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FINDING FLOW IN PHOTOGRAPY

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES
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Transcendent Experience: Abstraction in Photography

Cynthia Olsen McConkie

Honors Thesis

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Transcendent Experience: Abstraction in Photography

The associations I bring to an image are unique to me and my life experiences. I did not fully appreciate this until, as a photographer, I began to produce a body of work about activities that provide a refuge for me from the challenges of everyday life. I am an avid runner. For me running is a spiritual experience that renews my spirits and gives me hope. I took photos of the physical act of running and I was very disappointed with the results. The images failed to capture or recreate the sensations that I experienced while running. They elicited a full range of responses from viewers depending on their own personal experiences. There were those who abhorred running and had strong feelings of dislike. Even fellow runners brought completely different associations about running to the images. I became aware that it was more important to me to capture the way running made me feel than it was to document the actual activity itself. To create images of feelings, I found I needed to be able to articulate those feelings first, in verbal metaphors and then in turn in visual metaphors.

My research began with more closely examining my ideas and concepts. It led me to writings by others who had similar experiences. I also investigated universal means of communication that would effectively support my efforts.

My first series of metaphorical images were semi-abstract. I took close-up images of objects that embodied specific qualities (e.g. melting ice=soothing of frazzled nerves, metal=solid strength). These images were more successful. As I observed people's reactions to the images, I noticed a similar pattern to their experiences. The close-up, tightly cropped images would draw them in and hold their attention. They would look at and study the images as if they were puzzles. After a while their eyes would light up as they made connection to the physical world. Some were unsure and would want me to validate their deductions. I was pleased to have people spending

time with my images. However, I felt that most viewers were more concerned with "getting" them than with "experiencing" them. These exact words were used in David Spayde's article, *Who's Afraid of Poetry?* He reiterates that there is nothing to "get". Abstract poetry and imagery are not supposed to scare people or make them feel stupid. Their purpose is to break free from the confines of our culture by experiencing and enjoying the visual or rhythmic qualities of the image or words [45].

As my imagery became more abstract and less representational of the real world, I was faced with many challenges, both internal and external. As I printed my intimate images on a large scale, I was very self-conscious of the fact that they had a painterly appearance. Photography has battled throughout its history with painting to find its own place in the world of fine art. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Photo-Secessionists tried to establish photo as a fine art by manipulating their images to create painterly effects. They attempted to make their photographs look like paintings by soft focusing their images and hand touching their prints. They didn't allow photography to be its own medium based on its on inherent characteristics. The Photo-Secession movement faded away and the "straight" photography of Paul Strand and Edward Weston established photography as a fine art based on the inherent characteristics of the medium[Marsh 3]. Their tightly focused semi-abstract images captured their subjects in unfamiliar ways, but the relationship between the camera, the viewer, and the subject remained the same. They were still objects with a reference point to the physical world [Rexer 66].

I reassured myself that my work had its foundations in the work of Strand, Weston, and the other great photographers that I admired, and that they would be pleased that I was pushing the boundaries of our medium. However, I am continually confronted with the idea that historically a photograph will document or narrate the

world around us as in a landscape or a portrait. (Carey) Because of the optics of the camera there is the expectation that a photograph "should represent something easily recognizable and easily understandable." There is a direct correlation between an object and its image. The subject matter of my imagery is not a tangible object, but the light and color themselves (Laird 2). These images of light and color are manifestations of an internal world (Minor 17).

Truly abstract photography can be traced back to the beginning of photography and the invention of William Henry Fox Talbot's printing out process. He wanted to accurately duplicate the world, so he could share his trips and adventures with his family and friends, but he found that his process of duplication had its own characteristics. His printing out process captured objects from the physical world, but in a mysteriously abstract way. The inconsistent colors combined with the ability to record an image on paper using light and chemistry was hypnotic. It was a chemical process that brought with it an unknown world of possibilities in the imagination of the photographer. "It is this search for a medium in which inner and outer worlds converge, and in which the conventional relation of the observer to reality is suspended, that has provided a continuous alternative impetus to photography since its inception" (Rexler 64)

As I attempted to create images of pure feelings and emotions from my conscious I discovered that in order to better understand them it was helpful to be able to and describe them in the physical form of language. This guided my research.

At times while running or making photographs I become so focused on the task that I experience a state of increased awareness, self assurance, power, and contentment; a transcendence of self. As I began to verbalize these ideas and share them with others I was guided to the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. His doctorate

research was a study of creativity. He wanted to determine whether or not certain personality traits or cultural influences promoted or produced creativity. He discovered that specific personality traits were needed for an artist to create a variation in their medium. Whether or not this variation is deemed deviant or creative is determined by the field. The field is comprised of experts in a given area (Feldman 140). Only a few variations will be accepted and passed onto the next generation because society only has the ability to assimilate a small number of changes at a time, so many creative ideas will be lost (Feldman 143).

While Csikszentmihalyi's findings on creativity and deviance shed light on my external struggles, it is the questions that arose from this study that most interest me. Csikszentmihalyi observed artists as they worked hour after hour, and day after day. They were completely focused on their task and immensely enjoyed what they were doing. He wanted to know what reward they got from their activity. It wasn't money, fame, or the finished work of art. In fact, once the work of art was completed it was usually put aside and forgotten. Csikszentmihalyi found the reward was the activity itself (Csikszentmihalyi 4). He wanted to find out what activities promoted this experience and who experienced it (Csikszentmihalyi 5).

These are questions I asked myself as I approached my project. I discussed my concept with various people, and I was surprised to find only a small number of individuals had achieved a high degree of optimal experience. Csikszentmihalyi found that it was a rare occurrence, but it is not exclusive to any one group. People of all different ages, cultures, and backgrounds experienced this phenomenon and described it in almost exactly the same words. "Its characteristics include joy, deep concentration, emotional buoyancy, a heightened sense of mastery, a lack of self-

consciousness, and self-transcendence. Employing an image used frequently by his subjects, Csikszentmihalyi named this optimal human experience Flow" (Cooper 74)

In Flow, challenges and skills are balanced. When skills are greater than challenges boredom occurs and when challenges overwhelm skills the result is anxiety. This is not to say that Flow is without stress because stress is an essential stimulation for Flow. "A stressful situation is one that matters, one that is real, meaningful, and commanding" (Csikszentmihalyi 57). In a state without stress, less is expected and less is possible. The Flow experience encourages growth and change. For an activity to continue as a flow experience it must evolve in complexity and an individual's skills and challenges must increase as well. Some activities like chess, mountain climbing, and running are considered to be flow activities, but no activity can ensure flow. More important to the state of flow is an individual's ability to control consciousness. Flow happens inside consciousness. Yoga and meditation are disciplines that promote these skills. They teach methods that focus attention and limit awareness to specific goals. These techniques are key to balancing challenges and skills (Csikszentmihalyi 31).

In Flow, I am completely focused on the task at hand. Distractions are non-existent. Time is suspended and I transcend the body. All inhibitions and feelings of self-consciousness flee. I am completely aware of all aspects of the situation, without being hindered by them. I am able to push myself to higher levels because I know exactly what needs to be done and I am confident I can do what I need to do. In the private world of my self-consciousness, I gain a stronger sense of self by losing the self (Csikszentmihalyi 9).

Csikszentmihalyi describes this losing the self to find the self in terms of "I" and "me". He describes the "I" as acting, controlling, attending, and observing. The "me" is absent. The activity is done for the pleasure of the instance, not for the "what it does

for me” [Csikszentmihalyi 178]. Although Flow occurs while I am running or photographing, I am not truly aware of its empowerment while I am participating in it. The goal may be to complete a marathon or produce a body of photographs, but the goal’s main importance is not its completion. The importance of the goal is that it allows me to embark on a powerful journey. The journey is challenging and often painful, but allows the self to grow and develop. The journey ends when the goal is completed, and this compels me to search for another goal, so I can feel those powerful sensations again.

Experiencing a high degree of flow is rare. I do not experience Flow every time I run or every time I take a photograph. Neither do I experience the same degree of Flow from one time to another. Lack of focus, distractions, and feelings of inadequacy, all impede the Flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that our language may prevent Flow. Our language is dominated by the left –hemisphere. It is technical, analytical, rational language used primarily for scientific research and instruction. It is difficult to discuss feelings, sensations, and emotions in scientific terms. This inability to communicate emotions makes it difficult to look for, identify, and discuss Flow with others. Such phenomenons are better described in what he refers to as presentational language. “Presentational language is reserved for infrequent efforts to express the soft, fragile subjectivism of artistic appreciation, mystical wonder, religious spirituality, and other elusive sentiments. These are neither common nor comfortable topics for many people” [Csikszentmihalyi 51].

At first, my Flow experiences were very sacred and personal. I did not wish to share them with anyone else. Flow makes me a better person. It makes my world a better place. Verbalizing and discussing these experiences helped me to realize that I wanted to share these feelings, to spark an interest in other receptive individuals.

Articulating my ideas has led me to stronger imagery. My imagery has evolved, leaving behind representation, embracing pure abstraction. Emotions and feelings are visceral not analytical. These thoughts and discoveries were validated with the writings of Wassily Kandinsky. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he declares, "Shades of colour, like those of sound, are of a much finer texture and awake in the soul emotions too fine to be expressed in words. Certainly each tone will find some probable expression in the words, but it will always be incomplete, and that part which the word fails to express will not be unimportant, but rather the very kernel of its existence. For this reason words are, and will always remain, only hints, mere suggestions of colours" (Kandinsky 42).

Color and light are central to my imagery. The light's ability to change, intensify, and nullify color is exhilarating. The play between light and color allows me to capture and recreate sensations for myself and my viewers. The color and the light are as Rothko says, "a vehicle of transcendental meaning" (Rothko pg 58). I experience Flow while working on this project. Typical of the Flow experience, I needed to add a degree of complexity to the images to increase their ephemeral qualities. The addition of water produced this quality. It gives the sensation of mist and atmosphere. "Creating a place between what we know and what we perceive" (Waldman 60).

This sacred place between what we know and what we perceive is crucial to my work and my experience. By working close-up, I am able to offer glimpses into an unseen realm. Photography is the only art where the action takes place in front of the artist but is "unseen" by the eye. The action is "unseen" until the film is developed or the image is printed (Carey). In my work, the "not seeing" is intensified and is part of the challenge and excitement.

There are challenges and surprises in each of the phases of my process. When shooting the images, it is intriguing to explore what can be done with light and color. By lighting simple glass objects, which refract and reflect light, and combining them with water, I am able to create new worlds of thoughts and sensations. The shooting of the image is the most exhausting part of the experience: bending over the camera, looking through the extension tubes, deciding how many extension tubes to use, choosing the angle of the exposure, arranging the objects, framing the composition, placing the lights, diffusing the lights, or deciding to use natural lights. Sometimes I see the most incredible things through the camera lens, but how that vision will be recorded and transferred to film is still unknown.

It is exciting to develop the film and look at the negatives, to try and guess which images will be worth printing based on their shapes and pattern. Scanning the film adds another level of anticipation. The images appear enlarged and in color. Sometimes the images that I have been excited about throughout the other steps will be awesome and other times I don't like them at all. Some rolls of film will have captured nothing interesting, and others reveal surprises and mysteries.

Printing these intimate images on a large scale heightens their ephemeral qualities. I know the images will be transformed as I anxiously wait for them to emerge full scale from the printer. The largeness of the image allows me and the viewer to enter into the image and transcend the body. An image's success depends on the viewer as well as the artist. Rothko says, "A picture lives by companionship, expanding, and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world" [62]. I am trying to make images that touch the viewer's soul and provide an experience beyond words. My greatest

challenge is to create an image that compels the viewer to join me in the journey. I hope they will accept this invitation.

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Artist Statement

The further I journey into life, the more I realize how little control I have over things that are truly important. As this realization dawns on me I look for releases that renew my spirit and give me hope. Running answers this need for me. Pushing myself physically, mentally, and emotionally, I pound the roads and the trails. In return I gain an increased awareness, self assurance, power, and contentment.

Such a sacred personal experience should not be taken for granted. This reality hit me several years ago when a bulging disc in my back ruptured. There were weeks where I could barely walk and it was nine months before I could run again. I felt like I had lost my best friend. When we were reunited it was with stipulations based on the health and limits of my back. Running is a gift that I now safeguard to prolong it for as long as possible.

Knowing this experience could be taken from me permanently, I actively began seeking another activity that promoted these same sensations. I found a sister to running in photography. I saw the world with new eyes; ordinary things became beautiful and amazing.

Friendships need time and patience to grow and to deepen. This is true of my relationship with photography. Searching my soul, I explore light and unusual camera angles. Exhilarated by the light's ability to change, intensify, or nullify the color of an object, I work shooting controlled, close-up images of objects which refract and reflect light. Like Minor White, I believe the universe can be found in the miniscule. Printing my intimate images on a large scale heightens their ephemeral qualities. After the work is done, I immerse myself in the finished image and transcend the body. Neither my experience nor my images are static; they are constantly growing and evolving. The ultimate fulfillment would be to compel you, the viewer, to participate in the journey.

Cindy McConkie

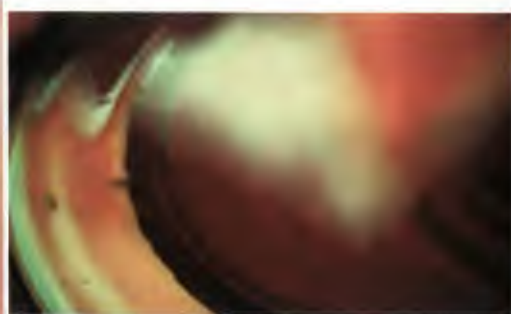


Image List

<u>Title</u>	<u>Medium</u>	<u>Dimensions</u>	<u>Date</u>
Untitled #10	Inkjet Print	15"x23	2005
Untitled #15	Inkjet Print	15"x23	2006
Untitled #16	Inkjet Print	15"x23	2006
Untitled #19	Inkjet Print	15"x23	2006
Untitled #21	Inkjet Print	23"x15	2006
Untitled #22	Inkjet Print	15"x23	2006
Untitled #24	Inkjet Print	23"x15	2006
Untitled #27	Inkjet Print	15"x23	2006
Untitled #28	Inkjet Print	15"x23	2006
Untitled #32	Inkjet Print	23"x15	2006



untitled 10.jpg



untitled 15 .jpg



untitled 16.jpg



untitled 19.jpg



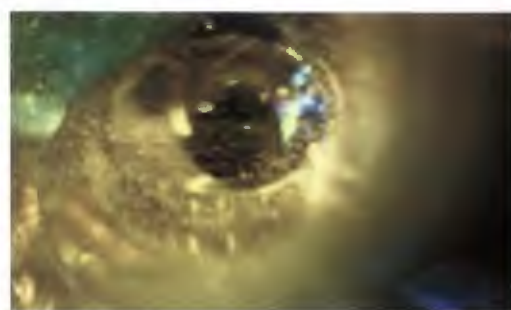
untitled 21.jpg



untitled 22.jpg



untitled 24.jpg



untitled 27.jpg



untitled 28.jpg



untitled 32.jpg