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Intimate Immensities

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INTIMATE IMMENSITIES

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
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by
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ABSTRACT

The works in the “Intimate Immensities” series of landscape paintings function as “aporia,” or irresolvable contradictions. Using two aspects of Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic designations of the sign: the “icon” and “index,” these paintings function as both iconographic representations of mankind’s spiritual connection with nature and indexical relics of the creative process as ritual. The foundational view out of which the work emerges is grounded in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. This thesis correlates Vajrayana Buddhism, ritual and the creative process, by explaining the parallels between ritual and the cognition that occurs during the creative process. To do this, the discussion uses the three-stages of ritual as theorized by Arnold Van Gennep: “separation,” “margin” and “aggregation,” Victor Turner’s terms: “structure,” “anti-structure” and “liminal” and the research into the creative process by educator and Ph.D, Nicole M. Gnedza. By fluctuating between the two ontological states of index and icon, the work resists stasis, however by representing a spiritual theme via both these means the work forms a cohesive whole.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

This thesis frames the “Intimate Immensities” series of landscape paintings within a spiritual context. Essentially, there are two aspects to the work from which content emerges: the way in which the materiality of the work functions as a relic of the creative process and the type of imagery that is depicted. The discussion begins by considering the spiritual milieu out of which I approach the work. Following this initial groundwork, some useful theories are provided that are instrumental in understanding how the creative process parallels spiritual practice. The discussion then moves on to focus directly on the paintings themselves, the ways in which they represent the creative process and represent mankind’s relationship to the natural world.

Approaching the creative process as a spiritual practice stems from my upbringing within a particular lineage of Vajrayana Buddhism called, *Kagyü*, (pronounced: either Kag-you or Ka-ju). The *Kagyü* lineage merges indigenous shamanism, physical yogic practices and Indian philosophy into a powerful set of practices and philosophies aimed at the ultimate fulfillment of human potential. Although both practice and study are essential in this endeavor, this lineage is known for its emphasis on physical practice more than philosophical study, as first-hand experience is the basis for conceptual understanding, not the other way around. Similar to well-known mystics and saints in the Christian tradition, the *Kagyü* gurus are known for challenging conventional social norms that encourage conformity and security. This manner of enlightened social misfitism is called *crazy*

*wisdom.*¹ It encourages a fearless exploration of the human condition, with all its glory and potential pitfalls.²

In accordance with the ethic espoused by the *Kagyü* lineage, this body of work emphasizes practice as the basis for theory; a practice that seeks to relentlessly confront, question and revise artwork during the creative process. This ethic, when transposed into the realm of painting, finds its equivalent in the belief that content emerges during the act of painting and is not predetermined. The content that emerges from the material or indexical nature of the work is free of pretense and communicates with the viewer in a manner akin to body language. Additionally, as the imagery of this work focuses on the subjective, perceptual experience of nature, it aligns with a shamanic view of mankind's relationship to the natural world based on visual and corporeal experience.

Despite its growing visibility in popular "new-age" and various spiritual sub-cultures, Vajrayana Buddhism continues to remain foreign, esoteric and exotic to Western culture. Consequently, a large part of the research conducted during the creation of this work has been oriented towards finding conceptual equivalents within Western academia to specific aspects of Vajrayana Buddhism. Critical theory, anthropology and specifically ritual theory, have been helpful in this pursuit. The work of Arnold Van Gennep is particularly useful in this task as it disassociates the function of ritual from any one particular culture, allowing me to understand how

¹ Trungpa, Chögyam, and Sherab Chödzin. *Crazy Wisdom*. Boston: Shambhala, 1991.

² "Decivilizing the Vajrayana Part 1 and 2." Talk given by Reginald A. Ray at the 2007 Advanced Meditating with the Body retreat held at Dharma Ocean's Blazing Mountain Retreat Center in Crestone, CO. <http://www.dharmaocean.org/meditation/podcasts/page/4/>

the essential aspects of Vajrayana ritual are also found within the creative process.³ I also use Victor Turner's model of ritual to further articulate specific aspects of ritual in relation to the creative process.⁴ The work of Nicole M. Gnezda, which explains the cognitive functions that occur during the creative process, demonstrates the correlation between the creative process and the theories of Van Gennep and Turner.⁵ In discussing the ways in which the paintings represent information through their materiality and imagery, Roy Rappaport's explanation of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory of the three aspects of the sign, namely the *symbol*, *icon*, and *index*, are used.⁶ George Didi-Huberman's critical discussion of the "Detail and the Pan," which articulates the dual function of paint to represent as both icon and index simultaneously, grounds Peirce's theory within the realm of painting.⁷ The discussion that follows will continually refer back to these ideas.

³ Gennep, Arnold Van. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

⁴ Turner, Victor Witter. *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969. Print.

⁵ Gnezda, Nicole M. Cognition and Emotions in the Creative Process. *Art Education*, 64, no. 1 (2011) 47-52.

⁶ Rappaport, Roy A. *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*. Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1979. *Symbol*: "In this usage a symbol is merely "associated by law" or convention with that which it signifies. The word "dog" is a symbol designating a certain class of creatures. Words are the fundamental, but not the only symbols; for objects, marks, nonverbal sounds, gestures, movements may be assigned symbolic meaning by words. With symbols discourse can escape from the here and now to dwell upon the past, future, distant, hypothetical and imaginary, and with a complex symbolic system, such as natural language, an unlimited variety of messages may be encoded through the recombination of a small number of basic units."

Icon: "In contrast to symbols, *icons* by definition share sensible formal characteristics with that which they signify. A map is an icon for the area to which it corresponds... A "phallic symbol," for instance, is an icon.

Index: In contrast to both symbols and icons, *indices* are, to use Peirce's phrase, "Really affected by" that which they signify. A rash is an index of measles, a dark cloud of rain. An index is caused by, or is part of, that which it indicates..."

⁷ Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005.

CHAPTER 2: THE POETIC IMAGE

“Poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity.” Gaston Bachelard⁸

Aporia: The Dual Nature of Paint

The title of this exhibition, “Intimate Immensities” reflects the work’s ability to occupy two states at once. The imagery depicted is both near and far, based on objective perception, yet constructed entirely from subjective imagination. The works expose their materiality but simultaneously maintain a capacity to draw the viewer into the illusion of deep space and mysterious reverie. In this way the works function as *aporia*, or irresolvable contradictions. As Georges Didi-Huberman discusses, paintings simultaneously function as icon and index, what he calls the “detail” and the “pan.” He states, “the pan is to be defined as the part of painting that interrupts ostensibly, from place to place, like a crisis or a symptom, the continuity of the picture’s representational system.”⁹ This points to the ability of paint to be read as both paint and illusion. From within these two ontological states of paint emerge two aspects of content: the index or pan reflects the haptic expression of the artist and the spiritual agency of the creative process, while the icon or detail functions to construct narrative, which in this case revolves around mankind’s spiritual relationship to the natural world. Consequently, the work functions in two ways, yet remains unified within the single view of painting as essentially spiritual in nature.

⁸ Bachelard, Gaston, M. Jolas, and John R. Stilgoe. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

⁹ Didi-Huberman, Georges. 266

Paintings are excessively intimate objects.¹⁰ They refer back to the origin of their creation while simultaneously abiding in the present tense. Bachelard extends our awareness of this duality when he writes, “At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions.”¹¹ The discussion below shows how this series of paintings fluctuates between illusion and material, between sign and subject, between depth and surface. The following four sections of this chapter begin with a discussion of the creative process in terms of its ritual nature. Succeeding this is a description of the formal creation of the work. As the focus of this series made a shift midway through its creation, visual depictions of space were revised and consequentially approached with different questions in mind. Therefore, the last two sections of the chapter focus on the two different emphases of the work.

The Ritual of the Creative Process

The paintings included in the first portion of the discussion were made shortly after returning from a residency in the Amazon jungle of Peru. They are infused with a sentiment of the shamanic worldview and embrace an attitude of Romanticism. Continuing with the landscape motif, which was my focus during the residency as well as the previous semester, the works employ a vocabulary of paint application including glazing, scumbling, splattering, dripping and a lyrically calligraphic brush stroke. There is an emphasis on space and its variable depths.

¹⁰ Orskou, Gitte. *Contemporary Painting in Context*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2010. 190-91

¹¹ Bachelard, Gaston. xix.

Vines, leaves, tree limbs, water, mist and light arrange to both hinder and reveal a vision of immense space. “The Jungle,” (Figure 1), is an example of these formal elements.



Figure 1. “The Jungle”
Oil on Canvas, 80” x 102”

The process during which I made these works is in a manner whose precedent I trace back to Matisse.¹² It is also seen in the work of Bill Jensen whose work was influential during the creation of this thesis.¹³ This manner of working folds together conception and execution, allowing form and content to be discovered simultaneously. It is a tumultuous process wrought with anxiety. The dialectic of structure and anti-structure dance back and forth as fragments of meaning are sifted through and discarded.¹⁴ Cognitively speaking, this is not unlike the process one goes through during a ritual. As discussed by Arnold Van Gennep, ritual has three main parts: *separation, margin* and *aggregation*.¹⁵ In terms of the

¹² Bois, Yve-Alain. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

¹³ Jensen, Bill. *The Exchange*. A Talk Given at Louisiana State University, 4/10/94.

¹⁴ Turner, Victor W. 96

¹⁵ Gennep, Arnold Van. vii

creative process, the *separation* aspect begins when one decides to make a painting, delineating the boundaries of the canvas and deciding on the genre of the work, which in this case is landscape. This creates a container inside of which the ritual will take place and in effect, separates that which will be the work of art from that which will not.

The second phase, *margin*, is the process during which transformation occurs. There are many parallels between the creative process and this phase of a ritual. Victor Turner describes this phase as *liminal* and states that people who find themselves within this phase of the ritual, “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial”.¹⁶ Nicole M. Gnezda describes the cognitive aspect of this part of the creative process as divergent, intuitive, non-linear and spatial; in ritual terms, anti-structural or *liminal*. This part of the ritual is a period of not knowing, of being lost, a space during which time habits and behaviors are confronted and tested.¹⁷

The anxiety of getting lost during both ritual and the creative process is essential and cannot be faked or stepped over. It allows for the dissolution of the self and consequently, the discovery of a new self and new solutions to creative problems. This aspect of the ritual/creative process was integral to the creation of the “Intimate Immensities” series as it imbued the work with a feeling of having made a journey through the unknown, the traces of which are indexed in the work.

¹⁶ Turner, Victor W. 96

¹⁷Gnezda, Nicole M. Cognition and Emotions in the Creative Process. *Art Education*, 64, no. 1 (2011) 47-52.

As the ritual of the creative process develops, novel pattern is recognized and fragments of meaning begin to coalesce to form a coherent whole. When this happens it occurs as a moment of epiphany. Bill Jensen rightly calls this moment *the exchange*. It is at this point that the agency of the artist is transferred to the artwork to such a degree that the work takes on a measure of its own subjectivity.¹⁸ Jensen writes:

At some point in working, there is a sense that something might be there. A hallucination of something being there, starts to take place...At this point, if I can stay focused and in a position of a servant to the image it will dictate its own course without my will being used. It is in this state that the object has a life-force of its own...In its awkwardness or ugliness, (sometimes vulgarness) it has reached a state of truthfulness and that the exchange has taken place.¹⁹

During the process of creating the works in this series, this moment of exchange, or epiphany would frequently occur when I would recognize the essential compositional thrust of a painting, corresponding to an articulation of the figure away from the ground. This moment is the fruition of the ritual; the transformation of heretofore divergent information has occurred and novel form has been discovered. This can be understood as the culminating, third phase of the ritual process, the moment of *aggregation*.

Moment Work and Formal Construction

Typically, the process of creating a painting begins by dividing the picture plane into sections and creating tension between the shapes on the surface. A non-

¹⁸ Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

¹⁹ Jensen, Bill.

objective painting may be devoted exclusively to this realm of exploration and remain entirely on the surface. However, since this particular body of work is invested in using iconographic representation, it employs techniques that penetrate deep into illusionistic space. Stacked and atmospheric perspective, as well as something called *moment work*, exemplify the techniques used in depicting this space and can be seen in “Vines” (Figure 2). *Moment work*, developed by Moises



Figure 2. “Vines”
Oil on Canvas, 50”x44”

Kaufman of *Tectonic Theater Projects*, is a compositional device used in creating new theatrical work, in which form and content are created simultaneously. It brings together discrete theatrical elements such as lighting, sound, physicality, and time of day in order to create a “unit of theatrical time,” that when joined with other *moments* creates a larger narrative.²⁰ When transposed to visual art, *moment work* is highly conducive to generating spatial relationships from imagination. For example, placing a sharp, thick line of dark burnt-orange next to a patch of light,

²⁰ Brown, Rich. “Moises Kaufman: The Copulation of Form and Content.” *Theatre Topics* 15, no. 1 (2005): 51-67.

hazy-blue, can produce a relationship that reads as multiple spatial zones, iconographically representing a branch laying in a shadow, with a bright and airy vista off in the distance behind.

By utilizing these methods, the works in this series were created in a non-objective manner within a context of iconic representation. Terry Winters speaks of an abstraction that operates within this type of atmospheric space. He writes:

The word “atmosphere” is important here. The drawings don’t fit the definition of the super-flat, the exploration of the picture plane, any of that Modernist rhetoric. There’s space in them always, but not articulated by conventional means of vanishing points and vectors, these hypothetical objects occupy within an atmosphere. It’s an inferred place. The atmospheres correspond to the perceptual reality and the illusionistic spaces of much Western painting. Abstraction can exist inside that same virtual and fictive realm.²¹

All of these works emerge organically from the subjective space of imagination. By stacking objects in front of each other, through shifting values and colors to represent atmospheric perspective and by *moment work* in which discrete moments of spatial relationships are realized, paintings such as “The Jungle” and “Vines” were created.

The Metaphor of Space

These works depict the landscape based on perceptual experience, yet are constructed from imagination, revealing a process in which perceived information is internalized. In this way, the work could be described as internalized landscape, a landscape in which the vast expanse of the external world is melded with the

²¹ Winters, Terry. *Warp and Weft. Fragments of a Conversation between Terry Winters and Jim Dempsey*. <http://www.terrywinters.org/warpandweft/>

intimate yet equally vast space of the internal world. Bachelard writes of this dynamic saying, “Grandeur progresses in the world in proportion to the deepening of intimacy.”²² The more intimately we feel and sense the external world, the deeper and vaster does our internal world become. There is a correlation, a dependency, and a co-emergence in this. Bachelard continues by discussing Baudelaire, “For Baudelaire, man’s poetic fate is to be the mirror of immensity; or even more exactly, immensity becomes conscious of itself, through man. Man for Baudilaire is a vast being.”²³ In these passages, Bachelard beautifully renders the dialectical relationship of the intimate to the immense. In accordance with this dialectic, the scale and iconographic space represented in these paintings induce a visceral response in the viewer, triggering them to question their own spatial constitution. Standing in front of a large canvas depicting a vast space, one is made aware of his or her own intimate scale. Conversely, while beholding the smallest of details, one cannot help but feel the extension of one’s own mass and weight.

The discussion could stop at this point. It has been stated that immensity and intimacy share a special relationship in which one gives rise to the other. However, the iconographic imagery of this series bespeaks a sensual relationship to the perceived world that is romantic, dream-like, poetic and mysterious. It adds a layer of content to the work that deserves further articulation.

As was mentioned above, this series was made after having spent two months in an artist residency in the Amazon jungle of central Peru. These works conjure the physical experience of being in the jungle. The obfuscation of sight, the

²² Bachelard, Gaston. 195

²³ *Ibid.* 196

scale of flora and the feeling of total emersion within a vast network that seems alive with intelligence, is depicted in works like “The Jungle” (Figure 1) and “Little Pink.” (Figure 3) The painting titled, “In the River” (Figure 4) invokes the experience of being at the bottom of a river, immersed in water with your eyes open, watching particles of plant and earth float past you. Using branches as a repoussoir promotes the experience of being embedded in the space and needing to look through layers



Figure 3 “Little Pink”
Oil on Canvas, “50.25” x 44”



Figure 4 “In the River”
Oil on Canvas, “51.5 x 43”

of foliage to appreciate the whole scene. The iconographic message of these works promotes a philosophical stance in which nature provides spiritual nourishment for mankind. Additionally, this iconography aligns with the ritual nature of the creative process to form a cohesive body of work that furthers the notion of painting as a spiritual practice.

The Index and the Rhetoric of Painting

The paintings made in the latter half of the semester take a different turn in regards to their depiction of space and emphasis on narrativity. The transition

began with “Saltspring” (Figure 5.) The bottom half of the composition functions in a way congruent with the paintings in the previous section,



Figure 5. “Saltspring”
Oil on Canvas, 42”x56”

with strong foreground elements silhouetted in front of a distant background.

Iconographic images are still represented in the top half of the piece, however their arrangement prefigures a change in spatial representation yet to come. We see for example, branches whose colors fluctuate between pink, green and gray, hovering in front of a large gray cloud. It becomes difficult to pull the foreground out from the background, resulting in a collapse of the depth of space.

In this way, the focus has shifted away from clear iconographic narrativity, and towards an interest in the rhetoric of painting itself. As narrativity diminishes, the source of content in the work shifts more towards the work’s construction, in other words, away from the realm of the icon towards that of the index. In this way, we are reminded of George Didi-Huberman’s dual ontology of paint.²⁴ This trajectory continues throughout the remaining paintings in the series, the most

²⁴ Didi-Huberman, Georges.

explicit of which is found in the two pieces: “Two Trees” (Figure 6) and “The Fractured Jungle.” (Figure 7)



Figure 6, “Two Trees”
Oil on Canvas, 24”x21”



Figure 7, “Fractured Jungle”
Oil on Canvas, 57”x43”

“Two Trees” was progressing in a similar way as many of the other works. However, at a certain point in the ritual of the creative process, a change was needed if the work was to be consistent with the ethic of Vajrayana practice. In an assaulting gesture to the logic of iconic representation, the color of the background was brought into the interior of the trees in the foreground, thus collapsing the space and rendering the trees translucent. This was a moment of epiphany and a progression forward in terms of understanding figure/ground relationships. This same *move* continued to be used in “The Fractured Jungle,” the painting most spatially collapsed in the series.

The work made after this new understanding assumed a tone in which its constituent vocabulary assumed paramount importance in providing content to the work. Surface began to hold more importance; picturesque compositional design was replaced by a more Modernist, over-all design, exemplified by “Cover” (Figure 8). In the piece titled, “Snow” (Figure 9) larger areas of color were allowed to stand

alone without filling them with objects. This highlights the materiality of the paint and lends a sense of *objecthood* to the work.²⁵



Figure 8. "Cover"
Oil on Canvas, 76"x67"



Figure 9. "Snow"
Oil on Canvas, 28"x20"

²⁵ Costello, Eileen, and Brice Marden. *Brice Marden*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2013.

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

The discussion above situates this series of paintings within a spiritual context. The creative process is considered in terms of its ritualistic properties, in which form and content emerge together. Its three stages, *separation*, *margin*, and *aggregation* correspond to the changes that take place during the creative process, especially the *margin* stage, during which time moments of epiphany mark a transformation in understanding. This moment of epiphany as well as the concomitant behavior of the ritual is indexed by the materiality and rhetoric of the painting imbuing it with spiritual agency.

Additionally, the work is discussed in terms of its Romantic, nature-based iconography, where the space of the landscape functions metaphorically for subjective space, a dialectic of intimacy and immensity co-emerging. By utilizing paintings ability to represent iconographically as well as indexically, the work promotes a message of nature as a spiritual source for mankind, thus fortifying the over-all message of the series as a spiritual experience.

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VITA

Jonathan Walker Wright was born in Boulder, Colorado in 1978. His early artistic life is marked by his exposure to Vajrayana Buddhism, graffiti, classical European drawing and painting as well as a regional version of Abstract Expressionism. He has studied at the Boulder Academy of Fine Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Naropa University, Studio Art Centers International, The New York Studio School, The Metropolitan State University of Denver, where he earned his BFA, and Louisiana State University, where he is a candidate to earn his MFA.