Abstract

INNER CHANGE: THE ARTIST AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

By

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December, 2010

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This report is written in support of the thesis exhibition entitled “Inner Change”, which investigates the idea of self-actualization through the use of self-portraits juxtaposed with personal imagery to represent my identity, and to explore portions of my life.
INNER CHANGE: THE ARTIST AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

A Report of Creative Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Lindsey Laing Youmans

December, 2010
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Penny Laing. Without her guidance and love throughout my life, this would not have been possible. I also would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, Richard Laing. Thank you for being open-minded, motivating, and a phenomenal teacher. Thank you both for your encouragement and unconditional love.

Thank you to my husband, Che, for being so understanding, caring and helpful throughout this extremely long process. Life would not be the same without you. And to my children, Duncan and Chloë, thank you for being my constant motivation and inspiration. I love you all.
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INTRODUCTION

The thesis exhibition “Inner Change” consists of seven paintings. Self-portraits are the basic thread unifying the paintings in the series. Within each work these self-portraits are juxtaposed with personal images depicting relationships which I believe have affected character traits and helped shape my identity. The paintings evolved through processes that combine intuition and formal decision making, utilizing multiple layers of paint to represent imagery of specific times and places. The objective of each painting in the series was to explore my identity, and to investigate specific episodes of my life.

During the process of painting these images, it was necessary to confront some complicated subjects: life and death, perceptions of reality, self-image, memory and the paths of life. My perceptions of the events in my life were modified by both the painting process and readings explored as part of this study.
UNDERLYING IMAGES

Each painting started out in very much the same way, as a bright plane of color.

Underlying images of multiple labyrinths were drawn on top of these planes of color. “The
labyrinth is one of the oldest contemplative and transformational tools known to humankind,
used for centuries for prayer, ritual, initiation, and personal and spiritual growth” (West 4). The
labyrinth represents the path people follow on their quest for self-actualization. Abraham
Maslow, creator of the Self-Actualization theory, described self-actualization as:

…finding out who one is, what he is, what he likes, what he doesn’t like, what is good for
him and what bad, where he is going and what his mission is---opening oneself up to
himself---means the exposure of psychopathology. It means identifying defenses, and
after defenses have been identified, it means finding the courage to give them up. This is
painful because defenses are erected against something unpleasant. But giving up the
defenses is worthwhile. If the psychoanalytic literature has taught us nothing else, it has
taught us that repression is not a good way of solving problems. (Maslow 48-49)

From childhood, these labyrinths or mandalas have fascinated me. “The labyrinth, with
its circumambulation of and eventual arrival at the center through a single path, seems to have
evolved from an archetypal symbol known in virtually every culture throughout time: the spiral,
the universal symbol of growth and transformation” (West 32). The labyrinths encased in these
paintings became representative of the cycle of life and death, and the passage of time.

Labyrinths contain “twists and turns” which cause a person to feel they are getting closer
to the goal, or center, and then the path leads them away, and then back in again. If a person took
an unexpected turn and momentarily veered from his or her goal in life, through trusting the
labyrinth path as it moves in and out, he or she would inevitably reach the supposed goal (Curry 8). During the beginning of the 21st century, in the United States and around the world, there has been a revival of the building and usage of labyrinths. A leader of the labyrinth movement in the United States and psychotherapist, M. G. West states that labyrinths are “…the deeply meditative and symbolic discipline of setting one foot in front of the other, of honoring the journey itself and what it has to teach” (West 5). This is the idea of the labyrinth, an aid in self-discovery. This examination of life experience developed into a series of paintings about my identity as an artist, daughter, wife, mother, and woman.

Plate 1: Early stage of “Intertwined” showing labyrinth; Oil and wax on canvas; 36”x 48”.

The labyrinths in these paintings became embedded in the compositions as layers of paint accumulated and became partially visible or totally obscured from view (see plate 1).
paintings themselves became steps on the journey through the labyrinth. The combination of the ancient labyrinth and Maslow’s theory gave direction to development of the series. Both of these methods of self-discovery aided me as I sought direction for viewing my life.

VISUALIZING POTENTIAL

Initially, these paintings were about the fear of discovering what I feel to be my own inadequacies. Development of the series progressed and the subject matter matured as I addressed my desire to accept myself as the adult human being that I am, with both strengths and weaknesses being part of that person.

Maslow proposes this by saying, “…self-actualization is not only an end state but also the process of actualizing one’s potentialities at any time, in any amount…Self-actualization means using one’s intelligence” (Maslow 47). Through examination of the development of my identity and influences by which I have been greatly affected, movement toward self-actualization in my life has occurred throughout my work on this series. Reflecting my own development, the processes of creating my paintings can be glimpsed through the scratched away layers of paint on these works.
INTERPRETATIONS: PAINTINGS IN THE SERIES

Plate 2: “Cradled by Memories”; Oil and wax on canvas; 36” x 48”. 
CRADLED BY MEMORIES

The first painting in the series is called “Cradled by Memories”. This painting explores the relationship with my father who was 43 years old at the time of my birth (see plate 2). A 17 year difference in age between me and my oldest sibling created a sense of separation and isolation. With the passage of time, the paternal bond has flourished, nurturing my appreciation for my father’s unique, inspiring and unusual view of the world.

I believe that my father is a thread from the fabric of a world unknown to me; he came from a generation that shaped the world between the 1930’s to the 1970’s. His interests and obsessions about such things as airplanes, World War II, and the architecture of postwar America have surrounded me. The baby being cradled by snow initially may appear to be in a flawless and comfortable world, but something is amiss. Childlike drawings of World War II airplanes circle in the sky over the baby and a drawing of a contemporary dwelling fades in the distance.

In the lower right corner of the painting, there is a drawing of me as a child asleep in my father’s lap as one last airplane circles overhead. This represents the slipping away of memories. An uneasy feeling is created by the swarm of airplanes signifying my desperate need to hold on to my ageing father and his influence on my life.

EPHEMERAL EXPLORATION

The child in the painting entitled “Ephemeral Exploration” is meant to look as though she is flat, or undeveloped, and existing in a three-dimensional world, rich in color and texture (see plate 3). This child is me. I am floating above a sphere, which could be interpreted as a world. Pulling something that appears to be a gauzy covering from the surface of another world, my findings are not revealed to the viewer, but this encounter seems mysteriously important to me as
the complexities of my imagination begin to manifest. This painting was created as a response to my exploration of the significance of play.

Plate 3: “Ephemeral Exploration”; Oil and wax on canvas; 36” x 48”.
Playing is discovering. Experiences are stored as memories and become a part of us. Children at play take delight in things which are overlooked and misunderstood by adults. For instance, parents often say that their child had more fun with the box or wrapping paper than with the actual gift. On the way to becoming an adult, the influence of opinions and outward appearances increased as play decreased. Play has, at times, been eliminated and my ability to openly and directly experience life diminished.

Play is essential to the development of knowledge. It enables children to develop their creativity and imagination. Confidence is boosted through their advancement of problem solving and improvement of fine motor skills. Play helps children learn to resolve issues, both social and intellectual, by conceiving new solutions and formulating fresh ideas.

UNCONSTRAINED

The painting entitled “Unconstrained” depicts my wish for spontaneity and impulsivity. The doll in the dance costume confronting the viewer is strangely static but enveloped in a chaotic world (see plate 4). As the child who owned this toy, I desired the ability to be creative and inventive, but the fear of being judged by others, left me feeling constrained and unsatisfied.

The painting shows separation between the soaring space and the motionless doll (myself). This dichotomy between the rigid composure of the doll (me) and the frenzied setting in which she exists are intended to represent my struggles as an introverted young person. Apprehension, anxiety and hesitation prevented me from fully experiencing freedom and play. As an adult, successes in the artistic field have liberated me from these insecurities and allowed for my unconstrained creativity to come forth.
Plate 4: “Unconstrained”; Oil and wax on canvas; 36” x 48”.
INTERTWINED

Dissatisfaction with outward appearance can be overwhelming. In the painting entitled “Intertwined”, I am engulfed by red, curly hair (see plate 5). The objective of becoming comfortable as an adult is interconnected with one’s perception of personal appearance.
In society, appearances are generally considered extremely important. Something that makes one stand out in a crowd can either boost or completely destroy one’s self-esteem. My hair is one of these traits which has kept me from blending in and caused me extreme anxiety.

In an attempt to exorcise this anxiety, I painted overwhelming lustrous hair again and again. My uneasiness and concern prevented me from successfully representing my hair as a positive and beautiful trait. It became apparent to me while painting that the hair would remain an agitating, distressing and disorderly heap of tangles. Although I have grown to accept that being unique is a positive quality, I still struggle to accept my red, curly hair.

CONCEALED

My feelings of distrust and foreboding when dealing with personal interactions are described in the painting entitled “Concealed” (see plate 6). Peering from my hideaway, seeking refuge and safety from potential hostilities, I am immobilized with apprehension, yearning to overcome insecurity and join the world.

In the painting, I am partially concealed. It is my choice to separate myself from normal activity, but hesitation and anxiety muddle perception. Uncertain what may happen when I leave my hideaway, anxiety hinders self-actualization, creating a barrier and impeding development into a strong adult.

The creation of this painting has made an impact on my life currently through forcing me to confront feelings of insecurity which I normally avoid and force to the back of my mind. In everyday life, one must sometimes wear a mask of certainty even when insecurities linger. This mask creates a quandary for me when attempting to deal with myself in a truthful, straightforward and open manner. The uncovering of truths through the process of creating this
painting, as well as the rest, has allowed me to perceive myself in a more mindful and productive manner.

Plate 6: “Concealed”; Oil and wax on canvas; 36” x 48”.

INTROSPECTION

The painting entitled “Introspection” is about contemplation and self-observation (see plate 7). I depict myself as pregnant and standing in the dark woods awaiting the birth of my child. At the same time, I am contemplating enormous personal change. The dark path represents the womb, a place of protection and shelter. Becoming a vessel for the baby, changes your solitary status and the focus of your attention.

Plate 7: “Introspection”; Oil and wax on canvas; 36” x 48”.
For most people, the perception of what is the most important time in his or her life changes as he or she grows older. People on a quest to find a purpose, or discover what life is all about, often are looking in the wrong places. It is my belief that the harder a person looks for meaning the more difficult that quest becomes. One must look deep inside themselves to find the answers.

At first, being pregnant was an extremely overwhelming and daunting situation. After the fear and uneasiness subsided, my purpose became more certain. This was a turning point in my existence as an adult. My children became a significant motivation in my striving to become a self-actualized adult. Through leading my children in their quest to find purpose, I continually feel the need to reach for my own potential.

CARTE BLANCHE

Sometimes people get lost, and the path they choose to take in life remains uncertain. They may have to make life altering decisions. How can you choose a path when you cannot see the path? The painting entitled “Carte Blanche” addresses gaining the freedom to make my own decisions on the quest for self-actualization (see plate 8).

In a boat on the water, one might drift along aimlessly or one might follow a certain course. To someone unfamiliar with steering a boat on water, one might think that there are no paths to follow except upstream or downstream. This implies that the water determines where the boat travels, but in reality and with some degree of control, there may be many more choices.

In this painting, there is a boat, water, and sky. There also is a faint image of myself. The idea which emerges in this painting is that, in order for the boat (life) to be steered in a chosen
course, I, the pilot, must be present. I am becoming aware of the responsibility to steer the boat whether I can see the path or not. The hope is that at some point the mist will clear and I will be able to see the path I desire.

Plate 8: “Carte Blanche”; Oil and wax on canvas; 36” x 48”.
CONCLUSION

Investigating and confronting obstacles in my life, such as fear, distrust, and uncertainty, through a series of paintings has allowed me to dig deeper and explore circumstances that have affected me. This experience continues to motivate me in a tremendously positive way. Maslow proposes:

…the more he knows about his own nature, his deep wishes, his temperament, his constitution, what he seeks and yearns for and what really satisfies him, the more effortless, automatic, and epiphenomenal become his value choices…Many problems simply disappear, many others are easily solved by knowing what is in conformity with one’s nature, what is suitable and right…We must also remember that knowledge of one’s own deep nature is also simultaneously knowledge of human nature in general.

(111)

Making this series based on personal subject matter, such as physical appearance, family, birth, and maturity, was both technically and intellectually challenging. The creation of these paintings, with all the layers of colorful paint and wax, was laborious and physically demanding. Scratching and scraping through the layers in order to get a spontaneous yet controlled appearance required many applications of paint and wax. Images were embedded as well as emphasized as the series developed.

I went through long term introspection to examine life events and relationships that were the basis for these paintings. In the process of looking at my life, I uncovered tendencies which have shaped my personality. My path to self-actualization and maturation has renewed my desire to be open to growth and change. Accepting my faults as well as the faults of others, and acknowledging failure as a process of growth is of paramount importance to me. It is my belief
that as I grow while striving for self-actualization, I hopefully will reach new levels of maturity and understanding. Self-actualization is not so much a destination as it is a target or objective which will always be in front of me as a motivation. The outcome of this experience has enabled me to replace negative thoughts such as apprehension, anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty with positive self-actualizing behaviors. Stemming from this body of work, I hope “to free…[myself] from illusions, to look at the facts courageously, [and] to take away the blindfold” (Maslow 309).

Completion of this series of paintings, as well as this paper, has given me a direction for the next steps in my work. Each painting has an individual concept which can be expounded upon, such as the idea of play being at the forefront of creativity and development. Another series could be about introspection and contemplation. Yet another series might investigate further the idea of spontaneity or the social anxiety of an introvert.

With the passage of time and maturation both in life and painting, I am excited about the possibilities for future work. This series has given me a framework for proceeding into new areas of both concept and techniques.
REFERENCES


