2006

Opening the Heart

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Opening the Heart

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May, 2006
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Artist Statement

It is my discovery of the mandala that has had the most significant influence on me as an artist. The mandala, Sanskrit word for circle or center, is found in a majority of my pieces, either literally or symbolically. My interest in and subsequent use of the mandala began twenty years ago and continues to this day. The mandala is a primordial image found in the macrocosm of the universe, the microcosm of nature, and in the psyche of man. The circle has been used throughout the world in image and architecture as a sacred symbol since the beginning of time.
Opening the Heart

Introduction

“Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans.”
- John Lennon (1940-1980)

My intention, when I took my first painting class, was to help out my friends, have some fun making art, and earn some recertification points. It was the first class offered by the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Louisa County, Virginia. I am an art teacher at Louisa County Middle School and at that time, my friends and colleagues had been traveling a long way to take classes in other counties. We wanted to have enough people to make the class in our own county. While the class was thoroughly enjoyable, I had no intention, at that time, to pursue a master’s degree.

A few months after I took that first class, and on the day before the school year began, my husband, Jack, was unofficially diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). ALS, more commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, is a devastating terminal illness. The diagnosis, which was later confirmed, began an odyssey for my family that continues to this day. For additional information on ALS please refer to Appendix II.

From one day to the next, I became the sole support of my family and a caregiver. Needless to say, my husband’s illness has significantly influenced every aspect of my life, including my decision to eventually pursue an MIS degree.

In the beginning, when Jack was able to stay home by himself with relative safety, I convinced myself that I needed to take classes to maintain my sanity. Making art has
always been synonymous with therapy for me and I was nurtured by the camaraderie of
dear friends and colleagues. However, caregiving requires selflessness and making art is
necessarily a selfish and self involved activity. The tension created by these two activities
is one that I have been unable to reconcile entirely. As Jack’s disease has progressed,
there is never a time when I am away from home for long without guilt and fear, guilt for
leaving him home alone, and fear that there will be serious or even fatal consequences for
doing so.

After taking classes for a few years, I applied to the MIS program in order to
qualify for a supplement to my salary. Due to my husband’s illness, I would never have
considered taking classes at all if it required me to travel. I think it is remarkable then, to
note that with the exception of two classes, I may be the only person in the program who
earned her entire degree not only in her own county but in her own classroom.

The Mandala

"When he prepared the heavens, I was there:
When he set a compass upon the face of the deep."
- Proverbs 8:27

No discussion of my work would be complete without including the influence of
the mandala. I feel it is my discovery and subsequent study of the mandala that has had a
significant impact on my development as an artist. As I sit in front of my stack of books
on the subject, I feel that I can not hope to fully encompass all that can be said about the
mandala within the confines of this paper. However, I would like to take some time to
explain what a mandala is before I talk about its effect on my work.
Mandala is the Sanskrit word for circle. The circle is the basic structure found in the microcosm of nature and in the macrocosm of the universe. It is a form often created by man consciously and unconsciously in dreams and visions. Mandalas can be drawn, painted, sculpted, built, or even danced. Generally, it symbolizes integration, harmony, and transformation. The earliest examples of manmade mandalas date from the Paleolithic age and appear to be sun wheels scratched onto rocks. They are estimated to be 25,000 to 30,000 years old. These images are thought to be evidence of sun worship. Most mandalas used in a religious context are concentric, geometric images. In my opinion, the most exquisite examples of mandalas of this type are the sand mandalas of Tibetan Buddhism (Figure 1). They are a representation of the cosmos and in this sense are ritual, geometric diagrams used for contemplation and concentration. The Christian equivalent of the Tibetan mandala is the Rose window found in Gothic architecture, which is also an abstract representation of the cosmos. While their specific symbolism may vary from one religion to another, the mandala's purpose does not. They are intended to focus the attention of the viewer on the sacred.

Figure 1. Monks from Namgyal Monastery build a sand mandala at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Photo by Gail Carlin, 1992.
It was psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961), through his own study and use of the mandala, who discovered the effectiveness of using the circular image in a personal, therapeutic way to bring about psychological and spiritual wholeness. He observed in his practice that people who were in extreme states of psychic disorientation would have the mandala spontaneously appear in their dreams and drawings. This was true even in people with no particular religious affiliation. From his observations, he came to the conclusion that the circle is what he termed “an archetypal image of wholeness.” Briefly, an archetypal image is one that is imprinted on the human psyche; it is part of man’s collective unconscious.

It is in this context that I have used the mandala and over the past twenty years I have produced perhaps a thousand images. They are very much like my personal journal, only instead of writing words, I have drawn mandalas. The saying that *a picture is worth a thousand words* was never truer than when applied to this method. Drawing the circle is the easy part of making a mandala, the hard part is learning not to think about or consciously direct what happens next. For me, making mandalas is a form of meditation.

While doing research for this paper, I came across a quote from Carl Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1989, p. 196) describing his own mandalas that very loosely echoes my own experience:

My mandalas were cryptograms concerning the state of the self which were presented to me anew each day. In them I saw the self - that is, my whole being - actively at work. To be sure at first I could only dimly understand them; but they seemed to be highly significant, and I guarded them like precious pearls. I had the distinct feeling that they were something central, and in time I acquired through them a living conception of the self,...
This quote resonated with me because I too regard the knowledge contained in my images as highly significant and precious. They are a powerful, unique, and efficient way to know thyself.

I trust by now that I have communicated to the reader how important the mandala work is to me. What was a surprise to me was the struggle it created in me once I began taking classes in the MIS program. Initially, my work in the program and the mandalas I was making on my own ran in two parallel lines, concurrent but never crossing each other. At the time, I'm not sure I thought that they ever should because I treated the mandala work as a private endeavor. However, as I continued in the program I was faced with an ever-growing uneasiness about my personal connection to the work that I was making.

From my perspective there is at least one important difference between making art for art’s sake and mandala making, and that is one of intention. As I said earlier, for me making mandalas is a meditative experience and in that moment the work is direct and completely engrossing. My intention is to allow the images to appear without any preconception, judgment, or conscious editing. The value is in the process itself and what the image reveals during that process, not the final product.

Initially, the work I produced in the program was mostly representational and very controlled. It was not surprising then, that my focus was entirely on the final product. It was the antithesis of my mandala work, which if judged critically is very raw. I became increasingly aware that I was unsatisfied, even irritated by my lack of courage to change the nature of my work in class to more closely reflect my mandala work.
It was the discovery of monotype that enabled me to resolve this dilemma to some extent. The creative possibilities with monotype are infinite and working directly and spontaneously on a plate has the same feeling as making mandalas. *It Can't Be Named* (Figure 2) is the best example of the spontaneity of mandala process of any image I made in the program. It is a non-representational image done with oil based inks, textured and scraped with a variety of materials, and finally written into with my fingers. It was the last print I did at the end of a class one night. Working very quickly, I was literally just using up the ink from my palette before cleaning up. I was very pleased with the experience and the image, but that did not mean that I would be comfortable displaying it. However, my advisor strongly urged me to include it in my show.

My struggle continues to be in finding a way to incorporate the mandala methods into my work and accept that if I display it, it will be judged.

Figure 2. *It Can't Be Named*, Monotype, 16” x 11,” 2002.
Painting

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.”

- Helen Keller (1880–1968)

It is a twenty mile drive on country roads each day from my home in rural Goochland County to work. There is rarely a day that goes by that I don’t find something remarkable to appreciate along the way and I consider myself extremely fortunate to live and work in such a beautiful place. I am endlessly fascinated by my natural surroundings; they feed my mind and soul and are very often the inspiration for many of the lessons I teach my students. In addition to the subject matter, my color palette is deeply imbedded in nature.

The first class I took in the program was a painting class. I felt more than a little intimidated, having not painted at all since I was an undergraduate and at that time receiving little in the way of instruction, or direction. One of the things that I enjoy most about painting is building the frames. Being a sculptor at heart, I love using power tools and building things. I prefer to paint with oils because they remain wet for a long time allowing me to model and blend the paint to my heart’s content. On many occasions, I will discard the brush in favor of using my fingers to paint. I also appreciate the depth, complexity, and translucence of the colors and the smell of oil paint and linseed oil.

The subject for my first painting was a rose, named Peace. Peace, a white rose, is the most popular garden rose in history. I chose to paint Peace (Figure 3) for several reasons. I had used the rose as an image several times before in my work. I was moved by the significance of its name in relationship to my personal life, I knew that painting a
white rose would be a technical challenge, I loved its sculptural form, but most importantly and obviously because the rose in its idealized form is a mandala. The rose is the Western equivalent of the lotus, a symbol of spiritual unfolding. Specifically, the white rose can be a symbol of innocence and purity but also, interestingly enough, of death.

The photo that I was working from was backlit and my instructor told me that if I didn’t get the lighting right it wouldn’t be worth painting at all. The challenge was on. I was instructed to begin by underpainting in the complementary colors of the final palette. This was an entirely new approach to me, although I came to learn that it is a very old technique. I painted the rose using the complementary colors for what seemed like an eternity, week after week, layer after layer of the opposite color working in very thin glazes until it almost became a joke at home and in the class. I complained bitterly, wondering if I would ever be given permission to use the real colors; having never used this technique before, I wasn’t at all certain that it was going to be worth the effort. To my great relief, I was finally given the go ahead to
use the real colors and as I began covering those awful reds and oranges with greens and blues, I became so excited I could hardly stand it. The surface began to glow right before my eyes. It was as though it really was lit from behind! The painting at that point had become more about painting light than anything else. To satisfy my curiosity, I put the painting next to a portrait I had done, which was also strongly backlit. The difference in the quality of the light in the rose was so superior to the other that there was no denying that the painting would not have been nearly as successful had I not used this newly discovered technique. The portrait looked gray and lifeless next to the rose. Needless to say, I became completely sold on this technique and was anxious to try it again.

In *Man and His Symbols* (1964), Jung coined the term *synchronicity*. It describes the relationship between the individual’s psyche and physical matter, specifically the "term means, ‘meaningful coincidence’ of outer and inner events that are not themselves causally connected.” It was just such a synchronistic event that provided the subject matter for my next painting.

It was my custom, in the early morning before work, to eat my breakfast on our sun porch. Workday mornings are very stressful and lonely for me, trying to prepare everything in advance for Jack for the day and prepare myself for the usual separation anxiety. During this particular winter, as the sun would begin to rise through the trees in the east, the sky became more and more breathtaking. I cannot recall a time before or since with more beautiful sunrises; it strengthened and encouraged me, and the photographs I took provided me with the inspiration for my painting *Power* (Figure 4).
It has only become clear to me in the writing of this paper the symbolic significance of my desire to paint light. The composition in *Power* is dominated by the sunrise. The painting consists of a distant horizon and some architectural elements in dark silhouette that are entirely invented. I feel the painting was successful on a number of levels. Technically, I was able to paint light once again but more significantly it vividly recalls to my mind a "meaningful coincidence" or synchronicity of inner and outer events.

Figure 4. *Power*, Oil on canvas, 36"x 54," 2000.
Mixed Media

“Heart, you say… oh yes the weeping, inconsolable self.”
- Rose Breda (1922 - )

In the summer of 2002, I took Mixed Media with instructor Martha Saunders. Of all the classes I have taken in the program, it was the best experience for me on many levels. Those of us who teach art, all know what a luxury it is to be allowed to spend all day long making art, and summer classes allow you to do just that. Martha, a generous and compassionate teacher, shared a whole host of media for us to work in. I had worked briefly with encaustics before and decided to focus on that medium for the duration of the class. For most of the class, I experimented with combining wax with a variety of different materials to create structure and texture. Heart, you say… (Figure 5) was begun as a result of that experimentation but ended with a surprise. I would consider this piece almost more a relief sculpture than a painting. I deliberately and consciously decided to make a mandala and began with a large circle drawn on a square piece of very heavy watercolor paper. Mandalas are very often circles drawn within a square. I then began to paint in the circle and attach pieces of torn paper and string painted with wax. I
spent hours adding wax and then melting parts of it away. One of the techniques we were shown was transferring images onto silk tissue paper. This process works very well in encaustics because it makes the images as transparent as the wax and it allows you to float the images in the wax. In my search for imagery, I was drawn to a Paleolithic Venus figure. To me the rotund, feminine figure symbolizes creation in the physical world (Mother Nature). I layered her in wax and added her into the right-hand side of the mandala, and there she stands overlooking her world. I continued adding layers of color and then carving and melting it away. In the center of the piece I had carved out a cavity with a clay tool and decided to pour liquid wax into it. Wax hardens almost immediately after removing the heat source and much to my surprise the heart appeared almost exactly as you see it in the photo. This immediately brought to mind words that my dear friend, teacher, and mentor had only just written for me and I knew in an instant what this mandala was about. They are as follows:

Let us aim not for the heart, but utter the words that come from that dark hidden place where mystery and unknown answers dwell.
Heart, you say..... oh yes the weeping, inconsolable self.
Win me not with pretty words, but with the dark, sad truth.
Walk through these fires and pitch a tent on the sands, unstable though they be.
Close to the mystery I will remain.

-Rose Breda

I took the words, “Heart, you say..... oh yes the weeping, inconsolable self” and I wrote them over and over again on the silk tissue paper and I melted them into the background around the mandala. The most personal of all of the pieces I have done in the program, I think it strikes at the heart of everything that I have been trying to express.
Conclusion

“To every thing there is a season,
and a time for every purpose under the heaven:”
- Ecclesiastes 3:1

I feel that by heeding the sometimes not so quiet voice within I have become increasingly more successful at incorporating the process of the mandala work into what for lack of a better description I call my public work. My goal as I look to the future is to continue on this path and create work that in my heart doesn’t distinguish between the two. To that point, in my most recent class I noticed that when I tried to go back to what I did before it was literally physically painful. This should not have surprised me as the individuation process, once begun, insists that you become your authentic self.

My experience in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies program was really never about the end product. Most of my work is sitting right now in two cardboard boxes in my living room getting in the way of Jack’s wheelchair. Someday, I will figure out what to do with it but today is not that day. My experience instead has been about the amazing instructors who came all the way out to Louisa County to my classroom to teach. It is also about the kindness and compassion of my friends who shared their creativity with me and most importantly the healing that occurs in the process of making art. It is the memories and the stories of the time spent in class that I value far more than the work, which once completed I feel oddly estranged from. As I sit here typing the last line of this paper I am amazed at what a journey this has been and that Jack is still here with me for even just a little while longer.
Bibliography


Appendix I

List of Figures

Figure 1. Monks from Namgyal Monastery build a sand mandala at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Photo by Gail Carlin, 1992.

Figure 2. It Can't Be Named, Monotype, 16" x 11," 2002.

Figure 3. Peace, Oil on canvas, 24" x 18," 1997.

Figure 4. Power, Oil on canvas, 36"x 54," 2000.

Figure 5. Heart, you say..., Encaustic, 23" x 23" x 2 ½," 2002.
Appendix II

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)

“And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.”
- Max Ehrmann (1872-1945) from Desiderata (1927)

ALS or Lou Gehrig’s disease is a neurological disease that causes the nerve cells in your brain and spinal column to die. As a result, your muscles atrophy until you cannot move a single muscle in your body. The progression of the disease depends on where the nerve cells begin to die. Only ten percent of ALS cases are hereditary, in the other ninety percent of the cases there is no known cause. In my introduction, I said that Jack was first unofficially diagnosed because you must meet ten criteria before you are actually diagnosed with ALS. Naturally, doctors are hesitant to make such a diagnosis as the neurologist said to us, “Let’s face it, it’s a death sentence.” Jack’s only symptom in the beginning was slurred speech. The average life expectancy at the time of diagnosis is 2-5 years. Almost every person we have ever met or heard about at the onset has had a different set of symptoms, thus making it even more difficult to diagnose. At this time there is no cure or effective treatment at all, nor have there been any significant advances in treatment since 1939 when Lou Gehrig gave his Luckiest Man Alive speech. It is true that advancements in technology have improved the quality of life with ALS, but nothing has been found to halt the inevitable advance of the disease. Jack was not officially diagnosed for a year. He has what is called Bulbar onset ALS which has a life expectancy of only six months. By then our best estimate was that he had already had the disease for two years! It turns out he is what the doctor called slow progressing. Initially, we thought
of this as a blessing. Once a strapping, muscular truck driver and master mechanic, who everyone knew could fix anything that was broken, and build anything he set his mind to, he has now lost more than half of his body weight. He can no longer walk or dress himself. It has been his engineering genius that has enabled him to adjust to every loss of ability, maintain his independence, and create a new normal each time, including building his own wheelchair ramp while he still could! Most difficult of all, my husband, blessed with twinkling blue eyes and a wonderful sense of humor can no longer talk at all. I’m afraid an electronic voice machine cannot translate the subtleties of a joke very well. I wish that I had taken note of the last time I heard him say my name so I could cherish the memory. Every time he eats he runs the risk of choking, he has very limited lung capacity, and he is rapidly losing the use of his arms. Once this occurs, he will lose the last bit of independence he still maintains. We decided early on that we would take none of the measures available to extend his life, such as feeding tubes and vents for breathing and yet he has still outlived most of the PALS (people with ALS) he has met online or heard about.

There are two reasons why I felt it was important to include in my paper a more in depth explanation of the disease process. First, because most people don’t know very much about ALS; it is known as an orphan disease. An orphan disease means that because so few people have it at any given time, it is not profitable for drug companies to do the kind of research necessary to find a cure or an effective treatment. There is hope on the horizon in the form of stem cell research which of course is a controversial issue that will not be resolved any time soon. Secondly, to simply acknowledge what is in fact
happening to us. Despite the difficulties we continue to face, I do not intend for this to be a litany of woe. Instead, I would like the reader to know that this story is not about dying but living with courage, creativity, and ingenuity. My husband and I both believe that wisdom does not come without suffering and suffering is clearly a part of the human condition. Despite this however, we continue to be grateful for every blessing both great and small that has come our way. While we both know that this journey is nearing an end, to borrow another line from Desiderata, “With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.”
### Education

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### Related Coursework

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### Scholarships

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### Professional Experience

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### Exhibitions

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