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Connecting to the Sacred Through Contemplative Gaze

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Visual contemplation can do more than convey images, it can transmit to the soul in ways that both inform and inspire. The artist shares the experience of empathic connection with another artist that may be cultivated by engaging with pieces that evoke emotional and somatic responses, and then entering into creative conversation with the artist by following their gestures, brush strokes, movement, marks, and color decisions.

Keywords: *contemplative gaze, creative site, gesture, improvisation, watercolor*

When I choose the subjects and objects for all my paintings I search for colors, movements, lines, and associations that feel nourishing and provide a means to connect empathically to beauty. Using Thomas Moore's (1994) definition of beauty as, "arresting, complex and pleasing images to the soul" (p. 278), what draws me in may not be what others consider to be beautiful, but rather something sustaining and needed during the gestation of the work. It is the derivation of nourishment that keeps me anchored to the creative site where execution becomes possible.

I feel myself being led in to the dreamy and watery place with each element [paper, brush, pigment, and water] offering light reflected back and an opportunity to explore. Allowing myself to be arrested I am slowed to a state of gaze where I feel immersed in something sacred and held in an exchange or a conversation. In the act of gazing I experience a receiving and a sense of a returned gaze from creative source; my act of painting becomes the reply. (Meyer personal journal, August 1, 2009)

In each of the watercolors presented, "Juno's Revenge" (Figure 1) and "Allegory with Onlooker" (Figure 2), I was drawn to original artworks that evoked emotional and somatic responses. I then began to engage more deeply into what I can only describe as erotic inquiry, exploring and gazing with all sensual utility. For example, I first encountered "A Young Girl Defending Herself Against Eros" (Bouguereau, 1880) at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Exhibited in natural light, the painting held my gaze and beckoned my return several times during the visit. Later, in my studio I worked with a reproduction of the image, gazing meditatively, to try and decipher my compelling resonance. Through this

process I uncovered hidden and shadow memories with regard to my history of intimacy with my medium as well as erotic consequences within my intersubjective and interpersonal worlds. My interpretive responses within the paintings portrayed my reflections on those consequences, such as privacy betrayals, elixirs of life that offered both sustenance and poison, storytellers (spider under cloche) who ignited change yet assured longevity. As the painting continued to evolve, I was simultaneously drawn to the poetry and literature of the time (late 1800s) as well as other images offering similar resonances. Personal journal exploration of these images assisted in my free association and resolution of inner conflicts between subject and form. Noticing intuitive connections within the developmental stages of the work permitted action on impulse as the work unfolded, allowing for improvisation. This synchronism within my process contributed to the sense that the discovery was guiding my exploration.

Both paintings, two in a series of five, employed an added voice to the creative conversation between artist and art. Similar to a musician performing a piece of music written long ago, my voice as a visual artist enacted the dialogue; I retraced the steps as marks, gestures, and choices of color from the originating artists. By doing so, I experienced a broader awareness and a deeper sense of the artist and the painting that became accessible to me, and served to inform my own artistic responses. I then allowed my own symbols to play into the work as completion or resolution of the overall exchange.

Using the work of other artists offered me the opportunity to follow their gestures, tactile-kinesthetic possibilities and invariants (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009): brush strokes, painting decisions, and responses to other movements. The artist's articulate gestures take place in the unseen and the unspoken, the hidden; it offers a



Figure 1. Juno's Revenge, watercolor on paper, 60 in. x 40 in.
In conversation with: Antonio Allegri (Corregio), "Jupiter and Io" circa 1520-1540



Figure 2. Meyer: Allegory with Onlooker, watercolor on paper, 60 in. x 40 in.

In conversation with: William-Adolphe Bouguereau, "A Young Girl Defending Herself Against Eros" circa 1880

knowing in the depths of one's psyche, in the imaginal and sacred realm. What I gained was an acquired, aesthetic awareness of that artist's reality, glimpses and connections that one would not experience as audience. This process allowed me to inquire about the artists I was drawn to, and look within myself at what has been hidden away, and then offer what can be said, through my own painting gestures, with regard to the hidden.

I found courage in this personal engagement with each artist's gestures, movement, marks, and color decisions to venture further and take risks in my own painting process. This proved to be very transformative in the way I developed my images and in my ability to abstract further from realism. I also experienced a deep feeling of kinship with the artists I chose. With this newfound awareness of creative conversations that included more than just Self and Art, I was moved to elevate the disposition of inquiry to more formal research questions concerning transformation within the artistic process, which I addressed in my doctoral dissertation (see "The Lost Dialogue of Artists," this issue, pp. 70-82). My primary research questions began with, "What is the nature of crisis within the artistic process and how does the shared space of artist and art that is penetrated by creativity as third participant enlist crisis to move toward transformation?" (Meyer, 2014, p. iii).

Following the gestures of my chosen original artists (Bouguereau, Corregio, Botticelli and others) enlisted an empathic connecting where mimicking the marks they made allowed me to follow the physical gestures made in *their* time. Rollo May (1989) discussed the value of this gestural mirroring when he wrote about the "secret of influence" (p. 74), suggesting that by taking on the gestures of another, one can "take on" the psychic state of another. He beautifully offered, "Influence is one of the results of empathy. Wherever there is empathy some influence will be occurring, and wherever there is influence we can expect to find some identification of psychic states" (p. 74). He continued by equating this phenomenon to "an 'in-flowing' of ethereal fluid from the stars affect[ing] the actions of people, which is the early mythological recognition of the fact that influence occurs in deep levels of the unconscious" (p. 75). By following the gestures of the artists I allowed the conversation to occur in present time between them and me.

Walking their path of contemplative gazing I attempted to join their conversation or at least witness

the reciprocity within their work while often feeling moved to reply. These conversations began hundreds of years ago. Perhaps that is all improvisation truly is, one note or brush stroke in question that suggests to the creator, "What if?" and invites the artists and all other artists to the sacred ground.

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About the Author

Diane Lucille Meyer, PhD, has been a professional artist and fine art educator since 1975. She received her doctorate in psychology from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology with a specialization in Creative Expression. Her dissertation research focused on transformation through the creative process. Diane brings experience as a facilitator in creative and conscious aging and is focusing her current research on creativity and wellness. Her watercolor paintings are exhibited nationally and housed in over 25 distinguished corporate and museum collections and can be viewed at www.dianemeyerart.com. Diane's publications include her dissertation: *Reaching into shadow: An exploration of transcendence through artistic crisis*, and *Interpreting Along the Deckled Edge: The Artist's Place in Leadership* (Integral Leadership Review, October, 2012).

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