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Japan Dreaming

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Art has its own voice, and demands that the artist listen, feel, and give it birth. This account relates the artist's experience of creating two works in a series entitled, "Japan Dreaming," works that evoke Japanese scrolls, fabric space dividers, paper streamers, kimono, and gates into sacred space.

Keywords: *Australia, Australian Aboriginal beliefs, displacement, dreams, Dreamtime, Japan, kimono, life-threatening illness, mixed media art, natural disasters, resonance, Shinto shrines*

In December 2010 and January 2011, floods devastated 70 towns and displaced 200,000 people in my home state of Queensland, Australia. In March 2011, a 9.0 earthquake, tsunami, and radiation devastated Northern Japan, left 20,000 dead or missing, and displaced 430,000 people. I have visited Japan frequently and found inspiration, both spiritual and aesthetic, from time there.

Shortly after the 2011 tsunami, I dreamt of shredded, faded hangings evocative of kakemono (scrolls), noren (fabric space dividers), shide (paper streamers), kimono, and forms resembling torii (shrine gates marking entry into sacred space). The dream haunted me, returning at unexpected moments. For many years I had been primarily painting landscapes in dry pastel. This dream required new mediums but exactly what they were was unclear.

Movement and actions play as vital a role as the mediums and forms in each of the following artworks. My body has been the prime mover and informer about each. I lack words for the silent, slow interchanges among the body's gestures, the different mediums (always a surprise to me and rarely what I wanted or thought I intended), and my internal, felt response to what I saw, which then I was moved either to develop or sacrifice.

"Entrance" (Figure 1) arrived boldly, surprised me. I doubted it at first. It seemed so . . . declarative. However, as the series evolved, I came to trust this piece, to return to it. It felt like a sacred entrance into the whole series.

The process of making "Entrance" required tearing, casting aside, discarding, removing, painting, over-painting, reducing, simplifying, balancing, placing, replacing, more tearing, shredding. . . Its mediums are torn canvas, acrylic, and board. I do not want to

intellectualize my creative process. I could. I do not want to. I believe that only half of the image is in form; the other half is in the eye of the beholder. Who am I to know what that is?

"Spirit Gate" (Figure 2) came later in the series. It, too, surprised me. It kept making and unmaking itself, forming and dissolving and re-forming. As I was making it, tears fell unexpectedly. I had to stop, embarrassed that my own image was bringing tears. At first an inner voice judged my tears, said that it smacked of self-congratulation to be moved by my own work. When more tears insisted on themselves, I felt their resonance with the emerging image. I realized the image was not "my" image; it came from some deeper source and was moving me. A requiem, a blessing, a renewal: all three. These rituals were embodied in the image as only dreams and the arts can hold paradoxical truths: free of linearity and causality.

No contradiction, all concurrently experienced. The piece required my burning, tearing, wrapping, breaking, mending, drenching, gluing, cutting, pulling, casting aside, destroying, smudging, sketching, tying, binding, wrapping, knotting. . . It evolved over hours. I would pick up a piece of material—a pastel, a wooden stick, a piece of balsa wood, a page of torn antique Japanese printed paper pierced with bookworm patterns and stains from unknown origins. I would hold the material until it began to move me. Then I would need to contemplate the emerging in thought-free silence, listen to the ocean, and begin to sense movement again.

When each piece completed itself, I would know. The inner air space would go quiet as though a breath had been released. My body would become still, unwilling to touch the piece any more. Later, this sense

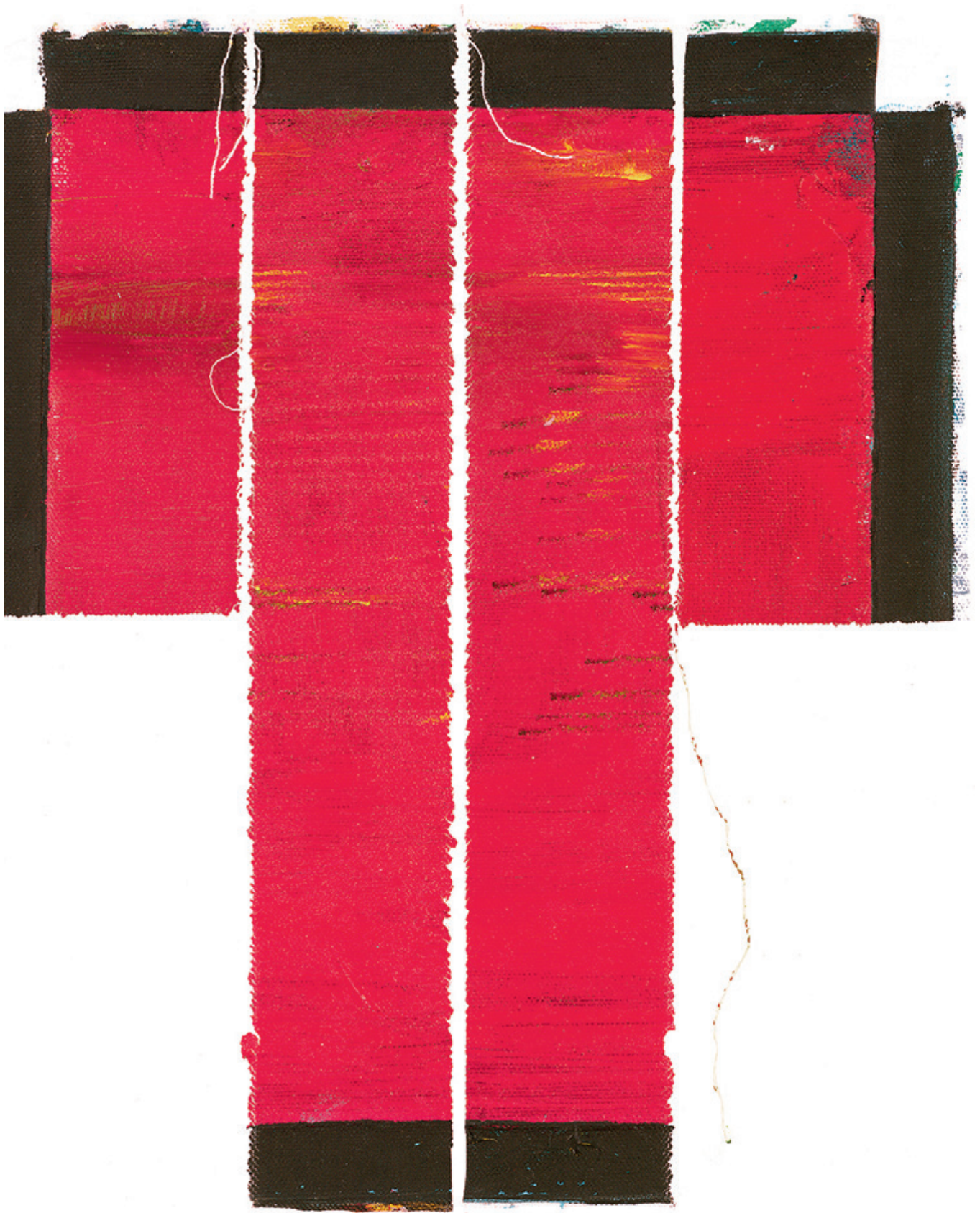


Figure 1. Entrance: Japan Dreaming 6. Mixed Media, 22 x 32 in.



Figure 2. Spirit Gate: Japan Dreaming 18. Mixed Media, 16 1/8 x 21 1/2 in.

of balance and completion would be confirmed in an interesting way. I had to arrange each piece for high resolution, vertical scanning. Not easy. The photographer was waiting. "Spirit Gate" was hanging on his wall. I looked at it and felt flat, disappointed. It did not evoke in me what it had when I was making it. Suddenly, I stepped up to it, moved one support stick and one knot, and the piece was alive again. Later, I compared this final arrangement with a quick photograph I had taken when I first completed the piece. The two were the same. Such was the elusive, unequivocal authority of each piece over me and any conscious intention.

The first group of pieces I created titled itself "Japan Dreaming." It seems to denote my own dream as well as connote the Australian Aboriginal concept of Dreamtime. The larger series, to which the "Japan Dreaming" group belongs, called itself "Passage." Each of the 29 works in the "Passage" series to date is one that I consider a prototype for a full series of its own; each uses different mediums. Content and process are integral to each and inseparable, one from the other.

As the series grew, I slowly came to recognize their resonance with my own recent experiences of life-threatening illnesses and the lengthy aftermath of losing one's body and world, then slowly learning how each recreates from nothing. I had had no words to describe these experiences; now, these images were describing them to me.

About the Artist

Jill Mellick, PhD, is a Jungian psychologist, writer, and artist in private practice in Palo Alto, California. An Australian, she is the author of many publications including *Coming Home to Myself* (with Marion Woodman), *The Art of Dreaming*, *The Natural Artistry of Dreams*, and *The Worlds of P'otsunu* (with Jeanne Shutes). Her poetry has been published in various journals.

Full Professor and Founding Director of the Creative Expression program in the masters and doctoral degrees for 20 years, she is now Professor Emerita at Sofia University. A multimedia artist and photographer, she

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