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“AT THE STILL POINT OF THE TURNING WORLD”

by

FAITH M. MCCLURE

Under the Direction of Matthew Sugarman

ABSTRACT

The history of landscape painting in the West has dictated and reiterated a phenomenological point-of-view derived from the Cartesian coordinate plane system. After having journeyed to northern India for eight months, I became influenced by other pictorial conceptions of space, namely the radial cosmological *mandalas* of Tibetan Buddhism and *yantras* of Hinduism. Unable to fully eliminate the coordinate plane system from the recess of my mind, I embarked upon a creative journey through consciousness in which my own studio practice provided the means to construct a new orientation, not only in terms of the perceivable, external world, but within the realm of my own embodied mind.

INDEX WORDS: Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Descartes, Mandala, Yantra, Cartesian, Linear perspectivism, Radial, India, Asia, Technology, Landscape, Cosmology, Perception, Emptiness, Impermanence, Mindfulness, Monoprint, Cosmogram, Creative process

“AT THE STILL POINT OF THE TURNING WORLD”

by

FAITH M. MCCLURE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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Faith Michelle McClure
2011

“AT THE STILL POINT OF THE TURNING WORLD”

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many of the ideas expressed in this paper and in the corresponding thesis exhibition, *At the Still Point of the Turning World*¹, were as a direct result of time spent abroad in northern India during my second year of study in the Masters of Fine Arts Program at Georgia State University. After having spent a total of eight months in Asia (over the course of two trips), primarily working as a teaching assistant for Emory University's Tibetan Studies Program in Dharamsala, India, my return to the United States was followed by a considerable shift in perceptual and phenomenological perspective.

Having adored my immersion in both north Indian and Tibetan culture for those several months, the pull to romanticize both of these cultures as somehow superior to my own was strong. In an effort to not fall victim to polarized definitions of "West" versus "East, or "First World" versus "Third World", upon returning I set out to explore ways in which my experiences in India were distinguishable from those in America, but without placing any value judgment on either culture. It was essential to avoid gross generalizations that would skew my observations for potential transformation as a result of having lived in an environment so culturally rich and remarkably dissimilar from my own.

In the interest of effectively relaying the spirit of my time abroad and its impact on my studio practice, I have chosen to retell this experience in the form of a patchwork narrative comprised of a combination of events and dramatized thought processes taking place before, during and after my time in Dharamsala. As is known to be true, fiction can often convey deeper truths that the detailing of factual events cannot. For this purpose, I have utilized creative licensure to vividly stage, and therefore, more intensely express the transformations that took place in my

¹ Title is drawn from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1: 62), a literary work of tremendous personal influence. As Eliot's final masterpiece, the four-part poem was completed at the close of World War II.

perception and my work. It should be noted that the overall chronology of events (especially those ones that are cognitive) is more or less true to my literal experience. I feel this paper is an accurate representation of my evolution over the last three years.

This cognitive shift (for which I am so grateful) has manifested itself primarily in the expansion of a personal philosophy of perception, or in more detail, the manner in which spatial construction and orientation influences metaphysical orientation and spiritual potentiality. The history of landscape painting in the West has dictated and reiterated a seemingly inescapable point-of-view derived from the Cartesian coordinate plane system. This orientation, to me, is reinforced through landscape representation and regular digital interaction and engagement. Having spent a great deal of time in India, absorbing Asian tradition in terms of its various religious philosophies, I've become influenced by other pictorial conceptions of space, namely the radial cosmological *mandalas* and *yantras* of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. These foster a relationship between internal and external, between the microcosmic and macrocosmic. Unable to fully eliminate the coordinate plane system from the recess of my mind, the creative result of all these influences has been a problematizing and attempted reconciliation of both Eastern and Western perspectives (or to be more correct, European/American and Southeast Asian perspectives), between the internal and external, between embodiment and disembodiment, as each point-of-view has fought for chief perceptual influence. Neither perspective has ultimately conquered the 'inferior' point-of-view; rather the definitive result has been a simultaneous presence of each, as well as the friction created during the attempted coexistence of multiple contrasting ideas.

2 AT THE STILL POINT OF THE TURNING WORLD

*...And so each venture
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate,
 With shabby equipment always deteriorating
 In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
 Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered
 Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
 To emulate - but there is no competition -
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
 And found and lost again and again... (Eliot 2:178-87)*

Coming of age in the mid 1990s, my construction of reality was built of digital components. I came to know myself through the mirror of the computer screen. I came to know the world through the portal of its 15-inch frame. Every morning, every evening—it's taken me deep within the recesses of our shared nervous system, where I must confess, I've found a pixelated, magnificent God residing, lodged somewhere in the umbilical cord between me and the hard-drive, between the illuminated screen and my contracting pupils. And despite its divine ubiquity, its presence has cultivated a kind of proprioceptive anxiety—like a fully embodied prosthetic that never quite fit. Too distracted to consider alternatives, I've only known to continue consuming its offerings as swiftly as it can feed me. There hasn't been time for anything else. The necessity of keeping pace is too overwhelming; the screen shines too brightly; its resources too vast; its truths too infinite.

So, I've perpetuated in a mind wired and blurred, until a short time ago when I felt my cranium might burst with pressure of accumulated data. The projected world had become disaggregated—my lens a fractured kaleidoscope. I saw everything in fragments and pieces, in collapsible windows and Wikipedia entries. I could no longer ingest entire subjects from beginning to end. Scurrying across the surface of knowledge, I knew no other options. Or perhaps there

were too many options. Life was conceived within the hardwire entanglement of an invisible global network.

2.1 *Descent into the Landscape*

I spent my first year of graduate school in opposition to the overpowering digital apparatus. Feeling lost without an anchor of relevance—a brain severed from its body—I commiserated with modern philosopher, Hubert Dreyfus, who expressed, “In cyberspace, without our embodied ability to grasp meaning, relevance slips through our non-existent fingers” (26). It was clear I felt an imperative necessity to return to the tangible—to ignite nerve-endings, to fire full-body synapses. In reckless abandon, I attempted to rekindle a sense of biological vitality, admittedly through clichés and in a kind of Dionysian frenzy, by slinging and smearing paint and charcoal over large sheets of paper, creating dark, anatomical landscapes that spoke of the body in all its excesses. Not quite sure of the intended compositional outcome, it seemed to be the only option that made sense at the time.

In these intuitively conceived pieces, anatomical forms were literally merged with the landscape itself, as a way of expressing connectivity or a kind of grounding to the earth (Fig 1). Strong references to bodily systems were apparent, namely digestion and reproduction, that in retrospect, seem to be direct parallels to the processing and digesting of ideas related to this philosophical search. I was, in effect, rooting through the physicality of forms, both the landscape and myself, on an archeological quest to unearth answers to questions I didn’t even know how to ask. Having felt literally birthed from the proverbial grid of the Internet, floating in a digital ether for a large portion of my life, these pieces offered a starting point for charting a new orientation.



Figure 1, *Cradle*, 2009-2010

At the time, I was quite immersed in the dark and grimy landscapes of German Neo-Expressionist painter and sculptor, Anselm Kiefer, whose work primarily addresses the collective memory and national identity of Germany since the devastation of World War II (Fig 2). In an exhibition guide for a curatorial project at MASS MoCA featuring Kiefer and his early mentor, the well-known Joseph Beuys, the curator explains:

Kiefer's mentor, Joseph Beuys, whose work can be seen alongside Kiefer's at MASS MoCA, spoke of a "wound" that was fundamental to the soul of Germany, and his objects often assumed a damaged or deformed condition. Likewise, Kiefer seemed to commence work as if there were a tragedy—an original sin, as it were—infesting the German psych (Rosenthal 1).



Figure 2, (Die Milchstrasse) *The Milky Way*, Anselm Kiefer. 1985-87

This “wound,” present in both Beuys and Kiefer’s work, resonated with me in that there was an implied restorative cleansing taking place, rising from the muck of the devastated landscape. In Kiefer’s work, the shattered, industrialized horizon is the central locale for atonement, and in many ways, the re-birth of a culture. I felt a parallel narrative in my own life and work, especially regarding the major shift in consciousness due to the onset of industrialization and its relationship to the Second World War. Technology had, in effect, been directly linked to the destruction of humanity on an unprecedented scale, both literally and psychologically, as human-to-human contact was already dwindling since the invention of industry and mass-production. I was dealing with technology in a similar ontological playing field, in which this inescapable rela-

tionship to mechanization was simultaneously responsible for compromising an awareness of some innate “being,” or a level of consciousness buried underneath my relationship to mechanistic necessity. This point-of-view originates as early as Greek philosophy, namely Aristotle and Socrates, who fundamentally concluded that technics² had no true ontological value, or as contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler explains of their point-of-view, that “technics is nothing other than artifactuality” (*The Ister*).

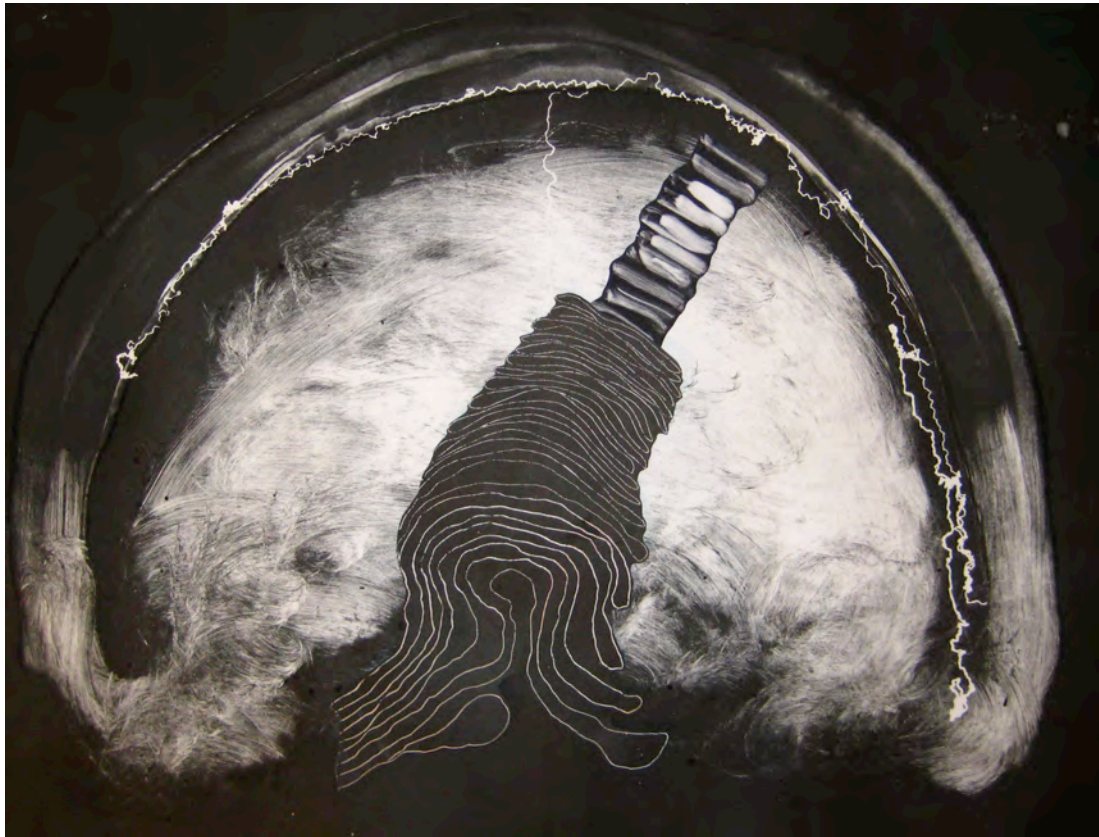


Figure 3, *One Observant Fellow Who Points*, Monoprint Collage, 2009

Perhaps it was this “original,” perfectly essential state of being I was searching for, adrift in some ethereal cosmic landfill (Fig 3). One truth had, in fact, become clear, as I so ecstatically whirled through the studio covered in paint. It was now obvious that the physicality of creating—the dance itself—was essential to excavating the root of my disembodied predicament. As I tried

² *Episteme*, Greek, most often translated as knowledge; *technê*, Greek, craft or art (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

to communicate this in the actual artwork, I began to realize that it was not only necessary to address the anatomical form via literal visual referencing, it was expressly relevant to address *my* embodied form as the starting point in the creative process. Rather than projecting my reality onto the landscape, I felt instead the need for a direct biological correlative in the artwork that could visually mirror the architecture of my own form. In essence, I was looking to expand the stuff of my body to the materiality of compositional form.



Figure 4, *The Eye that Sees*, Monprint and Mixed Media Collage, 2010

Similar to the narrative of Kiefer's work, it felt as though the landscape needed to be destroyed in order to be re-born from it. So quite cavalierly, I determined to remove the horizon line from all subsequent works to create free-floating anatomical expressions. This was a liberating move in the right direction, yet ironically, it turned out my will to eradicate the landscape perspective

was not enough to actually remove it. The horizon line uncannily appeared on its own, birthed from my subconscious mind again and again, regardless of my conscious efforts (Fig 4). Clearly, there remained an underlying foundation to this orientation that needed addressing.

2.2 *Portrait of the Artist as a Y-Axis*

While landscape painting has arguably been around since the origins of recorded pictorial history, it did not come to flourish as an actual “perspective,” both artistically and philosophicaly until its acknowledgement as such during the Italian Renaissance. The use of linear perspective as a means of visual mapping first emerged in the northern Italian city of Florence in the mid-fifteenth century. Its discovery is attributed to Filippo Brunelleschi, prominent architect and engineer of the Italian Renaissance. Brunelleschi is also consequently credited with the development of the landscape as a specific model for the Western way of perceiving the world (Wylie 57).

While it seems difficult to measure the level of actual influence this visual framework and thus orientation has had upon the Western mind, it is worth exploring for the purpose of, at the very least, questioning one’s positioning within his or her own phenomenology of space—an individual’s relationship to his or her own cosmology, so to speak. In his book on landscape theory, John W. Wylie similarly asserts:

The language, attitudes and implications of this particular way of seeing might be said to be hard-wired into Western cultures. Thus, as regards the general cultural significance of linear perspective, the art historian and visual theorist James Elkins feels able to say it is “our” perspective...the one that describes how we view the world, and constitute ourselves as viewing subject (57).

During the era of its discovery, the attention given to linear perspective was for the purpose of accurately representing the world as an accurate model of material reality, and was thus

presented as such. But attaching such proclamations of truth to an image is, very obviously, fraught with complications and shortcomings. While this science does provide accurate rationale for the way diagonal lines converge in space, its implied representation of reality requires an unnatural visual relationship to the image it projects. Thus, perspective “ties the viewer of a painting to a stationary point...precise to the very point from which the painter perceives the picture,” and requires viewing this projected “reality” within a literal one-point (meaning with one eye rather than two) perspective (Seppanen 25). Janne Seppanen, author of The Power of the Gaze: An Introduction to Visual Literacy, further explains “The linear perspective produced--and continues to produce--a motionless and disembodied visual angle on its object. It is as if the painter's gaze captures the flux of phenomena and perceives the visual field from a privileged point of view outside any motion taking place in it. In short, it is as if the viewer were not there at all” (25).

In this way, the painted image becomes emblematic of a purely representationalist point-of-view, presupposing that the mind is an internally separate domain, distinguishable from the actual world in which we move (Merleau-Ponty 163). Thankfully, our engagement with the exterior world is not solely through perspectival drawings and paintings. However, from a phenomenological point-of-view, our historical familiarity with this translation of space limits the degree that one can see his or her world outside the framework of a landscape representation, or more fully, outside Cartesian perspectivism. Roughly two hundred years following Brunelleschi's discovery, Rene Descartes left a significant mark on the Western mind with the emergence of his coordinate plane system, thus igniting linear perspectivism within a three-dimensional, real space. Yet experiencing the external via this Cartesian (or representationalist) lens forces the

mind to a realm of isolation and reason (Seppanen 25). Theorist, Mikko Lehtonen explains further:

Cartesian perspectivism is characterized by its lonely eye, like the eye of a Cyclops, which perceives reality outside of itself; something in which it is not included. Similarly, the eye itself is conceived to be static, attached to something, anything but dynamic. In the Cartesian perspective, seeing--seeing by a Cyclops bound to one place--is not mobile seeing but arrested gaze. It is immortalized, idealized, detached, from the body; coldly abstract, a non-participatory gaze. Moreover, it is a gaze that does not see itself. Being positioned outside the field of vision inhibits the seer from seeing him or herself as the producer of the scene (qtd. in Seppanen 28).

From this point of view, not only is the individual detached from herself and her body, but too, she is detached from the whole of humanity—as the center of her own universe, she is none other than the protagonist of her own autobiographical film, the whole of humanity serving as supporting characters in her own personal narrative.

It was clear that my proclivity to the landscape was, in effect, simply a representationalist reiteration of a vertical position in relationship to the ubiquitous horizontal plane. This emphasis on verticality made me hyper-aware of my posture and all the symbolic implications therein. I suddenly saw myself on the cover of Darwin's notable publication "Origins of the Species," which illustrates the spine of each subsequent primate growing more erect across the passage of time. There were also strong correlates to "uprightness" within a Judeo-Christian context, a point-of-view not entirely unrelated to Descartes's philosophy. Cartesian perspectivism did emerge within a strong Christian context, and verticality, in this sense, cannot be considered without also recalling religious art of the Renaissance, particularly those works depicting the Last Judgment, which very starkly distinguish the explicitly asymmetrical subterranean earth in contrast to the highly symmetrical celestial, Godly realm above (Fig 5). These moral implica-

tions made me a bit squirmy, yet I could not escape that my entire self-image in relationship to the larger world was contained within this perspective.

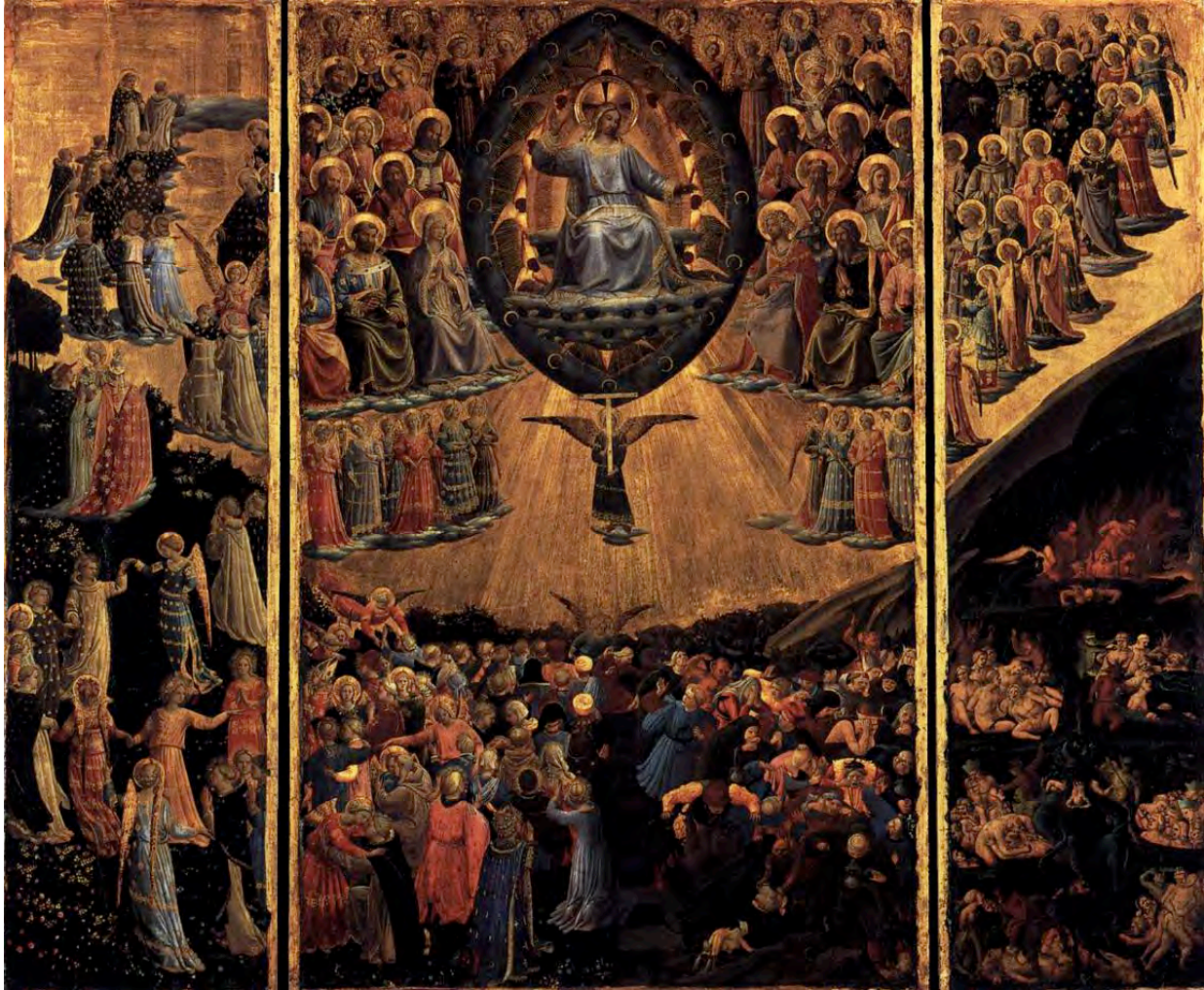


Figure 5, *Last Judgment*, Fra Angelico. 1450

2.3 *India: On the Other Side of the Horizon Line*

*Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation (Eliot 2:202-207)*

India came like a flash in the night. I didn't know I was looking for the miracle of this subcontinent when I found myself at the end of a fifteen-hour plane ride, descending into New Delhi for the first time in 2009. Having purchased the airline ticket months prior to my slightly dramatized existential meltdown, and having made the decision clueless of any concrete intention, my ultimate objective—formless and unknown—began to flicker like a short-circuited light bulb in dark room. At 27 years, I had been holding my breath indefinitely, on a quest for the unnamable. How peculiar it was to feel revived by the suffocating, sweltering heat, by the potency of the spicy polluted air, to feel renewed by chaos, standing amid thousands of bodies, all their exotic histories moving in every direction.

I arrived around midnight in Pahar Ganj, a slummy but reasonable part of town with cheap hotels and few tourists. Even in the obscurity of that late hour, the vitality of the city shimmered in between the shadows. People were out and about, markets were open; mobile vendors were on bicycles selling flowers and spices and God knows what else, somehow navigating a sea of sweaty pedestrians without taking any lives or bodily extremities. They were doing what the rest of the world does during daylight hours, but they were doing it at night—a reasonably cooler time of day, but not by much.

The curious sound of jingling was everywhere—miniature bells rattling from women's ankles and wrists, from the rear view mirrors of auto-rickshaws and from car bumpers. A perpetual echo of faint drumming hung in the sky, coupled with the siren sound of high-pitched female vocalists resounding from cheap miniature radios behind shopkeepers' counters. Deviant-faced monkeys finagled paths through treetops, rooftops and balconies.

The air perpetually smelt of things burning—incense, trash, curries and other spices. Colors spanning the entire spectrum were visible at the most mundane of moments, bursting from

vegetable stands, upon women clad in saris made of fuchsia or the most brilliant of turquoise; daubs of crimson *kumkum*³ between eyebrows brightened the dark eyes of many I glimpsed in passing. I was Alice in a wonderland of intoxicating and relentless stimuli.

I kept trying to remember how I wound up there. India had not always been among the first of future travel destinations, but suddenly, there I was. While it's true I had thumbed through a handful of popular texts on Eastern religion in the past, curious of other ways of knowing, the language frequently struck me as proverbially rote, a cure-all for the overworked, under-spiritualized Western mind.

Upon arriving, however, familiar pages of sacred texts—the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Vedas*, the Buddha Shakyamuni's *Heart Sutras*—swept into the forefront of my vision. It was suddenly as if I had literally arrived inside the texts themselves and was reading from the inside out. Bleary-eyed and displaced, I had entered a new and obscure narrative. Implanted on my internal grid, sacred texts had become horizontal—a walkable terrestrial history following the geographic contours of an entire metaphysical worldview.

My verticality, nonetheless, still felt obligatorily counterpart to the new planar horizon I was now walking. For years I had sat hunchbacked, a modern primate, pressed by gravity to my desk chair. At least now I was moving. Atrophied limbs were awakened; my gait awkward, as if stirring from a long sleep. And still the desire to stand upright was present, and not only present but imperative—to straighten a long-suffering crooked spine. But I kept walking. Walking the heated plain, through the sordid streets of Old Delhi, up and down through the peaks and valleys of the northern Himalayan range. For months, I walked, watching my steps progress forward on an internal labyrinth, rooting around, attempting to digest by hand (or by foot) the cyber-muck

³ *Kumkum* is a powder made made of tumeric or saffron and is used both socially and religiously in Hindu tradition. It is often used to mark the forehead or the neck as an auspicious symbol or blessing, most often in temples or offered to invited guests. Married women apply it daily as an indicator of marriage status.

that had accumulated over the last couple decades. Subtly aware of a gradual shift in perspective, I felt a slowly adjusting alignment, a gradual synchronicity—like the second hand of a clock passing over the first. If my posture failed to mirror the moral impeccability of the y-axis, then perhaps I should reconfigure my orientation to it.

As I sat in my 2nd Class AC train seat, headed for Pathankot⁴ where I would catch a bus to Dharamsala, I gazed out the window, letting my eyes roam across the open green fields. Farmers could be seen from great distances; women in particular were like bright moving smudges on the plain, squatting in the grass, harvesting crops in bright saris of passion fruit and tangerine. My vision teetered up and down on the rickety train. I watched the horizon line, trying to imagine the great sphere of the earth, ruminating upon the philosophical quandary at hand. I needed a new map.

In the days following, I found myself in local libraries and bookstores in the small hill-station of McLeod Ganj⁵ located in the northern Indian town of Dharamsala. Eager to explore other orientations—to feel less like a mere y-axis on the eternal grid—I delved into Tibetan Buddhist philosophy in search of another orientation in which to place myself. Having been historically a lover of all things loose, expressive and abstract, I was surprised to find myself fixated upon Tibetan *thangka*⁶ painting, ever-so-perfect and labored over with the most excruciating of detail. *Thangka* painting originated as a convenient educational scroll painting of sorts for traveling monks who would use them to teach the tenants of Buddhism. Today they are used for multiple purposes, primarily as pictorial abodes for deities to be used during ceremony, as meditation-al supports and as offerings to accumulate merit. The imagery they depict usually is that of dei-

⁴ Pathankot is situated in the Indian state of Punjab and is a popular train stop for those traveling from New Delhi to Himachal Pradesh (where Dharamsala is located), Jammu or Kashmir.

⁵ Popular tourist village within city of Dharamsala. Often termed “Little Lhasa,” it is home to over 80,000 Tibetans in exile as well as His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

⁶ Tibetan term; prefix, *than*, means “flat” and suffix, *ka*, translates to “painting”

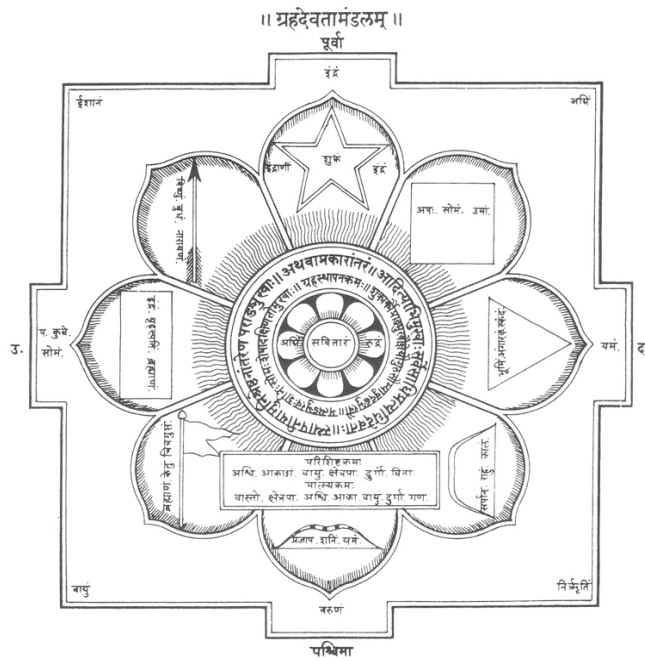
ties in throne, historical Buddhist narratives or *mandalas*, which depict the various realms of existence. Having studied the influence of the *mandala* form in Carl Jung's investigations of psychotherapy and his therapeutic practice of 'active imagination', I was curious the origin and relevance of the *mandala* within its own context.

The idea of the circular cosmogram, or a flat geometric figure depicting a cosmology, is first seen in the sacred Hindu *Vedic* scriptures (in particular the *Artharva-Veda*, which is one of four primary texts) early in the first millennium BC. The term *yantra*, which literally means "instrument" or "machine" in Sanskrit, is a circular labyrinth used in meditative practices within the Hindu tradition. While the utility of the *yantra* image is varied, the *yantra* as a cosmogram serves as a map in which a *yogin*, or spiritual adept, can meditatively visualize him or herself journeying through the labyrinth of the *yantra*, or cosmos, toward its center (Walcott 74).

The *yantra* also manifests architecturally in temples where the universe is reconstructed in microcosmic form. Hindu scholar, Diana L. Eck explains in her book, *Darsan*, "The particular *mandala* of the Hindu temple is called the *vastu-purusa mandala*. The Purusa is the cosmic "Person," from the sacrifice of whose giant body the entire universe was created...The body, as an organic whole diverse in the function of its parts and limbs, is here the image appropriated for the cosmos" (Eck 59, 60).

Purusa is not only the creator of the universe but is the universe itself, comprised of the elements that make his spiritual body. He is described in the *Rig Veda* as the following:

From his navel came space
From his head, the sky
From his feet, earth;
From his ears, the four directions
Thus the worlds were created (Rg Veda X.90 qtd. in Eck).



3. A maṇḍala of the heavenly bodies

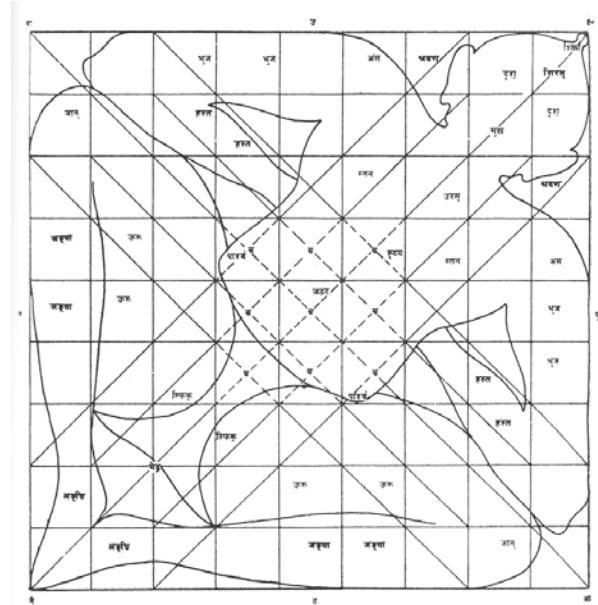


Figure 6, Mandala of Heavenly Bodies
 Figure 7, *Vatsu-purusa-mandala*

The symbolic architectural structuring of a temple, in particular, that of the North India *nagara* style (one of three primary temple styles), too, serves as a cosmological architectural rendering. The arranging and use of light and dark is exceedingly purposeful in the utility of the temple as both a microcosm and symbolic parallel to the interior of the human mind and spirit. The temple, both the cosmic body of Purusa as well as the entire universe, contains within it the center of all things. Eck describes its exterior as “teeming with intricately carved ornamentation and bas relief figures” (Eck 61). While the exterior is lush with decoration, the inner sanctum of the temple, is just the opposite. Dark and windowless, the *garbhagrha*, or “womb-chamber” it is the center of the world and where the temple deity resides. She explains, “The deep interior of the tradition is not flooded by the light of cathedral window, but is deep within” (Eck 63).

This use of the embodied form as essential rather than incidental deeply satisfied me. Additionally, the inner sanctum as specifically dark resonated a truth to me in my own visual expression of the interior world. Both of these motifs would eventually make their way into my work, especially regarding the darkness of the compositions. This intensity of blackness mirrors the intensity of such internal spaces, as is seen both in the Hindu *garbhagrha*, as well as in the context of a that which is deeply and personally internal, whether in philosophical, spiritual or psychological terms—it is the perpetual mystery.



Figure 8, Lion Gateway (Singhadwara) of the Jagannatha Temple (Nagara style) at Puri, taken by an unknown photographer around 1870

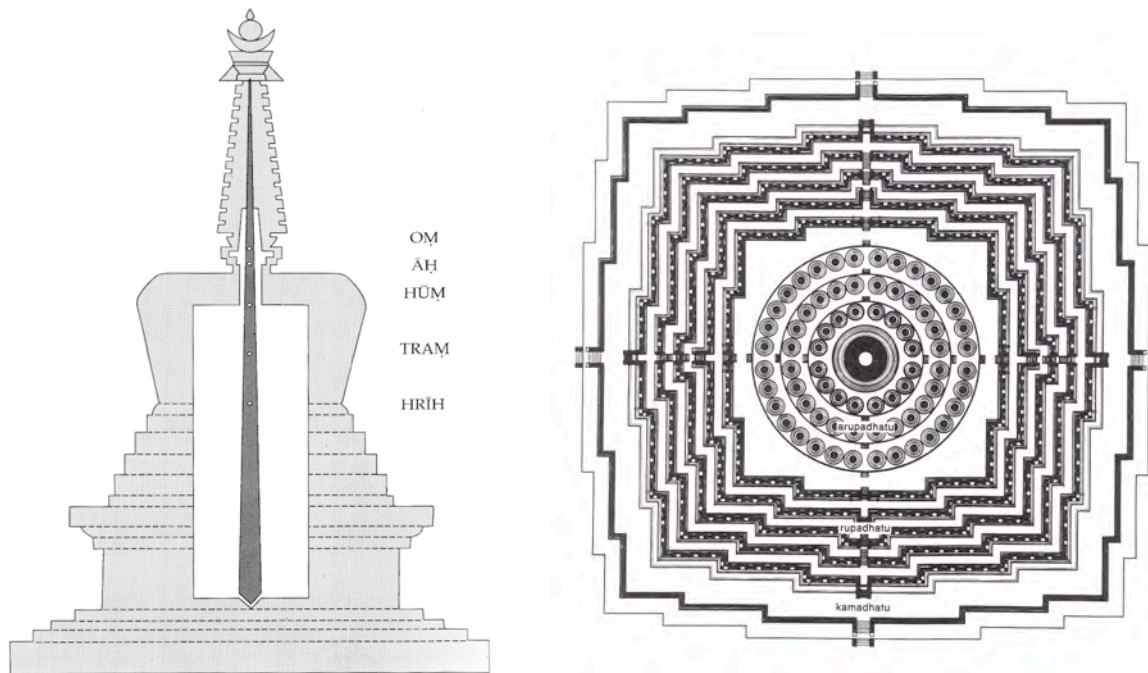


Figure 9 (Left) Diagram of *stupa* indicating power centers (or *chakras*) along the central wind channel (in humans)
 Figure 10 (Right) Drawing of aerial view of *stupa*

Not surprisingly, the complicated, multifarious functionality of the *mandala* in Buddhism is similar to its predecessor in Hinduism. While Buddhist mythology does not share a similarly compelling creation story (time in Buddhism is considered to be without beginning), the use of the *mandala* as a cosmogram is shared. Martin Brauen explains in his book, The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism:

Unlike the cosmology of the European Middle Ages, the Buddhist conception of the world does not place the earth and human beings at the centre. Rather, here it is the gods—corporeal, subtle, spiritual and formless beings—and their worlds, that form the “theocentric” axis of the universe, while human and other living beings eke out an existence on the margins of the centre. [...] The mandala as mirror of the cosmos—not just the outer cosmos but also the microcosm, the person—is based on the assumption of close relations between world, mandala and person (21).

Similar to Hinduism, *mandalas* in Tibetan Buddhism represent the totality of existence, both internally at the level of the individual, and externally at the level the entire universe. Additionally, *mandalas* are often aerial views of actual geographic settings, whether mythological, as in the case of the temple palace or heavenly realm of a deity, or literal, as in the case of an actual temple or *stupa*, a religious structure representing teachings as well as the body of the Buddha⁷ or other divinized teachers or deities (Fig 9). The form of the *stupa* purposefully mimics the form of such divine characters seated in mediation, as is often illustrated on the reverse side of *thangka* paintings portraying enlightened deities. Its various architectural planes each represent a different tenant of philosophical teachings as well as the various realms of existence⁸ (Brauen 29). Devotees often circumambulate and/or spirally ascend larger *stupas*, as a symbolic journey on the path to enlightenment that inevitably concludes at the center of the structure and the heart of the absolute (Brauen 27-29). The object is to awaken and enhance the participant's own Buddha nature through an absorption of the mandala's teachings.

The *stupa*'s multiple function as an object, a pictorial image, a body, and a map of the universe satisfies me to the degree that its purpose seems to transcend the pictorial dilemma addressed earlier regarding Cartesian representationalism—that is, the dilemma of distinction between the internal and the external. The same could be said for the manner in which the Hindu temple functions as well.

French phenomenological philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, developed a similar position in response to the Cartesian problem in his well-known publication, Phenomenology of Perception, in 1945. Here, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body is integral in experience in that it

⁷ When referring to “the Buddha” most are speaking of what is believed to be the Buddha of this age, Gautama (or Shakyamuni) Buddha. It is believed that there is a rising and falling away of the spiritual aptitude and maturity throughout time, and during those periods of spiritual draught, a Buddha emerges to enlighten the people.

⁸ As indicated in Figure 9, the various power centers (or *chakras*) are noted along the central wind channel of the human body (Brauen 28).

is the link between vision and the outside world. In contrast to the Cartesian model (and its ‘lonely eye’), Merleau-Ponty argues that the human body “simultaneously sees and is seen” (162), or as he further explains:

That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the “other side” of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. [...] a self, then that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future” (162).

When speaking of the artist—or specifically, the painter—he argues that the artist is not merely a mind that paints. Instead, the entire body of the artist is taken into the process of composition and creation, as it is inseparable from vision and movement. He argues, “Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things...it holds things in a circle around itself...they are incrustated in its flesh, they are part of its definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body” (163).

It is this way of realizing embodiment that initially pulled me in the direction of Eastern religion and its emphasis on inclusion of the body into the world, not only in its philosophies (as is referenced in Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism) but in representation via the pictorial image as well; through art, through architecture, through ritual and daily practice. In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, the pictorial image of the *mandala* is used as a literal prop for the conception of space at the micro and macrocosmic levels in the practice of *tantric* visualization in Tibetan Buddhism. Here, the *mandala* is not only an abode for the deity, but for the practitioner as well.

2.4 *Disassembling the Landscape*

This I carried with me on my reluctant passage home. I missed the heat of India upon arriving. It felt fertile and made things pulsate. I missed sweating, the liberation of dirty feet. But still within me resided a stirring that resonated deeply. I tried to bring that fire with me as I sat down with drawing utensils and paper again, questioning what marks were now appropriate to make. I pe-

rused stacks of old landscapes—large watercolors, monoprints, drawings—which appeared in dire need of reassessment. Unable to return to the former orientation, I began disassembling the landscape itself—ripping it apart and reassembling its shards in a composition that felt better to my spine. The planar horizon began shifting back and forth from a literal figure-ground relationship to that of a radial cosmology. Not fully one orientation or the other, the material world seemed to become liberated from two-dimensional surface.



Figure 11, *The Tear of Time*, 2011

Fragments of the projected world were situated next to each other in a more desirable ordering. As each piece was dislodged from the horizon, it became increasingly self-aware of its

distinction. Each fragment contained its own unique marks and gestures and thus became like individual isolated thoughts—like expressive visual murmurings that spoke of soil and muck, of flesh and body. I played with their placement like magnets on a refrigerator, searching for a perfectly balanced compositional equation. I did this over and over again—for months—wrestling with permanence, unable to settle on a finished composition. Finally, I begrudgingly resolved myself to the finite form, but mostly for the purpose of satisfaction gleaned from having finished something.

Quite naturally the compositions took on the feeling of biological growth and formation. Life was now evolving from the center outward. Compositions would expand and contract, moving from that of the very minimal to that of the grossly complex, and then back to minimal. The cycle was a never-ending process of creation and destruction, each time offering new insights into the realm of compositional possibility. Whittling down and rebuilding was a means of constructing the world, of simplifying all things to a single source—a single point of concentration—and then the pleasure of creating it again. As I formed each composition, moving the pieces around were like moving thoughts around in my head. I was able to observe my mind thinking, and through shaping the composition the way I wanted, I was able to shape my thinking the way I wanted. Revelatory synapses were firing and I was watching them.

The ultimate result was not that I had simply evolved from a purely perspectival orientation to a radial, biological orientation. That would be too easy—quite impossible, actually—and very far from the truth. While I wish this deeply imbedded perspective of the proverbial vertical and horizontal axes could be surgically eradicated from my mind, I've only had the option to question, complicate and challenge its presence, not only in the recesses of my consciousness, but how I orient myself within the outside world. The tangible result of this in the artwork was a

hybrid manifestation of multiple perspectives, for this is how it exists internally, “the general mess of imprecision of feeling,” as Eliot says (2:181). Therefore, in many of the pieces, the influence of both orientations is apparent, while some compositions focus on one or the other.

2.5 *On Impermanence*

This creative process of assembling and disassembling mirrors an interest in Eastern philosophy that extends beyond interpretation of the picture plane. Having fallen in love with both Hindu and Tibetan culture, a strong affinity emerged for the religious and philosophical belief systems and practices as well, particularly with the ideas pertaining to *anitya*, or “impermanence,” *śūnyatā*, or “emptiness” and *smṛti*⁹ or “mindfulness,” as it is taught in Tibetan Buddhism, a sect of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition which evolved out of India (Mitchell 38, 39).

When Buddhists speak of emptiness, they are essentially referring to the quality of ‘no-self’ in all phenomena, or the characteristic that all phenomena lack inherent existence. For example, a flower cannot simply exist as a flower; instead it is an amalgamation of constituent elements ranging from the soil from which the flower grows, the drops of rain that water the flower, the clouds that supply the rain and so on. The same is believed true in terms of the human self and/or mind, as is taught in the Buddhist teachings on the *Five Aggregates*, which fundamentally explains that an individual has no essential self but is rather a combination of form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. These aggregates exist within a realm of endless phenomena. It is therefore not possible to assign a legitimate hierarchy between people or phenomena because all things are comprised of individual components that are constantly in flux. As a result, Buddhists believe in an overall state of impermanence of all things (Mitchell 38). Donald W. Mitchell’s introductory book on Buddhism explains:

⁹ All three terms from the original Sanskrit

Impermanence, as the arising and passing away of the things of life, is sometimes described in the early texts as taking place in three stages. The elements of an object come together so that it “arises” into existence. Then, the arisen object is subject to “decay.” This means that once an object has come into being, it changes over time. Finally, the elements of an object change to such an extent that the thing passes away. In this manner, all things are impermanent in two senses: They arise and pass away, and while existing they are in a state of constant change (36).

There are strong correlations to both emptiness and impermanence in my work, in that the work is composed within a similar “rising and falling away” of phenomena, or in the case of my work, the respective collage elements. Not long after a composition is fashioned, it is dismantled and reformed into a new composition. This process of assembling and disassembling happens over and over again. In fact, all the work that comprises the current thesis exhibition is a culmination of collage elements that have been part of numerous previous compositions over the last three years of the graduate program. While it is debatable, I’m not sure the works would have ever become “complete” were it not for the thesis exhibition. However, to make them temporarily permanent was a conscious decision in that I wanted to “freeze” a moment between this “rising and falling away” for the conceptual theme of the show as indicated in the work. It should be noted that these works are only semi-permanent, affixed to the wall with pins. The pieces will be disassembled at the completion of the show.

Within the practice of Buddhist meditation, practitioners are to fix their concentration on such philosophical principles as a means of elucidating the mind and transforming oneself through the attaining of higher states of consciousness. These same principles have assisted me in my own practice inasmuch as they are mirrored in the physicality of the creative process; that is, the literal handling of each composition’s constituent parts during the assembling and disassembling as a literal practice. In this way, I am able to watch my mind through the formation of physical elements.



Figure 12, *Unearthing the Still Point*

3 CONCLUSION

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time. (Eliot 1:62-69)*

It is difficult to say whether or not I would have questioned this phenomenological relationship to the landscape, both literally and pictorially, had it not been for the process of attempting to wrestle with these difficult concepts through a studio practice. In posing this question, it then

becomes obvious why art and the creative process is necessary—if not essential—or at least for me, why it is an indispensable aspect of my living in and coping with the world.

Over the course of the last three years, whether in the studio, in India or elsewhere, it has become quite obvious the educational value of translating abstract curiosities into concrete directed expressions—that is to say, the ability that art-making has to teach and educate to the degree that one can consciously establish, through discovery and interpretation, a deliberate position within the world. Working with abstract forms in a largely intuitive manner, it happens quite often that the sheer practice of mark-making illuminates these truths months or even years after the original impetus of creation. In this way, the art becomes a second self—a mirror to reveal aspects about oneself otherwise indiscernible. In one of my favorite books on the creative process, Rainer Maria Rilke expresses the value of this patience-requiring practice to his young, aspiring poet friend when addressing the impulse to hurry maturation in this way. In Letters to a Young Poet, he articulates:

Leave to your opinions their own quiet undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be pressed or hurried by anything. Everything is gestation and then bringing forth. To let each impression and each germ of a feeling come to completion quite in itself, in the dark, in the inexpressible, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own understanding, and await with deep humility and patience the birth-hour of a new clarity: that alone is living the artist's life-- in understanding as in work (29, 30).

When rethinking this astute passage, I cannot help but recall the numerous cut-up collage elements that sat dormant in the studio for weeks, months, even years, accumulating under dust on the floor, buried under piles of paper on table tops—pieces that had been temporarily discarded and put on hold until a perfect constellation of elements, arising from the chaos, summoned for this piece or that from various corners of the room. As I thought and re-thought their placement, directing their multiple lifetimes in multiple compositions, there was a manner in which I was sorting through myself as well. Over the last few years, I have watched innumerable composi-

tions, each part and parcel of those created before and after, evolve in temperament and personality, as I, too, have evolved throughout this meta-cognitive journey of observation and the mind.

A friend once asked me, just prior to my first departure for India in 2009, if it were necessary to travel 8000 miles—to resituate myself on the other side of the globe in order to answer these questions I then deemed unanswerable. Having studied Buddhism a little at the time, I understood the wisdom of my friend’s question. Isn’t it also true that I could have sat in meditation on the floor of my apartment and apprehended some semblance of these revelatory uncoverings, if not the ‘true nature of reality’ as the Buddha did, sitting under the Bodhi tree 2500 years ago? After all, the fundamental irony of such insights in so many religious traditions and psychological perspectives is, indeed, if given the attention of a focused mind, we might make these discoveries within the luxury of our own, quiet solitude. But instead, we carry revelation with us, like a forgotten dollar bill deeply lodged in an inconspicuous coat pocket, as we go off searching for it, spending months and years of our lives looking outwardly for what we held so closely all along.

Unfortunately, the majority of people are not blessed with such an immediate comprehension of wisdom. Surveying the ocean floor of our conscious mind is not an obvious impulse—if it is, it’s petrifying. We need props, supports, parables, images, tangible interpretations and explanations that we can grasp and hold onto like rungs on a ladder. I would argue that raw experience operates in a similar fashion. We have to move through the world like archaeologists, happening upon bits and shards, holding them, observing them, moving them around in thoughtful negotiation. Eventually, after rummaging through the debris of our experience, we collect enough fragments to form something recognizable, even precious and beautiful. Epiphanies, in this way, are born of their own evolutionary course—the eventual result of incalculable causal events that, as Rilke explains, are born of gestation, that cannot be hurried but arrive in

their own due time. This path to knowledge has its own meta-cognitive quality, in that it allows for the contemplation of where one is situated in time—that is, within the course of one’s own lifetime—in that awareness, as it becomes distinguishable from ignorance, also makes the present distinguishable from the past.

But it was my interest in Eastern philosophy that led me to ruminate upon a different concept of time—that being the potential that one could, via meditation, enter a deeper state-of-mind residing underneath the apprehension of linear time. In his monumental work, *Four Quartets*, referenced in the title of this paper as well as the exhibition, T.S. Eliot repeatedly refers to a similar notion—that is, what he refers to in *Burnt Norton*¹⁰ as “the still point of the turning world” (1:62). Here, Eliot makes a great distinction between consciousness within the fourth dimension, as is conveyed in the ‘turning’ or revolving of the world, and consciousness experienced in relationship to the inherently timeless—in this case, the divine—as is expressed at the contemplative ‘still point’ which, when invoked, seems to both transcend and absorb all time. Eliot, in this fertile moment of opposition—between movement and stillness, between time and non-time—lures the reader to a deeper consideration of mind and consciousness beyond our ordinary perceptual realm; for it is here that he draws his path to redemption when he then expresses, “Only through time is time conquered” (1:90).

Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is particularly valuable in that it addresses such relevant questions within the context of modernity. I chose to title my thesis and exhibition *At the Still Point of the Turning World* for reasons explained above, but also because “world,” in this case, not only pertains to the perpetually whirling, chaotic mass of our present age—but to the chaotic mass of the inner world as well—the mind—both of which we are in constant negotiation. In forming these

¹⁰ *Four Quartets* is comprised of four individual poems, *Burnt Norton* being the first, followed by *East Coker*, *the Dry Salvages* and *Little Gidding*.

seemingly cosmic, yet cognitive and embodied compositions, I was perhaps making an effort to carve away my own 'still point'—that is, in scouring through the detritus of my own world—both inner and outer—I hoped to eventually start piecing fragments together to form a recognizable whole. What I have come to learn is by engaging with this process, much of the debris as begun to disappear. The visual, artistic result—as well as the cognitive, embodied result—has been a perceptible manifestation of spaciousness among the heaviness of the forms. I feel changed inasmuch as I have witnessed the evolution of change in my own artwork. When revisiting my friend's question—whether traveling 8000 miles was truly necessary—I answer with a definite and resounding 'yes'.

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