triangle connecting floating forms in the picture plane. In my recent work, simple squares printed from uncarved blocks coexist with the circular forms and smudges.

Other drawings and writings include “dumplings not cherry blossoms,” images relating to tea, happiness, and even farts. The author describes the humor present in Zen Buddhism as occurring because of its seriousness. Laughter occurs from the performer being completely serious, and he equates this with Zen. He says that Zen might be one of the sternest Buddhist sects, yet has so much humor due to the fact that monks are “pure and serious,” though they live “eccentric and unconventional lives” (27). Sengai’s self-portrait shows a blob-like shape and figure that I intuitively respond to and have used similarly in my work, though perhaps unconsciously. The Zen Master’s style of drawing is simple, yet elegant, comforting and silly.

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<sup>39</sup> Shōkin Furuta, Translated, Adapted, and with notes and commentaries by Reiko Tsukimura, *Sengai: Master Zen Painter*, Kodansha International, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 44.



#### d. John Cage

Inspired first by Indian philosophy and then Zen Buddhism, John Cage was not only one of the most influential musical composers of the 20th century, but a visual artist with poetic and philosophical teachings. He studied with Zen Scholar D. T. Suzuki, which greatly influenced his conceptual inquiries and way of living. Besides his visually compelling images, I am most inspired by his way of connecting art with daily life.

In Cage's work, art spills into everyday life, and makes one pay attention to its details and nuances. "Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos, nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, I hope to blur the boundaries between art and daily life with nontraditional marks such as smudges and smears that call to mind accidental happenstance of our daily lived experience.

My own work often gives the viewer more questions than answers. Cage said of his work: "What can be analyzed in my work, or criticized are the questions...My composition arises out of asking questions."<sup>44</sup> Asking questions rather than creating solutions leads one to realize that there is very little that we actually know about the image. In Cage's "Lecture on Nothing," he stated: "We really do need structure, so we can see we are nowhere."<sup>45</sup> He finished his lecture by saying: "...All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working, it is quite clear that I know nothing."<sup>46</sup> I find that I often think I know something, but when I am in the making, I either know nothing or attempt to reach a state of just being, without ego. John Cage took his likes and dislikes out of his music and art to "more fully attend to the "cycles of nature." Cage states: "I have always tried to move away from music as an object, moving toward music as a process, which is without beginning, middle, or end."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, my work appears to be in a state of flux, as if it is unfinished. I also want to highlight art as process, and life as process, without beginning, middle, or end.

John Cage touched upon discipline and disinterest, but not apathy, as a way to leave behind the ego. Discipline, he described, was "conceived as a means of sobering and quieting the mind, freeing that mind from its likes and dislikes, taste and memory, making it subject to the Mind outside it."<sup>48</sup> Like Cage, the artmaking practice becomes a disciplined form of mindful practice for me. "When you start working, everybody is in your studio- the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas - all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave."<sup>49</sup>

Cage said, "In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring

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<sup>43</sup> Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*.

<sup>44</sup> Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*.

<sup>45</sup> John Cage and Kyle Gann. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> John Cage and Kyle Gann. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> John Cage and Kyle Gann. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Millar, Jeremy, Roger Malbert, and Clementine Hampshire. *Every Day Is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*.

<sup>49</sup> Musa Mayer, "My Father, Philip Guston," 1988

at all but very interesting.”<sup>50</sup> This way of approaching the mindset of boredom and therefore impatience with something can be extended as an attitude or way of approaching daily habits and actions. Cage believed in living with an appreciation of the day-to-day, and with humor.

Interestingly, John Cage compares disinterestedness with love; “If one makes music, as the Orient would say, *disinterestedly*, that is, without concern for money or fame but simply for the love of making it, it is an integrating activity and one will find moments in his life that are complete and fulfilled.”<sup>51</sup> I, too, make work disinterestedly in order to feel whole. The joy of making art that references self-love is a form of love that goes against the egotistical claims of society in contrast to other postures and positions (markets, academies, salons, critics).

#### D. Self-Love: Rumi, Alain de Botton, Anne Lamott

Love for myself manifests within my decisions and within my consciousness. Self-love allows me to give and receive love more fully. Taoist teacher Robert Rosenbaum addresses love in Zen and Taoism, two traditions where the word is rarely ever used. He states that “love is a practice,” rather than a feeling. And rather than giving and receiving love in a back and forth manner, it should be circular, with equanimity due to an equanimous state within”<sup>52</sup>. Self-help writer Anne Lamott underscores this circular nature by stating, “Love is the question...and it is the answer.”<sup>53</sup> Alain de Botton says that “without love, we lose the ability to possess a proper identity; within love, there is a constant confirmation of ourselves... to love someone is to take a deep interest in them, and by such concern to bring them to a richer sense of what they are saying and doing.”<sup>54</sup> Both of these sentiments regarding love can be applied to both love for oneself or for another. Often thought of as secondary to so many pressing demands of our time, self-love is vital and important in our lives. Self-love needs to exist to accept the love of another. However, this is not to say that self-love solves all problems, any of which should be approached with a balance of wisdom from within and wisdom from experience. Alain de Botton speaks of this in his novel, *Essays in Love*, advocating for this juggle of the complexities of love, rather than romantic positivism or pessimism.

Although it may seem unconventional to cite in an academic research paper, I read self-help books as a form of self-improvement, and therefore they become a part of my research practice in the same way as texts by ancient philosophers such as Rumi. From the beginning of time, humans have concerned themselves with the inexhaustible topic of love. I realized that my desire for inner peace stemmed from a place of self-love. The two appear to go hand in hand, perhaps one bringing about the other, without any particular order.

Rumi addresses love extensively in his writings and is the poet I return to most often for his wisdom. He has stated, “Love is not an emotion, it’s your very existence.” And, “Love rests

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<sup>50</sup> Millar, Jeremy, Roger Malbert, and Clementine Hampshire. *Every Day Is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*.

<sup>51</sup> Maria Popova, “Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists on love liberty, and the pursuit of silence,” Brainpickings.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Rosenbaum, “Zen, Tao, and Love.” 2015.  
<http://www.wisdompubs.org/blog/201502/zen-tao-and-love>.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Lamott, *Stitches: a handbook on meaning, hope, and repair*.” p. 87.

<sup>54</sup> Alain de Botton, *Essays in Love*, pp. 108.

on no foundation. It is an endless ocean, with no beginning or end.” His words champion the idea that is love is life and encompasses us all. My sentiment of vitality, love, and health in their connectedness is supported by his words, “If you want to be more alive, love is the truest health.” Rumi speaks of being present and intuitive by connecting within; “We carry inside us the wonders we seek outside us.” and, “Let the beauty we love be what we do.” and, “Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment. Cleverness is mere opinion. Bewilderment brings intuitive knowledge.” and, “Seek the wisdom that will untie your knot. Seek the path that demands your whole being.”

I make my work without cynicism. Instead, I advocate for love, beauty, happiness, and peace. These abstract themes can seem out of reach, unrealistic, idealistic, but for me are something I wholly believe in. At a concrete level, I strive to resemble the objects, places, things that have inspired me with beauty, and to carry this within as well as to convey this beauty in my work.

Life’s circumstances lead to certain things unexpectedly. Alain de Botton says: “You normally have to be bashed about a bit by life to see the point of daffodils, sunsets and uneventful nice days.” I began to search for a holistic outlook on life because of one particular life incident. When I was sixteen, I almost died sliding down a seven hundred foot mountain with an ice axe. In such a situation of fear, uncertainty, and lack of control in the force of nature’s power, one recognizes the duality of life and death. I faced nature’s simultaneous beauty and strength that day. Following the event, my mindset changed, and a yearning for life through breath, presence, and wonder has gradually permeated my way of living. I still struggle to find the balance, daily, but my sense of self-love leads to me to keep trying.

## VI. Manifestation of Objects/Thesis Show

My thesis show includes five 86” x 67” prints and drawings on handmade, translucent abaca paper. The handmade paper pieces are simultaneously object and image due to the textural, tactile quality of the paper. At once both vibrant and pale, colors inspired by nature dance across the picture plane in smudges, blobs, and shapes. Organic, flowing lines and nuanced shifts in form seemingly float, converge and diverge. Atmospheric space and inherent light exists from the marriage of the marks and translucent paper.

In *Stitching together daily life in all its imperfect beauty* (Fig. 2), the handmade book consisting of thread, cut paper, letterpress, and drawing on handmade abaca paper anchors the show with the book form. The book invites the viewer into an intimate environment. From there, the viewer is greeted by expansive presence of the large-scale paper works. In *Flowing, in this moment* (Fig. 3), found discarded threads are embedded during the handmade paper process. The threads moved with the flow of the water as the plastic sheet was pulled out from under the deckle, locating themselves where the water and papermaking process directed them. *Love is the whole thing* (Fig. 4), a monotype, consists of an uncarved block print with painterly marks in warm earth tones. More gestural, expressive marks that feel intimate and immediate, but enlarged exist in *Being* (Fig. 5), a mixed media drawing. In *Essence of it All* (Fig. 6) and *Elemental Rhythm* (Fig. 7), monotype and chine-collé unify the uncarved block with collage.

The uncarved block, or *pu*, refers to the inherent naturalness of humanity or unity with the Tao. Use of the unworked woodblock contrasts with the imperfect wrinkles and tears in the paper.

The combination of dense and sparse, thin and thick, sharp and smudged, quick and slow, bold and delicate, geometric and organic, coexist to address the simple, yet complex nature of yin and yang. Seeking inner peace and harmony may appear facile, but is at once natural and challenging, as this search is a lifelong one. My intention is to materialize my personal journey while providing the viewer a site for their own experience of contemplation.



(Fig. 2) "Stitching together daily life in all its imperfect beauty," 2018, handmade book with threads, letterpress, marker, and collage on handmade abaca paper



(Fig. 3) *Flowing, in this moment*, 2019, discarded found thread inclusions in handmade paper naturally dyed with onion and citrus peels, 86" x 67".





(Fig. 4) *Love is the whole thing*, 2019, monotype on handmade paper, 86" x 67".



(Fig. 5) *Being*, 2019, graphite, colored pencil, oil pastel, and mica gold flake on handmade paper, 86" x 67".





(Fig. 6) *Essence of it all*, 2019, monoprint with chine-collé on handmade paper naturally dyed with lemons, 86" x 67".





(Fig. 7) *Elemental rhythm*, 2019, monoprint with chine-collé and drawing on handmade paper, 86" x 67".

## VII. Conclusion

Seeking the balance of a give and take, a yin and yang, of purpose and yielding, exists as a thread in my artwork and in my life. As humans, we live with drive, yet we must also relax and find the flow. My wish is to connect myself, others, and our earth with presence and gratitude in order to find happiness and beauty. A vibrating sense of happiness that permeates from an awareness of life exists because of the connection to the self and to others. Being human is a wondrous and mysterious experience that unfolds in each moment of life.

Beauty exists in the everyday, if only we are keen enough to open our eyes and really see. The gurgling of freshly brewed tea poured into a porcelain mug, the patterns of sunlight diffused through an open screen door, and the look of unconditional love from a pet are all moments of beauty that have the possibility of becoming art. Each moment in our life is an opportunity to shape our daily patterns, choices, thoughts, and emotions into who we want to be. Finding a balance of actively doing and receptively being is an art. The in-between moments, the pause between the inhale and the exhale, the space between the notes, and the simple pleasures that exist in the everyday all weave together the fibers of life. My studio practice is an important way of engaging and functioning in the world.

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