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Juliana Favela
Claremont McKenna College

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Unlocking the Energy Within; A Journey Through Healing and Evolution

A Thesis Presented

by

Juliana Michelle Favela

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Of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Professor Kasper Kovitz
Professor Nancy Macko

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Abstract

Through a series of acrylic paintings and watercolors, I set out to document emotions, feelings, and experiences that I've had through my personal process of healing. By engaging in meditations for each piece, I was able to decide on a set of motifs, symbols, colors, and messages that I wanted to portray. This paper discusses in more detail how I went about this process and what the significance of each piece is, in addition to my inspiration, my identity and its impacts on the work, as well as what I learned from this process. I argue that as we unravel our egos and peel back layers we can get to our true selves; in doing that we will be able to build ourselves back up after learning what caused pain and how to grow from that point.

As an artist I have grown immensely by stepping out of my comfort zone to work primarily with painting and gestures, and it was completely fulfilling, and I believe I was able to translate my messages through this series of works. In the future, as personal development does not just stop, I hope to continue this series and I will have a chance to do that next semester and add onto this project. While this project's main message was healing, I am hoping to choose another theme for the next leg of the project, maybe regarding confidence and expression.

Description

This project is a conjunction of an introspective spiritual practice of dissolving the ego in unraveling human emotion and projecting those emotions by making them manifest into a series of artworks. By portraying those emotions and the dissolution of the self, I hope to reach viewers in their own journey of reaching enlightenment. This project was not intended to be a one-size-fits-all guide for viewers on their own journeys, but more specifically a visible series of examples for the spiritual work that I have already completed. Not to be confused with the European intellectual movement, I am referring to enlightenment as in gaining spiritual knowledge or insight, and the act of being in tune with myself, my goals, and my areas for improvement, which for me falls under a category I call Freeing. This project comes from a place of healing and personal growth, wanting to share that with others, but most importantly working through the difficulties that come with healing through spirituality and art. I hope to represent the different energy states that I have experienced in my healing process and also in the process of creating these art works. With each successive piece, there should be a clear pattern on how each one is built off of the previous, but maybe sometimes not in a linear pattern, because healing and self-discovery is seldom linear.

The core of this project's concept is stripping away the layers of the self and addressing the person or the feelings that are there on each level. The succession of paintings will act as the different layers of the Ego that one may encounter on their journey towards the center of themselves. Therefore, for my first painting, there is a face and mask like figure with a lot of commotion and confusion surrounding them, and additionally, fluid exiting the mouth. There is a screwdriver and screws attempting to crack open this mask, or, reveal the first layer of the Ego. This face is starting to break, represented by the flow of fluid exiting the face, and also by what

could be perceived as spiritual hallucinations surrounding the face. The second painting is more abstract, shown by floating figures with eyes that are also expelling liquids or can also be seen as crying. This painting is meant to portray chaos or chaotic feelings, or a jumble of crying figures. Upon meditation and introspection, I have found that the first layer pulled beneath my Ego is that exactly: a chaotic jumble of emotions and eyes spying around to figure out which direction is up.

The next two pieces go further into the self. The backgrounds of all of the works represent a distant dreamscape which invokes a sense of floating and haziness, alone and hard to grasp. The introspection and self-discovery processes are often lonely and confusing on many levels, thus my creation of ethereal backgrounds. With the strong iconography of a hand, all humans can relate or understand what it means to physically hold something in the palm of their hand. The being shoots through a network of arteries and veins and holds its own; the tendrils flail as if they were looking for something to hold onto or reunite with the others. A dichotomy of a loss of control contrasting with having control in the palm of one's hand was the main message in this energetic piece. A separated limb is followed by a separated head, which is a motif that repeats from the first work, along with teardrops. In the first watercolor of the series, ideas that I explored were separation from the self, stringing those pieces back together, and patterns and familiarity. The head enters from the top right corner as if it were a meteor, floating through the translucent spectrum that is identity, and its motion is held in place by a tight grid. The logical squares guide our friend, ego, towards tears and a concentric and diminishing dimension. I see this as an organized combination of the first two pieces, which is apt because the ego is now on its journey back to itself after unraveling and learning, processing, and healing. With the multicolored background I was paying homage to the community which has been so

prevalent in my healing and identity building: the queer community. Each piece represents parts of my identity in subtle ways as well as the most obvious.

And finally, the last two pieces are not a culmination as the healing process and journey is never really over, but they do represent a certain level of evolution that I have found myself achieving. I have really enjoyed working in acrylic paint because like I mentioned before, it really lends itself to the changes that are bound to happen in the process of creation.

Additionally, there has been such a healing aspect of moving paint across the canvas and blending colors in order to represent what turmoil or peace is happening in my head. This fifth piece is an amalgamation of images and symbols that are present throughout the series, with new and repeating images that are adding balance, depth, and direction to the piece. When I was meditating on the outcomes for this fifth acrylic, I felt very centered and wanted to portray a sense of newness. For that reason, I can understand why new symbols, such as the geometric prisms and neuron-like figures appeared. It is really fitting and interesting that neurons were something that came up, likely representing the fluidity and quickness of which my mind was moving at that time. This piece symbolizes connections, repetitions, and newly learned healing methods, a real marker of progress.

And for the final piece, I utilize watercolor to portray the lightness and transparency of understanding that I have reached by exploring my inner depths and challenging my ego and its negative impacts on my healing process. The disks, growing in size, are a diagram of each of the layers of life that I have experienced, and are all tied together by one long, winding string that is emblematic of life's thread. Starkly different from the rest, this watercolor is meant to bring peace and cause reflection, following the journey that lay before it. The ego is now better aligned with the self after it has witnessed the inner parts of the healing process and can finally string

along its pathway upon reflection. This piece is clearly in a different style and coloring than the other ones. Bold, graphic lines give the sixth a comic-book feel. For me this was the most sentimental piece because it really encapsulates the art I would create in the process of teaching myself; thick, intentional lines and intrepid detail. For me, it symbolizes a return to the self and alignment of internal disks. In my thinking I also recognized the circles of personal development, which is a concept I learned in my developmental psychology course in sophomore year. These concentric circles can also be found in piece #2.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

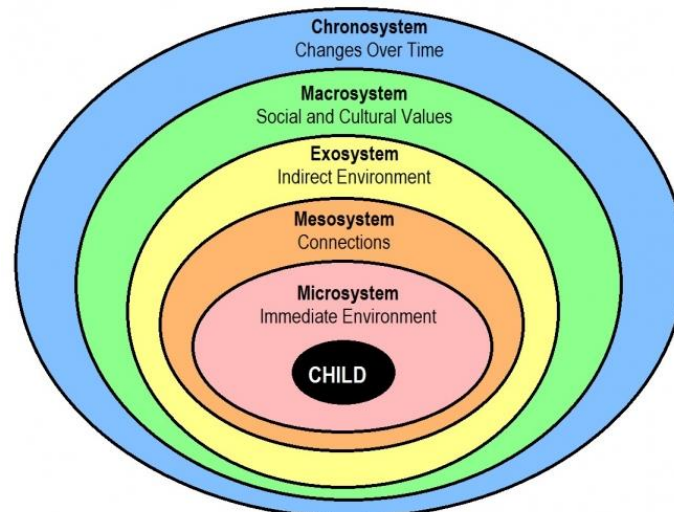


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

In order to document my process and clarify my journey for the viewers, I have included brief journal entries that explain a bit about what was going on in my head as I conceptualized these pieces and brought them to life. On some level, these entries can act as a guide for viewers to delve deep into their own self and peel back their own layers, making the process a bit easier to follow. Upon further thinking, I decided to leave the journal entries out of the final

presentation of the series, because in the end I think they actually muddied the waters and took away from the artwork itself. But I will include them here as I believe they hold value as a part of my academic and emotional process.

Journal 1
EGO DEATH

when I was making this piece, I felt a strong calling to depict the ending of a shell and the beginning of the rebirth of the self. Patterns and chaos run through the journey of unfolding of the ego and stripping to the center. It is the first step and probably the most difficult. But it is also the most necessary and impactful. Thank you for beginning this journey with me

Journal 2
LAYER ONE

following a meditation, I saw multiple parts of myself clashing, floating, and crying. These beings represent a mangled, chaotic first layer of the self. To try and understand is to make order of the chaos, represented by repeating, concentric circles and soundwaves, representing movement and order. These beings shed tears as they proceed, lamenting the past. But the brightness leads them towards the future.

Journal 3
STEP INTO POWER

And now is when things start to get interesting... an ominous hand shoots forward and asserts itself in space and time, representing a being who has tapped into their natural power. Sinews of an internally energetic core line the background - a re-entry into the material world and quite literally grasping, taking, growing, and learning. A preparation for what may lie ahead.

Journal 4
ELEVATE

My layers continue to unfold and reveal themselves. In this next chapter - the head, a symbol found in the first painting, returns as a more whole version of itself that is now in motion, waiting to see which emotion is next. Our ego then encounters tears on its own vulnerability; now she regains her hurt emotions and traumas as lessons and life experiences, to further travel through the web that is life.

On some level, this project is an attempt to reach out to other humans in this really confusing time, and also to hopefully unlock the spiritual bonds that connect us all in a moment where they may be blocked. All of these hopes and aspirations are ambitious, but I believe art has the power to connect people spiritually and emotionally if that is the set intention. This topic is particularly pertinent right now because people are struggling to reach enlightenment and move forward in their healing processes, and this energetic shift in the world is causing a lot of people to realize that. I hope to shed a light on the struggle and also a pathway out of it.

Process, Materials, and Methods

Prior to starting each work and before every work session, I meditate on an intention for the piece and include that as a part of the spiritual practice that goes into each piece. The meditation is the beginning of what I have deemed my spiritual practice; the other parts include a moment of reflection upon what I have seen and felt in my meditation, and then the hardest part for me is figuring out where that piece fits into my overall journey. Upon meditating, sometimes I unearth parts of myself that finally make sense as the beginning of some processes, as I additionally sometimes learn things that do not make sense linearly.

More technically speaking, this series consists of acrylic paintings and watercolors with drawn elements overlaid on top. I am choosing primarily painting because it is the medium which, to me, has the most flexibility and range to portray complex ideas. Before starting a painting though, I begin with a paper and pencil or pen drawing in order to refine some of the ideas that are floating around in my head. I hope to include these drawings in the show, as they differ quite a bit from the acrylic paintings they have become and show a really distinct evolution between my primary idea and what it actually became. I find that process important to share

because of the different person I was when I initially had the idea to the person I became throughout the painting process.

I've selected these techniques because I believe it will be the best way for me to showcase my ideas in the sense that I have always been more technical and outright with symbols, ideas, and musings. Additionally, the meditative practices will pair well with the hands-on activity of painting. In order for the viewer to receive my work the way I intend it, I will need to produce something with a high level of detail and attention to my intentions. This body of work resembles something more abstract and therefore will necessitate a lot of moving parts to properly attract the viewer to the spiritual aspects of the work. Spiritualism in art invokes consciousness, which is one of the primary themes that I am utilizing to show the process of learning about and becoming confident in oneself. Spiritualism has been used in the past by artists to materialize mourning, healing, and building oneself back up in the process.

Additionally, spiritualism focuses on transgression and agency through ritual (Fitchburg Art Museum, 2019), which is precisely what I hope to capture; regaining my agency through trauma and to go beyond what is visible to the naked eye. In exploring spiritualism, I will make this centuries-old technique my own by applying them in concordance with my meditations and my intentionality for dissolving my ego through the artwork. I think there will be limitations to making these techniques my own because they are so specific, and additionally I might have a difficult time reaching my audience on account of spirituality, but I most definitely will try!

As I've been painting, I notice my attraction to details and how my techniques have become more repetitive and autonomous. Many of my structures and lines are fluid, which is what this process has been for me. Healing and peeling back those stubborn layers of the self, like I mentioned before, are not linear whatsoever, and it takes a lot of work and drilling at the

thought processes that have been ruminating in our minds since youth. These processes have often created a deep groove within our brain's matter, and it takes a conscious effort to address the grooves that are created in the future. The final works of this series will connect and further build upon this ongoing, life-long process of understanding the self by literally representing connection and introducing freshness and newness, or a sense of rebirth and growth.

Resources and References

There are many artists who worked under the influence of the Spiritualism movement which eventually contributed to, formally and conceptually to Modernism in the visual arts. My ideas for this project actually began forming last semester in my art theory course where we looked at race and racism in the Western art historical canon. Within the canon there were artists who broke out of the mold to comment on the real situations around them and attempted to express their qualms with reality through their work. In researching more about those who worked outside of the status quo, I have been inspired by Hilma af Klint, Remedios Varo, William Blake, Paula Roland, Georgiana Houghton, Matt Mullican, Theophile Bra, and Louis Eilshemius. These are all artists who explored their spirituality and attempted to portray it in their works. The other artists' work emulates what I am trying to capture, which is the referencing of the human form in the space of the unknown or the ethereal. There is a contradiction here because in trying to dissolve the ego through portraying emotion and spirituality one may also be paying homage to the ego in that way.

In a writing by Charles Johnson, the topic of being awakened by art is discussed. Johnson, a Black Buddhist artist, has realized this in his many years of creatively expressing himself through writing, cartoon making, and studying under his Buddhist religion. But before he

reached actualization, he describes a meditation he went through as a teenager, which he believes has greatly impacted his work:

“Without judgment, there were no distinctions. Without distinctions, there was no desire. Without desire, there was only clarity and compassion. After meditation, I was suddenly no longer squandering my energies and consciousness by worrying about things in the past that could not be recovered or changed, nor was I pre-living a future that would never come. Rather, all my attention rested peacefully in the present moment, a total immersion in the here and now very similar to the state of self-forgetting artists know well from focused moments of creation. To my astonishment, I felt capable of infinite patience with and empathy for my parents, teachers and friends. Within me, I detected not the slightest trace of fear or anger or anxiety about anything,” (Johnson, 2006).

This excerpt perfectly describes the processes that I have gone through in order to create this series. The works are not illustrations of the actual process of meditation and introspection, but instead represent the outcomes, understandings, and different levels that I have reached in my spiritual practice. The attention will be completely focused on the present and the Ego will not be in the way, clouding judgements or making the present difficult to reach or to see.

Exhibition Simulation

Preferably, I would present these paintings on the wall, with no framing and maybe a small title plaque for description. The display would be fully immersive and maybe even some could be shown with black lights. The black lights would send the pieces into another reality as different colors and aspects would be emphasized, but most importantly, they would give the pieces a sense of being on a more spiritual plane themselves by being out of one’s normal range of vision. It would cause the viewers to work harder to understand the pieces and therefore themselves as well. The intended audience would be anyone and everyone who wants to expand their spiritual radius and inject their brain with some food for thought, and maybe even heal

themselves in the process. My work would be contradictorily living in this space because while it will be a project that I have put a great deal of work into, the nature and subject of the work is in an attempt to diminish the ego...therefore having it up as a celebration is inherently contradictory.

Reflection

In the execution of this project, it was difficult to sit down at my blank or half-finished canvas, further meditate on what I was feeling, and remind myself where I left off in my journey or in the piece, and continue to do my best to represent what I believed to be emblematic of that process. I think this project differs immensely from anything else I have ever done. Here I would especially like to mention Remedios Varo, as she was a surrealist and metaphysical artist. Metaphysics relates to the philosophical topic that explores the relationships between mind and matter, and potential and actuality. These themes are represented in my work with the very obvious representations of the human body, with faces, hands, and tears, but these images are surrounded by ethereal and spiritual ideas and patterns as well. Varo is also known to represent herself in her works with features that represent her, such as heart shaped faces, almond eyes, and aquiline noses. Varo also explores psychoanalysis and its role on female agency, and my project also encompasses a similar process of introspection and analysis of my psyche and thus its impact on my agency and who I have become. I am greatly inspired by Varo and feel a connection with her as a Latinx artist. An important part of my identity is my Mexican background, as this experience has also undoubtedly shaped my perspective and therefore my personal reflection as well.

Every piece I make is telling me more about my own healing and dissolution process, in which I will look back and see as my development in this final project. The most surprising aspect about this project is what I mentioned above; I was really interested to see what images and symbols came out most prominently. As an artist since very young, I have always felt particularly connected to my hands and as I've developed and matured, I've always noticed the hands of other people and found them to be such an intriguing part of the human anatomy and obviously so essential to my practice and everyday life. For something you look at every day, their whimsy may be lost in our heads, so I am happily surprised that they have been a recurring theme in my works.

The most challenging aspect of this project was making sure that each piece had a different message but remained united at the end. I am happy to say that I believe I have accomplished that with all of my compositions and the symbolism within them. This has been the longest series of work I have completed yet, and another challenging aspect about that has been making sure to keep up with the work but also to make sure that it at least has the potential to send the message that I want to send. The best way that I can say I responded to this challenge was to trust myself about what message intrinsically weaves itself through my work without having to try super hard or strain the message. The trusting process became a lot easier after I completed my first two pieces, and after that I definitely found my groove. Some feedback that I received from readers was to include a little bit more about my process and how I got to the end product, so following that I decided to include journal entries to give a more personal explanation of what exactly was going on. I decided to keep these relatively short and also a bit obscure because to some extent I want the viewer to come to their own conclusions as well.

What I've learned most from this project is that my art is best when it builds, and the underlying goals and concepts remain the same. Like I mentioned, this was the first time where I created a series of interrelated works and it really showed. I think another thing I've learned is that I want to include this type of meditative and spiritual practice and most of my upcoming pieces, because I think it adds a certain intentionality and crispness to the piece. I have also learned how to be diligent and manage my time and space really wisely, in a way that is most conducive to creating meaningful work. I think we should all give ourselves pats on the back for working through covid as well. It was not easy but not impossible either, and the work we all created in this time will be considered historic.

Research Directions

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