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Exploring Personal Symbolism and Visual Metaphors through Artistic Inquiry

by

Mollie Katzin

Under the Direction of Dr. Melody K. Milbrandt

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the use and implications of using symbols in personal artwork and in the art classroom. Biological, psychological, and cultural reasons for making art with visual metaphor and personal symbolism are explained. The use of symbolism and visual metaphors in the artmaking process are discussed. Through the analysis of a series of paintings created using personal symbolism, the topic is further explored and researched. Implications and uses for the art classroom are also provided.

INDEX WORDS: Symbolism, Visual Metaphor, Art Making

Exploring Personal Symbols and Visual Metaphors through Artistic Inquiry

by

Mollie Katzin

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

Masters in Art Education

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Knowledge of the symbols is indispensable, for it is in them that the union of conscious and unconscious contents are consummated.

-Jung, 1959, p. 289

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

When I first applied for graduate school at Georgia State University in the winter of 2015, I was halfway through my third year of teaching. At that time I was identifying myself as a teacher more than an artist. I was producing artwork that reflected this identity – it was often monochrome mandalas, often made from pens on scrap papers, and often void of any deeper meaning other than the simple fact that I liked to make it and it looked nice.

The first class I took was a drawing and painting independent study with Tim Flowers. Tim suggested that I move away from the comfort and monotony of my pen mandalas and explore avenues of color using the medium of gouache. This gentle push was like a vibrant lightbulb going off in my mind and the beginning of a journey in which I have connected the educator, artist, and researcher sides of myself. According to Irwin's (2013) description of a/r/tography I was recognizing and embracing the in between of these identities to engage in a self-reflective and self-reflexive journey.

At first, I stayed well within the realms of my comfort zone and created more mandalas out of simple shapes and lines. But as I participated in more classes and was prompted to think critically about my teaching, I began to think more critically about my artmaking process. I believed that if I created a body of work with a deeper meaning, I would be able to connect that

practice with my teaching and balance my identities as an educator and an artist. I realized that I wanted to create artwork that evoked a deeper response as well as being aesthetically pleasing – I wanted to speak with my art and search for fundamental questions about who I am.

For hundreds of thousands of years, humans have sought to explain the world around them and the world within them. Humans are curious beings and we seek knowledge, we crave it. Through knowledge we attempt to make meaning of the world around us and answer questions about who we are in relation to ourselves, each other, and the world. One way that humans have tried to answer these questions is through artmaking. Art allows humans to show sympathy, feelings and forge social bonds (Dissanayake, 1988).

In a time where a student's emotional well-being takes second place to their test scores, I wonder how as an art teacher how can ensure that there is still 'heart' in school? I believe that through fostering meaningful connections and meaning making within the self and with others through self-expression and self-reflection this can be possible. The power of symbols and metaphoric thinking in the artmaking process allows for communication and connections to be made.

The artmaking process is unique for all who participate in it. One common thread for all is the search for meaning through self-expression. Art making is important because it allows meaning to be discovered through emotions, reason, and context (Serig, 2006). A particular way in which artists may construct meaning is through the use of visual metaphor and symbolism in their artwork. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) assert that "art is the creation of perceptible symbolic forms expressing human feeling" (p. 48).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to use the exploration of personal symbols in the artmaking process to find personal meaning. Through the production of a body of artwork that features visual metaphors and personal symbols, understanding of the self as an artist can be achieved. This discovery can transcend an artist into a new realm of self-discovery and communication to others. Through this journey of personal self-discovery, I aimed to deepen the connection of the artistic process to teaching art and explore how teaching is impacted by the practice of artmaking.

Research Questions

Creating art is a “natural method of inquiry for all humans and is especially potent as a mode of investigation and personal reflection” (Lindsey, 2012, p. 162). After considering the potential power of art in my own research and personal reflection, I explored the following questions: 1) How might the process of art making using visual metaphor and symbolism create an avenue for self-reflection and meaning-making? 2) How might this help me as an artist explore the world within myself and around me? 3) How might the exploration of symbolism in the artistic process be relevant to art education? Like Sullivan (2006) I believe that “art is a creative and critical form of human engagement that can be conceptualized as research” (p. 19) and through visual metaphor in artistic inquiry, artists can learn more about themselves and the world.

Timeline and Process

In order to answer my research questions I described and analyze my artwork. I used gouache as a primary medium and created paintings that employ visual metaphor tell my

personal story – the story of who I am as an artist, educator, and person. I produced a series of gouache paintings that are metaphorical and include personal symbols. Through this body of work I explored and used imagery that is symbolic. I analyzed the symbols used in the works which allowed me to discover a deeper understanding of meaning about myself. I interpreted and described my artwork and connected it to personal biological, psychological, and cultural reasons for art making.

The creation of these paintings took place during my graduate school experience both in and outside of the studio classes I participated in. I created these paintings beginning in January of 2015 and by January of 2016 I began the analysis process. The symbols I used in the body of work are not predetermined, they were utilized as my process grew and I gathered inspiration from my experiences and the world around me.

I analyzed my work by describing the personal meaning, the process, and providing cultural connections and archetype examples. I began by describing my inspiration for each piece – how and why the idea for the work came about. I provided examples of cultural connections and archetypes that helped interpret the symbols in an expanded framework. I categorized the works and explored the context of the symbols and themes in my life. I conclude my research by considering the implications of my findings for my teaching and student learning in the art classroom.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of art is to create meaningful connections within the self and meaningful connections with others. Human beings create art to fulfill biological, cultural, and psychological needs. Artists find personal awareness and make meaning by employing the use of symbols and metaphoric thinking when they play, communicate, and connect with their artwork. Across cultures and throughout time, art has functioned to tell stories and help people discover who they are. (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Biological, Psychological, and Cultural Reasons for Making Art

The earliest forms of what can be considered art were tools made by *Homo Erectus* about 500,000 years ago (Dissanayake, 1988). Their tools are considered to be art because they display aesthetic sensibilities and design techniques. As human beings became less dependent in instinctive responses, they became more flexible to feelings and emotions. One of the earliest uses of art was to arouse feelings and communicate with others (Dissanayake, 1988).

As language developed, humans began to use symbols to communicate. This was an important step for human's evolution and cognitive development because it allowed for the emergence of artistic behavior. Artistic behavior developed as a social signal (Dissanayake, 1974) and artmaking is a beneficial process to our adaptive abilities and evolutionary success (Dissanayake, 1988).

Artistic behavior wasn't always associated with decorative and expressive qualities. Cognitive development in human beings involved play and exploration which are crucial in

adaptive learning. Play informs art as a survival function because the experience of making art stimulates pleasure seeking areas of the mind (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Through play we can learn about the world around us and ourselves.

Art originated as play and both forms of expression allow the participant to be outside of him- or her- self (Dissanayake, 1974) and utilize imaginative perspectives of make-believe (Szekely, 1983). Play involves active searching and visualization as well as investigation, shifting ideas, and decision making (Szekely, 1983). Creative play allows an artist to generate new ideas through a kind of ‘research through experience’ (Szekely, 1983). According to Szekely (1983) “artwork is the summary of many play experiences” (p. 19).

Because play is spontaneous, unpredictable, and rewarding (Dissanayake, 1988) it allows for metaphors to be made about the world (Dissanayake, 1974). When metaphors are made, the use of symbolism is employed in both play and art. Paradoxically, the predictable system of symbols contradicts with the impulse of playfulness from which they originated (Dissanayake, 1974) but through art and play humans engage in an “unrehearsed and open-ended . . . process of seeking and trying, in which the result cannot be known ahead of time” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

This exploration of the unknown through artmaking processes is closely associated with Carl Jung’s (1964) ideas about synchronicity the unconscious mind. Coward (1996) defines Jung’s ‘synchronicity’ as “meaningful connections between the inner psychic realm and external physical world” (p. 477). Connecting the conscious with the unconscious mind is an important part of the artmaking process because “creativity stem[s] from unconscious processes, and some of the symbolic themes in visual art are not apparent to the artists themselves at the time they

create their work” (Fontana, 2003, p. 70). By tapping into the secrets of the unconscious mind, artists are able to express deep connections and meanings.

In reference to Jungian ideals and philosophy, Jaffe (1964) suggests that “if artwork is performed in a more or less unconscious way, it is controlled by laws of nature that, on the deepest level, correspond to the laws of the psyche and vice versa” (p. 310). Through deciphering symbols, an artist can achieve new insights which will unlock doors into the unconscious mind (Fontana, 2003).

This act of deciphering hidden messages of the mind allows artists to “discover unexpected treasures in the unconscious and by bringing them into consciousness . . . give him psychic energy he needs to grow into a mature person” (Jacobi, 1964, p. 325). This growth serves as a type of self-actualization that occurs when uniting and correlating actions awaken the unconscious mind (Coward, 1996). By using dreamlike perceptions of reality and tapping into the unconscious mind, artists are able to find ‘the secret soul’ of things (Jaffe, 1964).

Artists utilize complex cognitive thinking processes to create artwork. Creating art is directly related to thinking processes “which involves the construction of meaning and the clarification and expansion of reality” (Feinstein, 1985, p. 29). One way in which artists express their insight and perceptions of reality is through use and manipulations of symbols. Feinstein (1982) insightfully suggests that “out of signs and symbols we weave our tissue of reality” (p.46). In order to manipulate cultural symbols which have different meaning across space and time and through different cultures and societies (Fontana, 2005) an artist must possess insight and self-reflection (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Symbolism in the Artmaking Process

Jung (1964) claims that “symbols appear in all kinds of psychic manifestations. There are symbolic thoughts, feelings, acts, and situations” (p.41). There is also of course, symbolic artwork. Artistic symbols are representations that are both subjective and affective and communicate emotions (Anderson & Milbrandt 2005). Symbolism relates to our inner psychological and spiritual world (Fontana, 2005) and “symbolizing is considered to be a watershed in cognitive ability” in which “art is often automatically considered to be a subset of symbolizing” (Dissanayake, 2003, p. 10).

Employing symbolism for creative self-expression opens connections between processes, contexts, and images (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) and facilitates art making as a process of problem solving to create meaning. After all, “making meaning is the overarching reason for art making” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p. 141). Through visual art, humans are able to “unconsciously transform objects of forms . . . endowing them with great psychological importance” (Jaffe, 1964, p. 257). By assigning importance to symbolic forms, artists can “objectify subjective reality, feelings, and affects by giving them concrete form, making them conceivable and understandable emotionally as well as intellectually” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p.48.).

Understanding and making sense and meaning from art is not automatic, it requires artists to “use reflexivity to engage in a dynamic cycle of creating art . . . to make sense of the world and their place in it” (Serig, 2006, p. 236). The cycle involves artists creatively interpreting a problem and through artistic inquiry making connections. These connection can emerge as creative ideas which “help to unlock . . . connections of facts and thus enable man to penetrate deeper into the master of life” (Franz, 1964, p. 387).

Mastery involves understanding and artistic intelligence which, according to Anderson & Milbrandt (2005) is “one’s ability to make and understand meanings in aesthetic form” (p. 234). Therefore, the visual artist must actively make meaning to become a master of their craft. One important way in which artists make meaning in art is to use symbols to communicate complex information which allows for the development of abstract thought, awareness, and self-conscious reflexivity (Dissanayake, 1988).

Feinstein (1982) claims that “the symbol-making function is one of man’s primary activities . . . it is the fundamental process of his mind and goes on all the time” (p. 45). Dissanayake (2003) states that “symbols in themselves need not be special or artful at all” (p. 10) but when placed in a visual context together, symbols invite viewers to make meaning and become elevated in importance.

The fundamental act of symbolic transformation helps us interact with our environment and comprehend and construct meaning (Feinstein, 1982). Symbols are a universal language that generate themselves . . . from unconscious as a spontaneous expression of some deep inner power” (Fontana, 2005, p. 11). Artists use symbols to represent concepts and ideas that are beyond the range of basic human understanding.

According to Jung (1964) “a word or image is symbolic when it implies something more than it’s obvious and immediate meaning” and encompasses “a wider unconscious aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained” (p. 4). In order for symbols to be used as successful modes of communication, symbolic meanings must be developed through social and group contexts (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). For an artist this is vital because through use of symbolism in art, profound expressions of human nature and the hidden and mysterious unknown can be transformed, related, and conveyed to others.

Artists must transform their experiences into symbols to communicate ideas. In fact, in many cultures around the world and throughout time, art “is purely symbolic in content, expressing in visual terms the beliefs and aspirations of the community” (Fontana, 2005, p. 60). Consider the Parthenon which stands atop the Acropolis in Athens. It was a symbol of the strength and knowledge possessed by the Greeks and stood as high at Mount. Olympus. This beacon of patriotism is an architectural symbol that has lasted millennia. Just as symbolic artwork can represent ideas and responses of a group, symbols can be combined, modified and changed to convey and communicate meaning at an individual level.

Artists use symbols as a deeply meaningful and personal language in which to communicate and connect with the world. Jaffe (1964) succinctly describes the role of an artist as “the instrument and spokesman of the spirit of his age” (p. 285). The artist as an instrument composes a song of aesthetic symbols that make up the notes and chords in the search for meaning in life.

Artists weave their symbolic song into a symphony that forms a conceptual visualization about the world through visual metaphor. “Metaphor is a symbolic transformation” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005, p. 70) and the way in which artists reorganize, expand, and synthesize their symbolic ideas (Feinstein, 1982).

Visual Metaphor in the Artmaking Process

Metaphor is a bridge between art and life and is linked to contextual art approaches (Stankiewicz, 1996). In contextual art, visual metaphors allow artists to express intellectual and emotional information and connect those ideas to the technical aspects of art making. The

elements and principles of aesthetic art act as a catalyst rather than a focus for visual metaphor to be employed to exhibit meaning (Smoke, 1982).

When an artist creates artwork with visual metaphor in order to convey meaning, they use metaphor to create the art so the viewer must use metaphor to interpret the art (Feinstein, 1985). In this way, visual metaphors requires interpretation through cultural context and are an invitation of intimacy and invite the viewer to participate in a “community of cultural understanding” (Stankiewicz, 1996, p. 4). Interpreting metaphors requires cultural and social context in which symbols are shared and understood. “Visual metaphor requires a reliance on language for meaning” (Smoke, 1982, p. 68) so all participants must speak the same contextual language. Both the perceiver and the artist must be aware of the meaning of symbols in order to make meaning from the art.

“There is a metaphorical quality to art, evident to both the artist and the perceiver” (Dissanayake, 1974, p. 214) and in order for the secret language of visual metaphors to be understood, both the viewer and the artist must think metaphorically. When the artist and the viewer enter the contract of understanding through use of visual metaphors, they both make sense of phenomena through the interpretation of ideas (Stankiewicz, 1996, p. 5).

Metaphor is essential to the thought process and is a symbolic transformation that allows us to think creatively which is widely considered to be a cognitive necessity (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). When creating metaphors, sensory, emotional, and cognitive systems are engaged and allow information to be transferred and information to be perceived (Feinstein, 1982). During the process of metaphoric thinking, the transformation of information happens in a form known as conceptual blending (Serig, 2006).

Conceptual blending involves key components such as restructuring, mapping, classifying, observing, and conceptual thinking (Serig, 2006). These thought processes are closely related to the SCAMPER strategy of creative thought in which artists substitute, combine, alter, multiply, eliminate, and reverse ideas (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) in order to create vivified conceptual and symbolic artwork. The ability to use metaphors is extremely creative and an integral aspect of creative thinking and self-expression.

Visual metaphors have the power to objectify feelings and imagination – a process which is vital to human thought. Metaphoric thinking requires a system of communications between reality and perceptions (Coward, 1996) in order to generate new associations and form deeper levels of meaning (Feinstein, 1982). Visual metaphors allow artists to condense and expand meaning in order to “generate vivid associations and develop insightful, deeper, and more personal understandings” (Jeffers, 1996, p. 9).

It is the search for personal understandings about ourselves and the world around us that drive our need for artmaking. Through the use of visual metaphors and symbols in art and artmaking, we can develop personal meaning. By unlocking metaphorical symbols we can find “truth” in art (Smoke, 1982) and through metaphor “our experiences can be enriched and better understood and our realities thereby broadened” (Feinstein, 1982, p. 53). Because visual metaphors deal with love, soul, spirit, values, and emotions, (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) their use in art and art making are vital for an artist to holistically explore meaning and make connections for themselves and the world.

Symbolic Thinking in the Art Classroom

In the art classroom, symbolic thinking and exploring visual metaphors in the artmaking process is important because it allows students to make the artistic experience personal.

“Symbols are more than just historical and cultural signposts. They can help us toward a fuller understanding of our own minds” (Fontana, 2003, p. 86).

Students as young as elementary school are capable of creating artwork with personal symbols because from about the age of seven or eight, humans develop the mental abilities to create and respond to artwork with symbols (Dissanayake, 1988). Students given the opportunity to create and utilize symbolism in their artwork will find a deeper sense of personal meaning both in the art classroom and out. Serig (2006) states that “thinking metaphorically represents mind-body interconnectedness” (p. 230) which is important for young growing people.

Using personal symbols in art opens avenues of connections and deeper understanding of the student’s self and world around them. Young growing minds need the opportunity to explore the world and creating and using symbols in art making allows for just that. Eisner (2001) cites Dewey stating “the human being as a growing organism whose major developmental task is to come to terms, through adaptation or transformation, with the environment in which he or she lives” (p. 67). By finding personal connections through art, students explore and gain understanding of the world around them.

Symbolic thinking in the art classroom provides opportunities for an authentic experience and the development of higher order thinking skills. Through the production and use of visual metaphors, students develop a visual literacy. Deciphering and using symbols is like solving a puzzle. Students learn to speak the language of symbols and “in the metaphoric process, ideas, situations, and feelings are reorganized and vivified” (Feinstein, 1985, p. 27).

Through this vivification of ideas, students can communicate and express themselves to the world around them. Exploring symbols in the art classroom allows students to become more engaged in artistic practice by making a more personal connection. Personal symbolism is so much stronger than the all-too-often seen prescribed projects of reproduction and regurgitation. Recreating *Starry Night* might help a student remember the title of the artwork but are they truly connecting to ideas about the self and the world?

By using symbols, students access active, in-depth learning in which they acquire genuine understanding about themselves through higher order thinking and inquiry. “The visual artist works with elements of visual organization and allows those elements to interact with materials being used; the artist finds visual approximations for knowledge of feeling and renders them into visual form” (Feinstein, 1985, p.28). Through this process, a meaningful learning experience occurs where students find connections and understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

I used arts based research to explore the topic of visual metaphor and personal symbolism in art. I wanted to answer the question: how can art making with visual metaphor and symbols help myself as an artist discover deeper personal meaning? I created a body of work that is extremely personal and deals with topics and themes that are important to me. These topics and themes became clarified through the final analysis and interpretation of the artworks. I sought to interpret the meaning behind what I created by analyzing the symbols in my work in order to gain a fuller understanding of self. I hoped to achieve an elevated level of self-reflection through this artwork and connect it to my teaching practice.

My inquiry is arts based research, described by Sullivan (2006) as “interactive and reflexive whereby imaginative insight is constructed from a creative and critical practice” (p. 20). By interpreting the critical act of creativity through analysis of my artwork, I constructed a deeper personal meaning from my work. This search for discovery and sense of self is what makes the artmaking process so important for students and integral to the overall learning process.

My artmaking process is based on the search for meaning in life. Meaning is made vivid through discovery of patterns and systems in artwork and “art practice involves giving form to thought in a purposeful way that embodies meaning” (Sullivan, 2006, p.29). Just as the “history of art is a record of humankind’s most moving and meaningful symbols” (Fontana, 2005, p.63) the symbolism and visual metaphors expressed in my artwork are a reflection and history of me.

Chapter 4

EXAMINATION OF ARTISTIC PROCESSES AND ARTWORKS

I created a body of work and choose several pieces to analyze, describe, and assign archetypes and cultural connections. Similar or identical visual symbols pop up in different cultures throughout history and while this can be viewed as an extraordinary coincidence, Jung claims that these symbols “are not individual but *collective* in their nature and origin” (1964, p. 41). Here he is referring to archetypes, or symbols that are shared in humanity’s collective unconscious. The collective unconscious of humans stems from the inherited psyche of the archaic man with “collective images and mythological motifs” (Jung, 1964, p. 57) of universal themes which appear often in visual artwork as archetypes.

Through my research, I explored the meaning of these archetypes and the collective unconscious in order to find a deeper personal meaning in my work. Like a puzzle I pieced together the symbolic meaning of my works and made discoveries that show that “both symbolism and creativity stem from unconscious processes, and some of the themes in visual art are not apparent to the artists themselves at the time they create their work” (Fontana, 2003, p. 70). Salvador Dali’s (1948) claimed that “if you understand your painting beforehand you might as well not paint it” (p. 15). This links closely with Jung’s notion of *synchronicity* – meaningful coincidences that link unconscious knowledge with actual events that often manifest in symbols (L. von Franz, 1964). I connected the ideas and meaning behind each work to reach a deeper state of self-reflection and discovery.

Description of Materials and Processes

My work is ritualistic – I work in a way that pays respect to materials and the passage of time. My work is also emotional and a form of meditation. When I create art I use repetitive techniques and symbolism which serve as a type of ritualistic, meditative action when performed. Dissanayake (1988) states that “metaphorical and symbolic uses of words and objects are the essence of ritual” (p. 84). Ritual lends itself to artmaking with symbolism and metaphor because “Ritual, like play, is concerned with metaphor in that it is saturated with symbolism” (Dissanayake, 1988, p. 89).

Through both art making and yoga practice, I have come to understand and respect the importance of practice and perseverance. Through repetition of poses, yoga serves as meditation. When someone practices yoga they bend and breathe and stretch and aim to achieve meditation. Art making is also a form of meditation for me. My ritualistic artmaking process, is a “physical enactment of spiritual journeys . . . into the collective unconscious” (Fontana, 2003, p. 44). When I begin my process for art making, I start with an idea, usually conceived during yoga or while walking in the woods. I usually let the idea – conceptual or visual – marinate while I decide on how to go about showing it through visual metaphor with the materials at hand.

I begin with faint pencil lines on the paper. These lines are fragile and ephemeral like a deep exhale. After sketching a general outline, I trace over my lines with masking fluid. The repetitive process of tracing over lines I have already drawn is like the rhythmic performance of a *vinyasa* in yoga practice. It is the balance of an inhale after an exhale.

Next, I use gouache to paint. I often consider my colors as another layer of symbolism within my work. Colors represent something bold yet mysterious and a way in which emotions and reactions are elicited. To me – colors can be philosophic and metaphorical. While my colors

are swirling and melting still wet on the paper, I gently sprinkle salt, water, or isopropyl alcohol to create texture within the colors. I find this mixing of chemicals to be elemental and makes my artmaking process a kind of alchemy and scientific process. Alchemists used mysterious symbols in complex ways to represent nature and expression (Jaffe, 1964). Sometimes the mixing of chemicals creates a chaos of colors on the page but ultimately, this texture finds contrast in the last step of the process.

When the paint is dry, I peel off the masking fluid to leave clean, crisp white lines and shapes. The clean lines contrast with the texture and colors to create a harmonious work. This process is reminiscent of batik.

I employ positive and negative spaces in my designs much in the way that in “Asian ink paintings, white spaces are of equal if not greater importance to areas containing brushstrokes” (Chung, 2012, p. 137). The balance of space and lines create a harmonious space that allows for the flow of *Chi* – spiritual, physical, and mental energy (Chung, 2012).

The visual harmony connects to the idea of harmony and balance I present conceptually in my work. Jung believed that “an individual is psychologically healthy when the conscious and unconscious minds are in dynamic balance” (Fontana, 2003, p. 15). What Jung referred to as “unconscious” or “synchronicity,” East Asian philosophers and artists referred to as “wholeness.” I respond to and resonate with many idea of East Asian philosophy during my artmaking process. Not only do many of my aesthetic and conceptual choices correspond with these ideas but my process does as well. The aim of Taoism is to live in harmony (Coward, 1996) and in many East Asian brushwork techniques, mind-body unification is sought after (Chung, 2012). Unifying the heart, mind, and spirit correlates with the Japanese pedagogy of art

known as *kokoro* (Matsunobo, 2012). My aim through artmaking is to achieve harmony through my process and personal harmony in my life.

My process touches upon ideas of *Chi* as well as I take inspiration from energies within myself as well as from the world around me. The 8000-year-old Daoist concept of *chi* denotes that it is “the life energy that governs all interactions in the universe” (Chung, 2012) and is essentially the spirit of life. Through consideration of this concept of life energy during artistic inquiry, the duality of conscious and unconscious can be transcended and deeper understandings about self and the world can be unlocked.

Analysis and Interpretation of Works

Spectrum

As I embarked upon the journey of obtaining my master’s degree at Georgia State University, I had no idea how much I would grow as an artist, researcher, and educator. Irwin (2013) defines this triad of identities as a/r/tography or the “research methodology, a creative practice, and a performative pedagogy” (p. 198). Up until I enrolled in a directed study painting class with Tim Flowers, I had been mostly connected with the educator aspect of my identity. I was half way through my third year of teaching and well situated in my “art teacher” identity. I made time to create every once in a while but it was not a priority. My artwork at the time was highly decorative and aesthetic with very little conceptual meaning. I was primarily using pens and creating intricately detailed black and white mandalas that were more useful as aesthetic pieces than functionally symbolic.

When Tim suggested that I use gouache painting to create works for his course, I was initially intimidated. I had not worked in color or paint for many years and I had never used gouache before. My first attempt was a frustrating failure and my significant other asked me what I would tell one of my students if they were frustrated. I answered that I would tell them to keep trying, nobody is ever an expert when they begin. So I did some research on how to properly use the medium and tried again.

My first several paintings were mostly more mandalas. That was the imagery that I was most comfortable with at the time. But as I became more fluent with the gouache, I began to expand not only my skills but my subject matter into symbols with deeply personal meanings. I began to explore symbolism more deeply and found many connections in the painting entitled *Spectrum*.



Figure 1. *Spectrum*
15" x 20" gouache

Spectrum features a Hamsa hand in the center of an oval. This symbol is one that I associate with my Jewish heritage. However the Hamsa is not a symbol I grew up with – it is one I was introduced to when I visited Israel in 2013. I was part of a Birth-Right tour and the trip truly changed my life. I discovered my heritage and connected to a part of my identity I had never known.

The Hamsa was a prevalent symbol throughout my travels in Israel. It was present in marketplaces, ancient synagogues, and even in souvenir shops. The symbol was explained to me by an old woman in a Jerusalem market to be one of guardianship of home, heart, and soul. The hand protects and the “eye of God” in the palm watches over you. I bought one inscribed with Hebrew and it hangs in my home. Fontana (2003) describes the symbol of the hand as “open and raised, the hand may denote reassurance and freedom from fear” (p.214). With an eye in the center, the hand becomes a Hamsa Hand is and is often worn as an amulet used to ward off the evil eye. (Frankel & Platkin Teutsch, 1992).

As a Jewish symbol, the hand itself has characteristics that symbolize strength and creativity. “Many have regarded the hand not only to represent human power, but also as a representative of a higher power” (Frankel & Platkin Teutsch, 1992, p. 70). In Judaism, the hand symbolizes divine protection and power and are reflective of the idea that humans were created in the divine image. (Frankel & Platkin Teutsch, 1992). In fact, there are many instances the hand is used metaphorically throughout the *Torah* to represent the connection between humans and the divine. I interpret this as the hand representing a connection between the conscious mind and spirituality or personal mysticism in my own artwork.

I have been doodling or incorporating the Hamsa symbol into my artwork and life since my trip and it is featured predominately in *Spectrum*. I was interested in combining as symbol

from my somewhat newfound spiritual identity with symbols from my childhood in the form of science topics.

I fondly remember trips to Fernbank and Sci-Trek with my family as a child that have to this day instilled a great love and respect for science in me. I wanted to use a rainbow palette and contrast it with black and white so I created an image of light refracting through prisms.

The inspiration for using a rainbow came from two events. The first was a magnificent story from Tim about a double rainbow sighting during an international travel experience of his. This is where I connected the rainbow motif to the Hamsa hand from my own travels. The second event was when one of my 5th grade students asked earnestly, “Who is Roy G. Biv anyways?” Explaining color theory to elementary students can quickly go from concrete ideas to abstract notions, especially when asking students to consider the light spectrum. These two events made me consider the color spectrum in both an artistic and a scientific context.

The lines that radiate around the hand were intended to represent individuality and reference lines in a fingerprint. These lines are reminiscent of lines in a tree that show its age or lines in a fingertip; each are unique to the organism. Fontana (2003) points out that concentric circles are often considered to symbolize the cosmos (p.89). This cosmos connection closely relates to mandalas.

On the topic of the mandala, L. von Franz (1964) asserts that “the contemplation of a mandala is meant to bring an inner peace, a feeling that life has again found its meaning and order” (p. 230). In the context of *Spectrum*, order is found through the repetition of design elements such as radial lines and dots.

The dots within the oval in the hand and the dots floating around the rainbow energy waves represent energy expanding and moving. The intersecting wavy lines are beams of energy

traveling around the Hamsa and refracting through the prisms. The lines are meant to be abstract wavelengths that are overlapping and spiraling around as the energy travels.

I began this piece by drawing the design with pencil. I wanted to play with contrast through shapes, textures and colors. I used ovals and triangles to create geometric contrast. I features bright vibrant rainbows of color against a black background for color contrast. I contrasted detailed tendrils emerging from behind the Hamsa (representing something alive and growing) against a soft velvety background.

I researched different shapes of prisms and included four different types – one in each corner to frame the Hamsa hand. After sketching the outlines, I traced over each line with masking fluid. Then I painted the shapes created with gouache. The last step was to peel off the dried gouache to reveal crisp and clean white lines underneath. This is the physical process I used to create each of the paintings in this series. I believe this process in itself is a form of meditation through the act of focusing and repetition.

Nanakorobi

The symbol of the Daruma is one I first explored years ago during summer clay camp. The theme that year was art from around the world and one of the projects was a ceramic Daruma. The students were so creative with their Darumas and put their own spin on each of their creations. I remember being fascinated by the meaning and symbolism of the Japanese art form.



Figure 2. *Nanakorobi*
18" x 24" gouache

I learned that the Daruma was created by Japanese monks and its round shape made it wobbly so when it was pushed over, it always rolled back up. Originally Darumas were made out of wood or stone (Punnsman, 1962). Traditionally, the Daruma is placed in the house alter to watch over a family. The Daruma comes with 2 blank eyes and when you purchase or create one, you color one eye in as you contemplate a goal. When you reach your goal, you color in the other eye. In that way the Daruma literally “watches” as you achieve your goals. When the goal is met, the Daruma cannot be thrown away, it must be burned (Punnsman, 1962).

McFarland (1986) cites the Daruma as the “the preeminent symbol of Zen practice and experience, a paradigm of perseverance and resilience, a god of good fortune, and the inspiration and subject of much good humor and playfulness” (p. 167). McFarland goes on to attribute

“good fortune in all enterprises and the development of perseverance and resilience as personal qualities” (p. 169) to the symbol of the Daruma.

I created this piece with the concepts of perseverance, resilience, and goal achieving in mind. In fall of 2015, I was informed that I would not be at my home school teaching for five days a week and would instead travel to two other schools two days a week. This news came as a shock to me. I had planned my school year around the assumption that I would be at my home school full time – I was busy with grad school classes and I was grade chair for the specials team.

Upon learning this news, I was initially frustrated and a little heartbroken. But I thought of the perseverance and strength I would need to have to successfully transition into a new situation. I decided that my goal would be to stay positive and envision success. I created the Daruma with this in mind as a visual talisman. It symbolizes the strength I was searching for in that time and the strength I ultimately found within myself.

The process of this piece began as many of my pieces do – with a vision of the final painting. To get there, I did some research online of the different visual aspects of the Daruma. I looked at many images and compared the facial features and the kanji characters inscribed on the front. I picked my favorite features to incorporate into my work such as the mustache, double arches for the nose, circles along the side, and repetitive lines detail. By combining several different designs I was able to formulate my own Daruma design.

I began by sketching my Daruma design on a long since discarded piece of paper. I knew that for this piece, I wanted the image to solely focus on the Daruma with no other distractions around to represent the single-mindedness of perseverance. I traced my sketch with masking fluid and then painted using gouache, liquid water color, and salt. I chose to place the Daruma in

a galactic background to emphasize its importance – it is a heavenly body of positivity and perseverance floating within the universe of my mind. The red and gold colors were derived from traditional Darumas that I glimpsed in my research.

I asked my significant other – who is Japanese – about the kanji on the front. He told me that traditionally Daruma said one of two things. They sometimes said *Oki – Agari* which means “get up” and “arise.” Other times Darumas said *Nanakorobi* which means “seven times down, eight times up.” These traditional words of perseverance really resonated with me in this time of turmoil and I had my significant other show me how to draw the symbols for the words. I chose to incorporate the first phrase into my painting and ultimately name the painting the second phrase.

Jumble Tribe

After the first few weeks of juggling being at different schools, grad school, social life, and professional life, I was stressed to say the least. *Jumble Tribe* was created as pure stress release. This was a sort of throw-back to my earlier work of geometric line drawings that had no real conceptual purpose and served mainly as a mode of meditation.

Meditation can happen in many forms and for me it is the act of focusing on one thing and clearing your mind. In the case of *Jumble Tribe* I was focused on the precision of my lines and shapes, and letting the patterns flow onto the page. This provided a release and a conduit in which I placed all of my anxieties so that they were then flowing out of me. In simple terms this can be called “doodling.”



Figure 3. *Jumble Tribe*
10" x 15" gouache

In *Jumble Tribe* I employed doodling techniques to create a space in which to reflect and think. In a 2011 TED Talk, Sunni Brown states that “doodling is really to make spontaneous marks to help yourself think.” Brown goes on to say that, “across space and time, all children exhibit the same evolution in visual logic as they grow” (Doodler’s Unite! 2011). In other words, they have a shared and growing complexity in visual language that happens in a predictable order.” This visual language manifests into symbols.

This can also be considered to be a type of stream of consciousness art making process. Stream of consciousness is a process of creating in which the maker accesses a type of Zen mindset in which thoughts are cleared to achieve a kind of clarity where pure creation can take place. Stream of consciousness can be found in writing, music, art and is defined as “the continued unedited chronological flow of conscious experience through the mind” (Stream of Consciousness, 2016).

By accessing this stream of consciousness to produce and consciously analyze visual metaphors, one can achieve a deeper understanding of the mind. Jung (1959) states that “the harmonizing of conscious and unconscious data . . . cannot be indicated in the form of a recipe. It is an irrational life-process which expresses itself in definite symbols” (p. 289).

The symbols and designs used in this piece includes a symbol of the Hamsa Hand I use often in my work surrounded by a variety of various technical lines and shapes I teach my students to use in their work. Featured in the bottom left corner is the Hamsa hand with the eye in the palm. This is the largest portion of negative space in the image which gives emphasis to the symbol.

Inside of the palm is an eye symbol. I use the eye symbol in my work to represent a type of omnipotence and omniscience I wish to achieve about my own life and unconscious. Jung (1959) cites the symbol of the eye as “the center of order in the unconscious” (p.337). I believe this archetype is incredibly relevant to this painting because it was created as an attempt to sort out my very jumbled mind. The eye in the middle of a cacophony of patterns represents a certain centeredness and calmness amidst the chaos.

The patterns radiating out of the Hamsa are zig zags, leaves, flowers, curved and drippy lines, and repetitive lines. I often demonstrate this type of design work to my students in many different projects and find that I use it in my own work too. If placed in a more radial design, these motifs would form a mandala. So this arrangement is in a way a disassembled mandala, reflecting the overall feeling of disassembledness I was experiencing in my life at the time.

The Four Agreements

This piece is a visual representation of the ideas outlined in the book *The Four Agreements*. This book of Toltec wisdom is one I try to read at least once every year. In the book there are four agreements which when followed will create a transformative experience of personal growth of self and relationships.

I believe this is because it reminds me of the wisdom talks I had with my dad growing up. He taught me many things about how the world works and how to successfully navigate the social, cultural, and personal terrains of growing up. I strive to live my life with integrity and love and I owe much of that to my dad's wisdom sharing.

The first agreement is to be impeccable with your word. To me, this means not only being truthful and honest but also not speaking badly of others and not speaking badly of yourself. I represented this agreement as the seed because "The human mind is like a fertile ground where seeds are continually being planted. The seeds are opinions, ideas, and concepts" (Ruiz, 1997, p. 28). The seed represents the seed of truth which when planted correctly allows for growth.

The second agreement is don't take anything personally. This is represented by the flaming heart. This symbol represents "light emanating from the flame in your heart" which makes you "one with the wind, with the water, with the stars, with all of nature, with all animals, and with all humans" (Ruiz, 1997, p. 137). When you take things personally, you block yourself off from everything else and the light in your heart is darkened. Keeping this agreement allows for an open heart that can share love with others.

The third agreement is don't make assumptions. This is represented by the smoky mirror because people are not transparent, you never really know what someone is thinking or feeling.

We often project ourselves onto others and think we understand them but everyone is living in a separate reality that makes it impossible to really know what someone is thinking.

The fourth agreement is to always do your best. This is represented by the Daruma and the sun and moon. The Daruma represents perseverance and the sun and moon represent the passage of time. So, it symbolizes a continuing effort over time.

The process for this painting came from inspiration from the book *The Four Agreements*. I wanted to create a visual representation of the wisdom shared in the book and display it in my home so that I can look at it every day and be reminded of the agreements. I wanted to use images that are described in the book but make them my own so that the ideas are communicated succinctly every time I look at the painting. It serves as an illustrated reminder of how to deal with other people and relationships in a successful and happy way.

I began by reading the book and deciding on the symbols I wanted to use to represent each agreement. I wanted to place the images in a round shape to symbolize wholeness. I divided the circle into four equal parts, the “‘fourfoldedness’ motif [is] usually a symbol of completeness” (Jacobi, 1964, p. 353). When considering the circle, I thought about it as a symbol of wholeness for the mind and spirit, which reminded me of a medicine wheel.

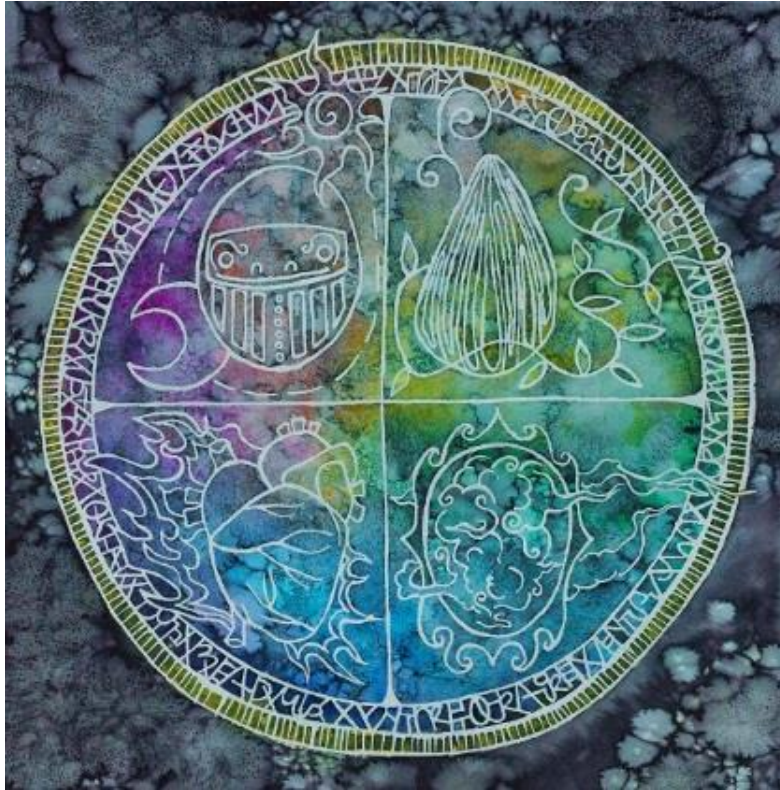


Figure 4. *The Four Agreements*
18" x 18" gouache

I have a medicine wheel hanging in my room which was a gift given to me by my aunt and uncle. When they gave it to me many years ago I researched the meaning of the medicine wheel and learned that they are used by Native Americans in the Southwest as spiritual objects of healing. I see the medicine wheel as a symbol of healing for the soul and used it for this painting to represent a healthy mindset that can be achieved when keeping the four agreements.

This symbol of a circle represents infinity, (Fontana, 2003) Zen enlightenment, human perfection, (Jaffe, 1964) and one's own boundary (Matsunobo, 2012). According to Jung (1959) "the division of the mandala into four denotes a process of becoming conscious" (p. 322). This relates back to the meaning of the painting because it is all about becoming conscious of interpretations of relationships. Around the edge of the wheel are two outer circles. These allude to a compass representing traversing down a path or journey. The outer most circle is filled with

repetitive lines creating visual texture and interest. The inner circle has cryptic rune symbols inside. This alphabet is completely made up and is based on letter symbols from many different languages including English, Hebrew, Sumerian, Elvish, Arabic, and Gaelic. I searched for images online of these written languages and used the letter symbols as a patterned motif to create an entirely new, made up language. The motif of the language represents knowledge and in this case, knowledge of the self in relation to the world.

I first became interested in using an alphabet as a design motif many years ago when I began to practice calligraphy, which means “beautiful writing” (Abia-Smith, Kaplan, & Lachman, 2012, p. 104). The art of calligraphy originated in China and began with divination rituals of oracle bones. I find the ritualistic aspect of writing and reading to closely connect with my art making process because the ritual of “East Asian brushwork represents the unification of the creator’s mental and physical faculties” (Chung, 2012, p. 136). Fontana (2003) describes rituals as “physical enactments of spiritual journeys – or in Jungian terms, journeys to the collective unconscious in which the body is the symbol of the spirit” (p. 44-45).

In terms of Asian culture and aesthetics, “calligraphy is tied to the natural world and is viewed as an aid to meditation and exercise” (Abia-Smith, Kaplan, & Lachman, 2012, p. 105). Calligraphy is closely linked with *chi* and aesthetic practices and spirituality (Chung, 2012, p.133). Besides the spiritual aspect of writing, the motif of a secret alphabet serves as a sort of meta symbol – it represents the step beyond basic pictorial representations and graphic symbols into more complex modes of pneumatic communication. Semiotics is the relationship of symbols and signs of communicative meaning and written language is a standardized systems of graphic archetypes understood by a group of people (Fischer, 2001). The inclusion of the secret language motif in this painting represents an idea that can be communicated with others once it is

understood by the communicator. The ideas provided by the *Four Agreements* are transcendent and can positively affect many people by affecting one person. This goes back to the idea of personal discovery through the art making process.

The Messenger

This painting was inspired by a book trilogy and the weird phenomenon of bees disappearing. The trilogy of books include *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *Maddaddam*. Written by Margaret Atwood, the dystopian trilogy deals with themes of survival, man vs. nature, nature vs. nurture, ethics, mythology, loss, and biology. I was inspired by these ideas and specifically by a quote from the last book which reads “the bees are messengers . . . They carry the news back and forth between the seen world and the unseen one” (Atwood, 2013, p. 153). Bees are used in the book as messengers to the dead – a nod to Greek mythology and folklore.

Whenever I think of bees I am reminded of the fact that honeybees are disappearing and have been since the 1990s. Bees are responsible for the success of many American crops and their disappearance would have tremendous impact on human’s food sources. (Heid, 2015). There are many pieces at play in the phenomenon of honeybee disappearance and I find the connections from the micro-implications to the macro-implications to be fascinating.

I wanted to capture this in a painting and included several symbols, which represent the bee as a mythological messenger and the very real issue of the mystery of bees disappearing. *The Messenger* features a honey colored hexagon (a honeycomb) with a bee in the middle. Honey symbolizes immortality and fertility (Fontana, 2003), which are connected with overarching concepts of this piece.



Figure 5. *The Messenger*
18" x 24" gouache

I researched images of scientific illustrations and photographs of bees to create my bee image. Inside of the bee is a keyhole which represents mystery and unlocking an answer. It is a symbol of the mystery of the bee as a messenger between worlds and the mystery of the disappearing bees. The key “represents permission to know the deepest darkest secrets of the psyche” (Estes, 1992, p. 50) and is used here to reference the choice between knowing and not knowing the answers to life, the universe, and everything.

Around the honeycomb is a border of the language motif, which I use here to reference the knowledge required to unlock the mystery. Behind the honeycomb are two leaf-like green shapes. This configuration of lines creates a symbol I use to represent ideas of energy. Here it is used to symbolize spiritual and physical energy.

Above the honeycomb is a small crescent moon. I use the crescent moon in my work to symbolize femininity. My mother instilled a strong sense of feminism in me starting at a young age and I find ideas of women empowerment to be inspiring, often symbolized in my artwork as a moon. The crescent represents “change within the world of forms” (Fontana, 2003, p. 91) and “symbolizes resurrection, immortality, and the cyclical nature of all things” (Fontana, 2003, p.202). Jung’s archetype of the *Kore* (or female) manifests as a maiden or mother and is often pictured or related to the moon (Jung, 1969). The moon is connected to female ideas and the honeybee represents feminism and the strong female archetype as well because each hive of bees has a queen bee.

On the left side of the painting is an image of a vertebrae. I researched pictures of bones and decided on the vertebrae because of its function as an integral part of the nervous system, protecting the cords that connect to the brain. This is again another metaphor for knowledge. The bone also represents death or the spiritual world. “In archetypal symbology, bones represent the indestructible force” (Estes, 1992, p. 33). They also represent the “indestructible soul-spirit” (Estes, 1992, p. 33) which applies here because this painting references the connection between the spirit or soul and the physical world.

Directly across from the bone is a flower. The flower represents life and the physical world. The flower is a further allusion to feminism as it can represent “the paradisaic state and feminine beauty” (Fontana, 2003, p. 173). The connections go even deeper because the flower pictured here is a sunflower, which I use to represent vitality because the blossom constantly changes to face the sun from which it receives energy. The design of a flower’s petals is a type of naturally occurring fractalization, which points to sacred geometry and the connections that all things in the physical world share. Skinner (2006) describes the “swirling patterns of a flower’s

seedhead [to] utilize the geometry of the Golden Spiral which is based on the Fibonacci series” (p. 11).

Sacred geometry is the “archetypal patterning of many things, perhaps all things, be they noumenal . . . conceptual, mathematical, natural, or architectural” (Skinner, 2006, p. 6). The symbol below the bone and flower is one known in Sacred Geometry as Metatron’s Cube, which is derived from the Kabbalistic Seed of Life or Fruit of Life symbol. Fontana (2003) cites the Kabbalah as a way to “understand the spiritual dimensions of the universe” through a “system of symbols that are held to reflect the mysteries of . . . the universe” (p.255).

Metatron’s Cube is fascinating in a geometric way because in it can be found all five of the platonic solids, which are associated with ancient elements when connected (Skinner, 2006). The image is a series of thirteen circles, which are connected and can be extrapolated infinitely. The hexagon, which is created when the circles are connected mirrors the hexagon with the bee above. The six sides shape is symbolic and Jung (1969) cites the number six as a representation of “creation and evolution” and “female and male” (p.372). The connection between Metatron’s Cube and the feminist metaphors in this painting are further strengthened by the intersected circle motif or *vesical piscis*, a symbol which was used to portray the Mother Goddess (Skinner, 2006).

Here the symbol of Metatron’s Cube is used to represent the mysteriousness of the universe on a micro-scale. I consider the symbol to represent the minute, and be a more geometric representation of the configuration of atoms and molecules. By repeating molecules in configurations over and over, the wider world is actualized. The universe is made of repeating shapes and fractalized components that spiral ever outward from the microscopic to the macroscopic, in a continuing pattern that makes up the fabric of reality. Even the smallest things

have a domino effect and can create bigger consequences such as the effect on crops from the bees disappearing.

In between each symbol is a small, broken line that serves to connect all of the visual metaphors into one idea. The background is a foggy grey to represent grey matter of the brain as well as the fog that surrounds a mystery.

Cosmic Balance



Figure 6. *Cosmic Balance*
18" x 24" gouache

It is hard for me to remember a time in my life when art-making and creating wasn't a driving force of enjoyment. I have been a maker for as long as I can remember. I was fortunate enough growing up to realize my love for art and to have a family that supported me.

My parents sent me to after school art classes and summer camps at a young age and in middle school I really became interested in practicing a variety of artistic processes. One of the classes I took was a printmaking class. An assignment for this class was to create an abstract as well as representational design. The theme for the image was the animal from the year I was born on the Chinese Zodiac calendar. I was born in 1987, the year of the rabbit.

Up until this time, I had never really given that much thought to other culture's mysticisms. I was born and raised in the Jewish faith and for a long time took all of the teachings at face value. This artistic assignment came at a time when I really began to question my knowledge and beliefs in spirituality and faith. I was fascinated with the concept of this ritual and felt immediately connected to my animal – the rabbit.

We had to research aspects of our animal according to mythology and folklore and the aspect I chose was “happiness.” So, I created a painting that had a silhouette of a rabbit. Above it was an abstract squiggly design and below it simply said *Happy Bunny*.

From that point on, I used the rabbit a lot in my artwork. I used it in cartoon doodles and one of my most prized possessions (and inspiration for many drawings and paintings) was a ceramic rabbit my grandmother had made.

The rabbit is an animal I deeply identify with so when I was walking through the forest one day and a fox suddenly crossed my path – I felt an abrupt shift and instantly saw the fox as a predator. I was surprised to see a fox on such a well-traveled path in the middle of the day. It was a moment that felt like being in the right place at the right time. I instantly wanted to paint the fox because it was so beautiful and disruptive.

As I walked I thought about that fox and what it represented to me (as a rabbit). It represented aggression to passivity, violence to pacification. Then I thought about how each

person has these dual traits within them. We all have the capacity for violence and peace, love and rage, and an infinite number of other dualities. Fontana (2003) describes the fox as “as powerfully positive symbol. In Japan it represents longevity and serves as a magical messenger” (p. 139). The rabbit is “widely held to symbolize love, fertility, and the menstrual cycle, hares are closely associated with the moon” (Fontana, 2003, p. 158). The concept of the balance of masculine and feminine is an unconscious overarching theme of this painting.

I chose to create an image that is reminiscent of a Yin-Yang which represents balance. In Eastern philosophy, the yin yang symbol is used to represent the “opposing and complementary forces” such as “male and female, light and darkness, warmth and cold, hardness and softness, or movement and quietness” (Lee, 2012, p. 86). As a Jungian archetype, the yin yang represents “the two metaphysical principles whose co-operation makes the world go round” (Jung, 1959, p. 341) an idea which connects the concepts of balance and harmony to my personal use of the symbol. I believe that through finding balance within myself, I am able to achieve personal harmony.

I pictured the fox and the rabbit sleeping because in slumber, all creatures are vulnerable and therefore balanced in their inaction. The fox and the rabbit sleep together peacefully, portraying harmony of emotions. They circle a sunflower, which represents the day and the male persona. The sunflower contrasts with the bright, looming crescent moon that hangs above the scene representing nighttime and femininity. This symbolism further represents the ideas of opposites, indeed Jung (1959) points out the yin yang symbol is a “cosmogonic pair of concepts . . . designated *yang* (masculine) and *yin* (feminine)” (p. 59).

The fox and the rabbit slumber against a back drop of tree roots, vines, and mushrooms which set the scene for a magical forest. Lush green leaves surround the roots representing self-

growth through balance. Fontana (2003) cites the symbolism of the forest as being representative of the unconscious mind.

With these visual forest elements, I wanted to capture a fairy tale spirit that evokes nostalgic memories of bed time stories. I wanted to reference a sleepy night scene because the practice of finding symbolism through dreams is one that I have always had great interest in. Jung too was a strong believer in dream symbolism and submitted that “we should understand that dream symbols are for the most part manifestations of a psyche that is beyond the control of the conscious mind” (1964, p. 53). Like the interpretation of visual metaphor, the interpretation of dream symbols can open doors for deeper personal understanding.

Luneuron

Luneuron was inspired by the concept of the building blocks of the universe from the micro to the macro. There are patterns in nature that begin as small as an atom and expand to the size of a galaxy. I find this phenomenon to be beautiful and poetic and wanted to capture my fascination in a painting. At the center of the painting is the Hamsa hand with the all-seeing-eye representing the spiritual connection to the universe. Surrounding the Hamsa symbol is a green organic shape that stretches over the page. This shape is a neuron. To create this I researched images of neurons and used the references to form my composition. Through my research I noticed that the grainy black and white images of neurons resembled pictures of meandering rivers and deltas from above. I found the similarity between these visuals astounding.



Figure 7. *Luneuron*
15" x 20" goauche

Another connection between micro and macro can be found in the mandala-like concentric lines through the neuron shape. These lines represent the lines in a finger print which marks each human as an individual. Similar lines can also be found in the cross section of a tree trunk marking the tree's growth and uniqueness as well. The lines are also reminiscent of a maze which is thought to symbolize "the idea of an inner journey through the . . . pathways of the mind until the seeker reaches the centre and discovers the essential reality of his own nature" (Fontana, 2003, p. 102). Mazes or labyrinths are also archetypes of sacred geometry dating back to the ancient myth of King Minos and the Minotaur (Skinner, 2006). A labyrinth symbolizes "junctions or decision points" and can "generate particular spiritual benefit" (Skinner, 2006, p. 113).

Nestled within the tendrils of the neuron are eight circles which represent the phases of the moon. It is incredible that the moon is responsible for so much life and growth on earth particularly through the tides. The circles also represent molecules floating around the neuron which again alludes to the idea of micro and macro.

This idea of repetition from small to big is a geometrical concept known as fractals. In sacred geometry, fractals are “geometric shapes or patterns that help describe the forces of growth” (Skinner, 2006, p. 58). The French mathematician Mandelbrot used the golden ratio (*phi*) to create a visual proportion that remains unchanged no matter how much you zoom out or in to it. (Skinner, 2006). Fractals occur in nature in forms such as snowflakes, leaves, flowers, crystals, and spirals.

The concept of the spiral which is also known in sacred geometry as the Golden Mean Divine Proportion, or *phi* is an astonishing mathematical wonder that visual artists have been employing for thousands of years. The ratios of *phi* appear in the Parthenon, the artwork of Salvador Dali, Leonardo da Vinci, and countless other renaissance artists and architectural features around the world. (Livio, 2002). The spiral design is one that permeates throughout my paintings and manifests as a mandala. The mandala archetype is closely related to the spiral imagery as it contains patterns that return and repeat, “the process is that of the ascending spiral which grows upward while simultaneously returning again and again to the same point” (von Franz, 1964, p. 248).

One commonality of all of the pieces in this collection and a motif I spiral around again and again are the references to mandalas. This is a quirk that is particularly significant because I stepped into this process looking to escape my overuse of the mandala archetype and here I am full circle having used it unconsciously in one way or another in almost every painting I created.

The formal elements of mandala symbolism appear visually in my work many times: circles, centers, squares (or the placement of symbols in a square formation) and the evil eye (Jung, 1959). In Eastern philosophy, mandalas represent a visualization of space and time (Graham, 2012) and are often symbols “narratives, healing tools, gateways, and portals; and often as visualization of what is understood to be divine” (Lindsey, 2012, p. 160).

The mandala is a “prime universal symbol, appearing in continuous use in virtually all cultures” (Lindsey, 2012, p. 160). The symbol of the mandala and the fact that it is prevalent throughout cultures all over the world and across time makes the mandala an archetype. Jung believed that “there must be a trans conscious disposition in every individual which is able to produce the same or very similar symbols at all times and in all places” (Jung, 1959, p. 384). This points back to the concept of the collective unconscious and the idea that a mandala is a very significant visual symbol for human beings.

The mandala hold not only visual significance but significance in psychology as well. Jung considered the magic circle to be a symbol of structural order symbolic of the human psyche. The mandala is an expression of the self, and “most mandalas have an intuitive, irrational character and, through their symbolic content, exert a retroactive influence on the unconscious” (Jung, 1959, p. 361).

Ultimately, mandalas represent an archetype for wholeness and order emerging from chaos in both Jungian psychology and Eastern philosophy. Mandalas are used to aid in the quest for psychic wholeness (Graham, 2012) and express “order, balance, and wholeness” (Jung, 1959, p. 361). Creating a mandala with personal symbolism is “an antidote for chaotic states of mind” (Jung, 1959, p. 10) and can be used as a “powerful everyday tool for centering and information gathering, for practicing wholeness” (Lindsey, 2012, p. 161).

This concept of “wholeness” is important to my artmaking process. I create art to find a balance within myself and use symbols and visual metaphors as guideposts to decipher my unconscious thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Mandalas are an excellent vessel for this type of artistic exploration because “they are a type of blueprint describing a sacred territory where ritualistic centering and enlightenment take place” (Graham, 2012, p. 153). My series of paintings are an attempt at finding personal enlightenment through the use of visual metaphors and personal symbols.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS

In this section I will connect the ideas explored in the previous sections and in the art work analysis to the practice of teaching art in the classroom. I will suggest implications of symbolic thinking and artistic inquiry through visual metaphor for students.

Implications of Research Findings for Art Education

The heart and soul of teaching has all but disappeared and hangs on by a thread kept alive only by those passionate enough to go beyond the standards and provide a truly authentic education that encompasses academic as well as social and emotional skills. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) define authentic instruction as “teaching and learning that have consequences in the real world, both as content that applies outside the classroom and as teaching and learning strategies that are useful in life” (p. 234). What is more authentic then, than the employment and use of personal symbols and visual metaphor in artwork? Many popular “art activities in schools do not actually support creative self-expression and that they are not effective in teaching students about methods of artmaking outside of school contexts” (Gude, 2013, p. 85). Utilizing a curriculum which includes opportunities to explore and create personal symbolism is an important feature of active, in-depth learning which fosters genuine understanding through artistic inquiry.

I believe that visual metaphor and personal symbolism in art is a form of character education because students explore ideas and concepts that go beyond formal and technical elements and breach the realms of empathy, cultural literacy, artistic inquiry, experience, and

creative self-expression. In 21st century learning and teaching, it is vital that opportunities for social participation are given to students so that they can produce quality art and generate knowledge and understanding.

In the following section, I will provide ideas for lesson plans that focus on formulating and exploring personal symbolism and visual metaphor. By participating in lessons like these in the art classroom, students will take part in an authentic experience.

Mixtum

Mixtum is a game I came across at the 2016 National Art Education Association conference, conceptualized by Yataka Houlette. In his blog, Houlette says that “the basic idea was to create a way to randomly select three symbols to be synthesized into new concepts” as in Figure 8 below (<http://yutakahoulette.github.io/blog/5-2014/mixtum/>). *Mixtum* is a series of 3 concentric circles with a spinner in the middle. Students spin the spinner to land on three different symbols. Examples of symbols include things like a snake, a wheel, a mirror, a clock, a cactus, a bottle, a tooth, and many other objects. The symbols are then used to visually create an image or narrative.

This challenging activity encourages students to think creatively by using fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. First, students must be fluent in the meaning and use of the symbols provided. They must be familiar with the visual literacy and know how to use the symbols within a context. Students must also be flexible with their thinking and find ways to show the symbols within a story or narrative image. Originality is key in creating something new with the possibly unexpected combination of symbols. Elaboration comes into play when students explain their visual creation and how the symbols interact. This activity can be used to

jumpstart a unit on storytelling or narrative and incorporates concepts of brainstorming and creative thinking.

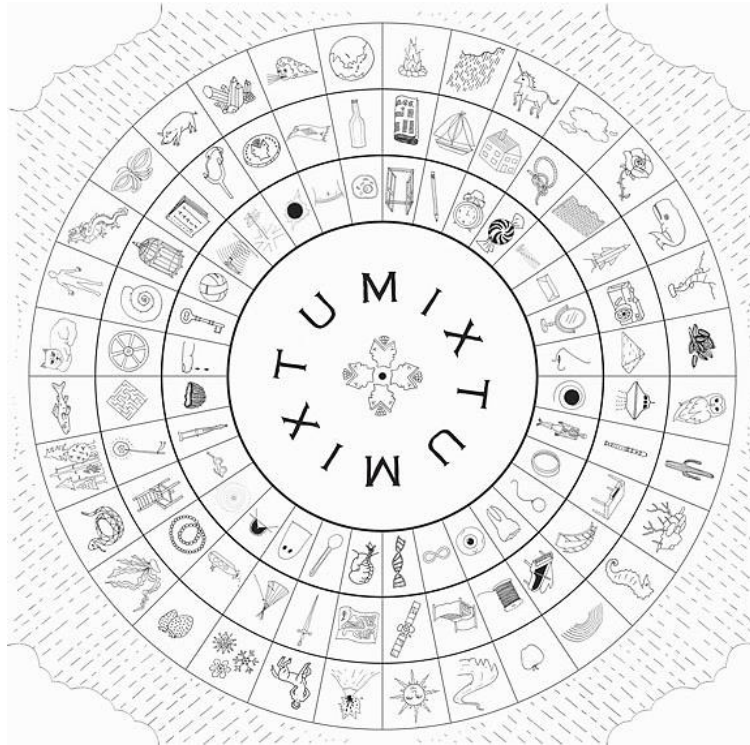


Figure 8. *Mixtum*

Collagraph Letters

The current third grade art curriculum denotes that printmaking must be done in collagraph format. In this type of printmaking, an image is created by building up a relief sculpture, painting it with ink, then printing it onto paper.

Students begin by learning about the artist Jasper Johns who created collagraphs and paintings featuring letters and numbers. Students are asked to generate three letters and three numbers with personal significance and explain why they chose those particular letters and numbers. Next, students create their collagraph plate and include the letters and numbers they generated. They then create prints using their plate.



Figure 9. Collagraph Letters

This lesson encourages student engagement through the use of personal symbols.

Students have generated letters and numbers based on aspects of their personal life such as their age, the number of their favorite sports player, their initials, a letter for their pet or family, their address, and many other various meaningful connections. Students are also given the opportunity to take the symbolism a step further and include any personal symbols that they find interesting or meaningful. In the example shown above, the student included a heart with wings, an arrow, and a face.

Senufo

This art lesson is based on the artwork of the Senufo people of West Africa. This version is well suited for fourth graders. Students begin by learning about the art form of Senufo mud

cloths and the people of Senufo. They discuss the use of animals as symbolism and the creation of mud cloths.

Students are asked to choose a totem animal that has some significance to them, perhaps a pet, an animal that they feel connected to, or their favorite animal. They may use pictures or figurines as reference to draw their chosen animal.

Around the animal they create a border and design patterns of lines and shapes. In each corner of the paper, students are asked to include a symbol that represents them. As a class, symbols are brainstormed and meanings are formed and assigned to the symbols. In the example shown below, the student chose a turtle as their totem and included symbols of the moon, a cross, a pencil, and an infinity sign.

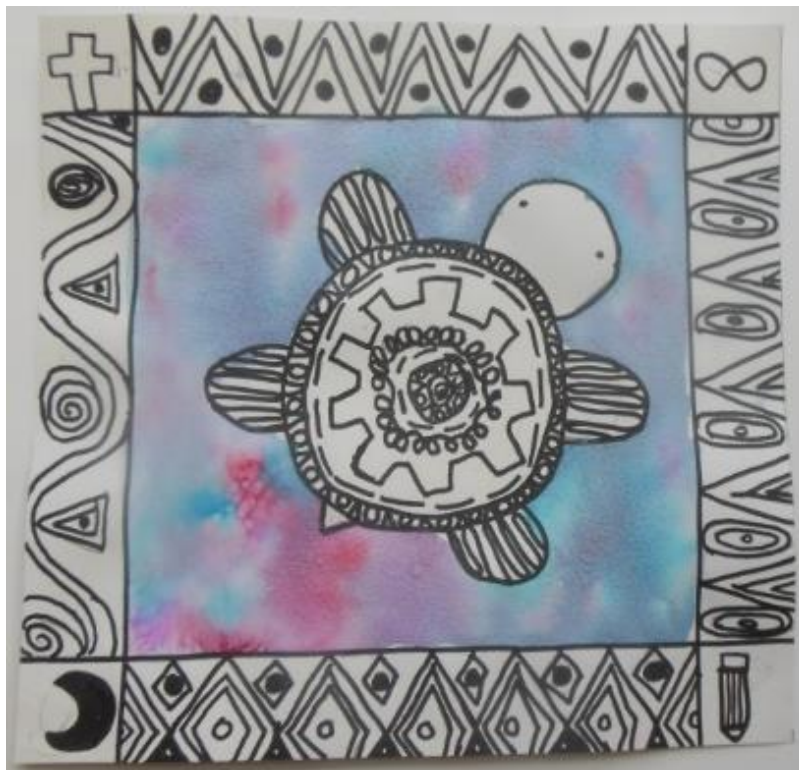


Figure 10. *Senufo*

Emoji Flowers

In the art classroom, students use inspiration and resources they gather from their experiences in and outside of school. One way in which students are already using symbols as fluent communication is in the form of digital emoticons or emojis. I find the increasing trend of using emojis to communicate in lieu of text cyclical and a good indication of the legitimacy of Jung's idea of collective unconscious. Despite the availability of letters and text as modes of communication, humans seem to be drawn to pictorial or symbolic representations. Thousands of years ago ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians were also using visual symbols in lieu of text called hieroglyphics to communicate. Now, students are infatuated with using and depicting emojis not only in their personal communication but in their artwork as well.

This lesson is based on the idea that colors can communicate emotions or feelings. Students create secondary colors from mixing primary colored paints. Then, they cut their painted paper and create petals for a flower using complementary colors. Students are asked to reflect on how colors make them feel and depict those emotions using emojis.



Figure 11. *Emoji Flowers*

Reflections

Through my research, I attempt to answer three research questions. My first research question was: 1) How might the process of art making using visual metaphor and symbolism create an avenue for self-reflection and meaning-making? My first finding is that when artists and art students participate in the process of artmaking using visual metaphor and symbolism, meaning is made. “Through a paradoxical process that condenses and expands meaning, metaphor enables us to generate vivid associations and develop insightful, deeper, and more personal understandings” (Jeffers, 1996, p.9). Artists are able to self-reflect through the associations and connections that are created when visual metaphors and personal symbolism are employed. The content of an artist’s work features important interrelationships that rise to the psychological surface as the artist “dialogues with the self through the material” (Serig, 2006, p. 236).

In my own work I was able to discover connections and ideas that illuminated aspects of my life and beliefs that allowed me to reflect and find personal meaning. By creating a body of work that employed personal symbolism, I was able to gain insights into my unconscious mind and think deeply about my place in the world. I discovered that my trip to Israel has a much more profound effect on my subconscious than I even could have imagined. I discovered that much of my work is driven by nostalgia and manifests in a narrative of my experiences. Themes of science, nature, Asian culture, Judaism, spirituality, and mandalas surfaced the more I explored. These themes emerged through archetypal symbols, it turned out that there are many archetypes of my own that I used in my artwork, with only a semi-understanding of the cultural or historical contexts they carry. Through my research I was able to form connections and deeper understandings of the symbols I was using. I discovered that I have a secret language within

myself. Through my painting and research I now have the key to unlock the meaning and symbols that I used.

Serig (2006) states that “making meaning through the interplay of emotions, reason, and context seems to describe the types of relationships existing within art practices” (p. 230). Serig goes on to say that, “investigating . . . networks enables a more thorough understanding of the conceptual structure of visual metaphor” (p. 230). By exploring and investigating ideas through metaphors and symbolism, an artist is able to make meaning through self-reflection. Lindsey (2012) states that “artmaking is a natural method of inquiry for all humans and is especially potent as a mode of investigation and personal reflection” (p. 162). Through this personal investigation and self-reflection, meaning is made.

My second research question was: 2) How might this help me as an artist explore the world within myself and around me? I believe that creating art enables the artist to “dialogue with the self through a medium, come to know the self, and to better understand the self’s relationship to the world and the relationships within the world” (Serig, 2006, p. 244). Through the use of visual metaphors and personal symbolism in art, an artist opens avenues to explore the world within them self and around them. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) cite symbolic communication as one of the most vital aspects of making art. They state that symbolic communication allows the artist to “make the intrinsic connection between form and meaning – between a sign or symbol, with its nuances and particularities, and actual experience” (p. 142). Metaphorical thinking has the power to “bridge an experiential, sensorial world with an abstract, conceptual world [where] artworks become the vehicles and the embodiment of meanings” (Serig, 2006, p. 233).

“Metaphoric works of art function to heal and generate deep insights and new meanings, they also [function] to build close relationships” (Jeffers, 1996, p.10). Art is a mode of communication and through the language of symbols, an artist is able to communicate their ideas and express their thoughts to the world. “As a metaphor . . . a work of art can be contextually understood as a personally and socially functional product” (Jeffers, 1996, p. 11). When using symbols, an artist is creating a visual language which functions to communicate ideas to the world. This communication is important because it allows artists to “create a web of social interactions that encourage thinking and diverse points of view” (Serig, 2006, p. 237). In this way, an artist creates connections to others and therefore explores the world within themselves and around them.

I hope to connect with others about this work and share it with the world. I have started to share my artwork, not only through social media but also through an Etsy shop. I have never been comfortable with selling my work and sharing it on a large scale until I created this series of paintings. I am so deeply connected to the work and so proud of what I have accomplished that I want to share it with others. My hope is that others find the same joy and pleasure in viewing my paintings as I found in creating them.

My third research question was: 3) How might the exploration of symbolism in the artistic process be relevant to art education? In answering this question I found that the exploration of symbolism in the artistic process is relevant to art education because creating art with symbols and metaphors is an authentic way to engage students in the artistic process. By using symbols in their artwork, students can engage in creative self-reflection and enter a “cycle of life to art and back [involving] complex thinking directed at the doing of art” (Serig, 2006, p.

236). Students using metaphors can apply their real-world experiences to the artmaking practice and form a deeper connection to their work. Anderson and Milbrandt (2005) describe personal engagement as “the key to making art and to the potential contribution of art to individual development” (p. 143).

By creating an environment of engagement, students have the opportunity to develop conceptual and higher-order-thinking skills. Visual metaphor plays an important role in artistic practice and meaning making so “understanding the conceptual structure of that process impacts how students are taught to be artists” (Serig, 2006, p. 233). In order for today’s students to learn the skills necessary to navigate a future where innovation and creativity will be necessary abilities, they must learn to look past the collection of descriptions, technical processes, and basic vocabulary of artmaking processes. Young artists must be given the opportunity to explore the “truth-in-art-work metaphor [that] exists beyond and outside of the elements and principles; in and of themselves they are only a catalyst, the presence of which helps the metaphor to happen” (Smoke, 1982, p.69). Through the exploration and development of symbolism and metaphor, students can tap into reflexive processes, which will improve cognitive skills by understanding how meaning is constructed.

While these cognitive processes are indeed important for development, metaphor in art also supports emotional growth and development. “There are many children who earnestly seek for some meaning in life that could help them to deal with the chaos both within and outside of themselves” (L. von Franz, 1964, p. 169). For students who struggle in school and life, art provides a creative outlet where they can attempt to make sense of the world. Creating art with personal symbolism and visual metaphor can give students a sense of identity, value, and worth.

Teaching and learning should allow students to make real-world connections, involve the active construction of knowledge, and “develop intellectual, emotional, skills-based, and expressive knowledge, abilities, and sensibilities” (Anderson and Milbrandt, 2005, p.7). The exploration of symbolism in the artistic process is relevant to art education because it allows learning to occur through construction of personal meaning and creation of connections. By creating these meaningful connections, artists and art students are able to tap into the human experience to “help us know who we are and how and what we believe” (Anderson and Milbrandt, 2005, p. xxiii).

My exploration of symbolism in the artistic process has allowed me to reconnect with my artistic side which will empower me as an artist and strengthen my teaching. The research discussed in the paper will affect my teaching and my art in the future. As a result of this exploration, I have already begun to plan and implement lesson plans geared towards creating personal symbols. I hope to incorporate a variety of activities that guide students into thinking about existing symbols from different cultures around the world, iconography, and even creating their own symbols using their own experiences as context.

The lessons outlined here are examples of incorporating symbolic visual literacy and metaphor into the art curriculum. By including these types of lessons, young art students will be more engaged in the artistic process and learn the skills that will help them grow as artists and as people. By participating in an artmaking process which includes the creation and exploration of visual metaphor and personal symbolism, art students can self-reflect, make meaning, and explore themselves and the world around them.

I hope to share my research with others in the art education community. I have submitted the ideas discussed in this paper to present at the 2017 National Art Education Association

conference where I hope to spark a dialogue about visual metaphor in the art classroom with colleagues from around the country. I want to share and connect with other art educators and find out how they use symbols in their teaching, what strategies they have for guiding students to construct meaning and context, and how we can get students to think about symbols in a deeper way.

At the beginning of this paper, I quoted Jung (1959): “knowledge of the symbols is indispensable, for it is in them that the union of conscious and unconscious contents are consummated” (p.289). Through my research – creating a series of paintings and exploring the meaning behind the symbols used – I believe that I have gained a deeper understanding of myself and found a more meaningful way to express myself and communicate through my artwork. In a way, art is a reflection of humanity. We look in the mirror of ourselves and create artwork as a reaction to what we see in that personal reflection. Through my exploration of personal symbolism and visual metaphor in my own artwork, I was able to reflect and tap into a part of myself that will have profound effects on my teaching approach and artwork in my future creative journeys.

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