Pictorial and Spiritual Spaces

A Personal Journey Through Painting and Meditation

Brendon Palmer-Angell

Candidate for B.F.A. Degree
in Painting with Honors
April 2006

APPROVED

Thesis Project Advisor: ______________________________
Professor Jerome Witkin

Second Reader: ________________________________
Professor Sharon Gold

Honors Director: ________________________________

Honors Representative: _________________________

Date: ________________________________
Abstract

The way that an artist works is directly affected by the way that they perceive and interact with their surroundings. My work over the past year has dealt with the way that I perceive different universal aspects of human experience such as death, separation and personal motivation. The work itself consists of large representational figurative paintings executed in acrylic, oil and various drawing mediums on canvas, linen, or illustration board. Each piece is preceded by a number of preparatory drawings in which space, characters, and narrative evolve.

The way that I approach subject matter and the execution of paintings has been changed over the past year by experiences in meditation, including a nine day silent meditation retreat in the Vipassana tradition, and recent training in the practice of the Shamatha meditation practice. Specifically, cultivation and training of attentional stability through meditation have become two of the main grounds for the way I spend time with my artwork.

The work presented here is also strongly grounded in the Western European traditions of narrative figurative painting. I believe that there is a direct correlation between training in representational painting and meditation; I have found that the emphasis that both place on observing and perceiving reality in the most accurate way intertwine in my work.
# Table of Contents

Reflective Essay  
Sources Cited and Consulted  
Appendices  

## Artwork

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vanitas und Veritas: Mozart’s Deathbed</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spacial Studies for Mozart’s Deathbed</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrait and Hand Studies for Mozart’s Deathbed</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embers of Discord</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparatory Studies for Embers of Discord</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median: A Study in Aggregates</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prelude to a Dream</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflective Essay

As a visual artist, I believe that it is my role to perceive and represent what I encounter. Though this may sound straightforward enough, it has been both my struggle and pleasure over the past year-and-a-half to explore how complex and difficult a task it is. In truth, there are not any more fundamental aspects of my life as an artist to investigate; the very way in which I see, and the way I re-present it have both changed.

My experience has been drawn from two seemingly disparate sources: the influence of the great Western painters of the 15th and 16th centuries, and the Eastern philosophies of Buddhism. Initially, I was compelled to investigate the core practices of both groups in search of a silence that I thought was lacking in my contemporary American experience. Where, amongst all the success-driven speed of our society, was there a place that quietude, serenity and introspection were encouraged? I found myself drawn to the visual discipline of narrative painting, and at the same time to the introspective concentration of meditation. Over the past year, I have sought opportunities to immerse myself in both. During the spring of 2006, I chose to study in Florence, Italy, where I was surrounded by the history of narrative painting. During the following summer, I spent nine days in silence at a meditation retreat in Barre, Massachusetts. These two experiences would propel a personal investigation through painting and
meditation in a way that was totally unforeseen. The silence that I had sought to investigate would become interwoven in my daily life and the way I work.

During my time abroad I was immersed in the art of the Renaissance. As its name implies, this period of time in Europe brought many aspects of human life into a new era of development and creation. Painting was one of the most profoundly changed fields, and the museums of Europe hold the most pivotal elements of the development of its pictorial and narrative conventions. Given this rich history, I was surprised to find myself traveling the halls of Italian museums in a strangely disengaged mindset. To look at these hundreds of years of painting history is to meet the same group of people over and over again; portraits of The Madonna and Child, the Cycle of the Cross, and the myriad stories of the Disciples’ martyrdoms were portrayed in painting for generations. However, this seemingly endless repetition is a critical part of what made the time such a fertile ground for the development of representational and narrative painting during the Renaissance.

In painting, meaning is something that is not easily controlled. In fact, I have come to accept that, for the most part, the audience owns the meaning of any work. As much as one might attempt to guide the viewer’s eye through a picture, their interpretation of what they encounter
will inevitably be influenced by their individual history. In Renaissance painting, however, the public already owned the stories and meaning being represented in the art of the time; the narratives that unfolded on the walls of churches in oil and fresco always depicted the familiar stories that were the laypeople’s basis for their daily worship.

Because of this, the task of painters was not to invent the story lines but rather to re-present the same parables in a new light. It was this opportunity for the artist to set aside the creation of meaning that allowed painters to concentrate on developing new pictorial and narrative models of representation. The emphasis came to be placed not on what was being said but how well one could say it.

During this time, the Italian masters pushed the boundaries of painting in leaps and bounds; the majority of the ground gained would come from concentrating on the ocular perception of reality. The faithful representation of life through painting became the goal for many schools of thought, and, therefore, the careful observation and rendering of visible reality became a critical tool for artists.

Though this may sound like an obvious solution, up until the Renaissance artists had stayed isolated with their work. Instead of directly observing a corporeal model of what they were painting—much as a contemporary art
student would learn anatomy from a nude model—they remained dependant primarily on imagination and what were known as ‘copy-books’—books of pre-made designs handed down over generations—to create imagery.

With a newly found emphasis on observing reality, new pictorial inventions such as realistic perspective, emotion, gesture and anatomy suddenly came into play. As a representational artist, I see those who propelled these advances in concentrated ocular artwork as most crucial to the history of painting. It was in the presence of the works of the old masters such as Da Vinci, Rembrandt and Caravaggio, as well as those of the contemporary figurative mastery of my professor and mentor, Jerome Witkin, that I began questioning my preconceived notions of what painting was capable of.

When I returned from my semester abroad, I prepared to investigate the second of my primary interests—that of meditation. My original impetus for investigating meditation came during my sophomore year. Prolonged sleep deprivation and over-work had brought me so off center physically and mentally that I finally had to see a doctor about sleep and work habits. Looking back, it seems that the distracting abuse of my body and mind that I was engaged in was not only acceptable, but also promoted and even expected among my peers in the college community. Meditation became a
way of finding a balance in my daily routine, and began to help me to be aware of the many negative habits that I had been embracing to facilitate my work.

The retreat I attended in Barre, Massachusetts was nine days of silent engagement in the Vipassana meditation tradition. To be honest, I had originally conceived of it as a place where I could take quiet time away from the chaotic world—one where I could take refuge from deadlines, expectations and destructive work habits. In short, I intended it to be a vacation away from everyone. Once silence began, I realized that these preconceptions were far from the truth; I had in fact chosen to go into isolation with myself, and the experience would prove to be more trying and eye-opening than any other in my life.

Much as the tradition of representational painting hones the artist’s eye to perceive and re-present external objects, meditation seeks to hone the practitioner’s perception of the self. In this way, I see the representational artist and meditator as parallel practitioners; a student of either is trained to observe reality in the most clear and precise manner so that they can engage or represent it as clearly possible. In meditation, this skill is developed through the practice of turning attention inwards, with the intent of studying one’s own state of mind. The goal of the entire retreat became to exist, clearly and openly, in each single passing moment. As
simple as that sounds, I have never had a more dynamic encounter with myself.

To work towards this, the practice is built around training the attention on breathing. The breath holds special import in Buddhist practice in many ways, but it is embraced primarily because it is the most direct physical interaction with one’s environment. Through breath, the body and environment engage in an ongoing physical exchange. By focusing on the sensations of the breath, we began to calm our minds and settle our senses. Although this was difficult, it would be the interaction within my own mind that would prove to be the most trying.

After practicing following the breath for sometime, I was encouraged to turn my attention to the climate of my own psyche, and I realized that it was anything but the calm and silence that I had sought. What I found instead were the many facets and chaos of constant thought: stories, fantasies, delusions, self-deprecation, planning, the past replayed and relived, hopes and dreams. During each forty or sixty minute meditation period, these elements of thought would surface and resurface. Here, the practice of not grasping or engaging was even more difficult than with the physical senses. Within your own mind you are capable of having an infinite number of interactions with any imaginable setting; in the silence of meditation even the slightest surfacing memory can whisk you away
from the present to any imaginable reality if you allow yourself to engage and feed it with your attention.

After several days of the retreat I found moments of clarity in which attention became so vivid that I felt that I was seeing and feeling some things for the first time. Foods tasted richer than ever before; even basic dishes such as oatmeal took on an entire landscape of textures, tastes and smells that I had never been so present for. My sleep became deep and dreams as memorable as waking hours. In a way, the challenge of being present became woven into each facet of daily life.

After the experience of the retreat setting I found it difficult to return to the buzzing modern world. I found myself immediately inundated with the plethora of distractions that had been removed in the silence of meditation. To continue the daily practice of meditation in near silence, I had to wake very early before anyone else arose for the day—a schedule that would prove very hard to keep once I returned to school. Fortunately, this routine and practice would evolve and combine itself with the love and passion I had for painting; the two practices enfold, encourage and thrive in silence and concentration, and I soon found that they could be interwoven.
It had occurred to me during the retreat that the training of the awareness upon a single phenomenon at a time seemed remarkably familiar to the discipline of representational drawing and painting, where the attention can be placed for hours at a time on a single object. In a sense, these two very different exercises—one from the East and one from the West—both seek to develop perception. In the works that I developed over the past year, I have found a marriage of these two practices. Painting and drawing became another form of meditation for me; each day I would attempt to continue cultivating the presence of mind that meditation promoted with whatever artwork I was engaged in at my studio. I was to find that creating large figurative and narrative works of my own was far more taxing than I had previously imagined; fortunately, the discipline of meditation became a vehicle for the prolonged focus and attention that each piece would take. The patience and silence of meditative practice would become a cornerstone of my artwork; with them, I found myself not only comfortable, but also vividly perceptive of the paint, models and changes that needed to unfold in each piece. Beyond drawing from a model, metaphorically I began to draw from my own paintings. They became the guides for what needed to occur, and without the patience that my meditative practice afforded me, I would have missed out on many of the queues that were present. These tools also became essential for the deep digging required in the preliminary work for each piece. As you will
see, extensive explorations in drawing became a personal requirement before even considering a painted surface.

Selecting subject matter is usually the first step in my work, and the aspect that I usually receive the most questions about. Many people have made the remark that my work is dark, dramatic or disconcerting. I see painting as an opportunity, much like meditation, to confront and dialogue with the personal, subjective layers of our daily lives that wait just below the apparent surface of experience. Although many people harbor feelings and mindsets that they would rather not experience, I believe strongly that there is much to be learned by spending time exploring these difficult things. I am haunted and drawn to the shadowy spaces of contemporary human experience because I feel that, through understanding the nature and context of these phenomena, there is insight to be gained.

In each of the four works that I produced, my drive to explore particular subject matter came from a need for personal inquiry. Setting out to create a painting in an academic setting is often spurred by the context of an assignment; for the most part, painting outside of deadlines has made painting much more like setting out on an unplanned journey. The development of a painting becomes more about finding content, meaning and form based on initial inclinations—inclinations that are affected constantly by internal and external circumstances. The many hours to be
spent with a painting become a chance to explore and test these feelings; before a work is finished, they will have inevitably gone through many transformations.

To begin a work of art is to start down a path that will almost certainly lead to an unforeseen conclusion. As Jerome Witkin once told me, “you start the picture because you want to know what’s going to be in it.” Over the past year it has actually been the excitement of possible discovery that has energized the creation of pictures. By letting your grasp loosen from preconceived ideas, you can be prepared to engage in whatever presents itself. The creation of my first large figurative work, Vanitas und Veritas: Mozart’s Deathbed, is one that echoes the direction that my paintings have all taken. It also illustrates the beginning of what I hope to be a long journey as a painter—one that has already begun to take turns in unexpected directions.

In Mozart’s Deathbed, what began as a portrait of the artist in his space came to take on deeper meaning as the context of the work developed. It began as a glimpse into the end of an artist’s life. I felt driven to reflect on the journey of an artist; a journey which, worse than being rocky, could remain externally unrewarding in one’s own lifetime.
What is it that drives a person to continue to create throughout their lives despite difficulty and discouragement? I wanted to peer into the worst of possible outcomes to engage how I would react.

As Mozart worked on his final piece—a requiem mass anonymously commissioned by a wealthy patron with plans to claim authorship—he became convinced that it was to be played at his own funeral. The question that I took from this became the core of the piece; looking back on a life’s work at the moment individuality would be stripped away, what would an artist feel? Although everything corporeal is destined for reclamation, could we leave something behind?

In two-dimensional art, the first difficulty is to select a handful of moments—or even more difficult, a single moment—to portray. How does one distill an infinite number of possibilities down to one? If one considers the works of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, it becomes apparent that key moments before or after an action take place can describe an entire series of events. The subtle gesture of a hand or head, or the nearness of a touch could describe everything that is about to happen without handing it to the viewer. The beauty and difficulty of this method becomes showing just enough to a viewer to allow them to fill in a story themselves. In doing so, they can become engaged in a work and tell themselves a story far more intricate than what a painting can show.
In front of the works of Caravaggio and Rembrandt I had also seen how light could become a dynamic narrative element. I imagined Mozart, isolated in his deathbed, and how his only interaction with the outside world might be through the light that came through the windows of his room. This light echoes not only the outside world to me, but also a greater external continuum of past, present and future. In the narrative sense, the hands of the artist came to represent the work completed and the work in progress; framed within the light, it represented the possible contribution to be made to the world beyond the individual.

Beyond the figurative aspects of the painting, the space in which the model was to reside became an even more complex problem. Not only could the presentation of a model’s gesture be significantly altered by the chosen eye-level and spatial organization, but also the way that pictorial space was organized dictated the way a viewer approached a work. Within this problem, I found it difficult to decide how to invite a viewer into the work, as well as how to position elements for a specific reading. After several weeks of struggling with the space and gestures, I had to set it aside and move on to something else; it had become too overworked in my mind, and it was difficult to see it with fresh eyes.
Ideas like this can often come at the strangest of moments, but most often they spring forward effortlessly after a prolonged period of intense searching. A pivotal idea could come in the shower, while you are brushing your teeth or walking out of the studio for the night.

The moment when a tuning fork of sorts goes off—when a drawing feels right—is so exhilarating. What a beautiful thing, what a preposterously wonderful feeling to be allowed to have. There have been times when I almost think that I am cheating the world because I feel like I have got it so good. Although there is so much leading up to that final drawing, there is still a pervasive sense of mystery. It can feel almost as if I’m creating something out of thin air—conjuring something out of a non-physical space and onto paper or canvas. Anne Harris, a contemporary figurative painter, once said of drawing that “there is something magical about it…drawing is the essence of art; you’re putting dirt on paper and making something magical.”

Of course, there are many many drawings before the one that feels magical. I found that it takes a great deal of energy to come back, over and over again, to the same theme, to the same kind of set up, and to try it anew each time. Being aware of how you are feeling and what you are really trying for is critical; I’ve found it difficult to work with music playing or while talking with someone because I feel out of tune with
It might be tempting to assume that conversation or entertainment wouldn’t affect the performance of an advanced drawer. Since the silence of the meditation retreat, I’ve found that in drawing there is an entire universe of tactile experience to be in tune with. Drawing implements, paper, the model, lighting, costuming, expression, and quality of marks—a subtle change in any of these elements can affect the entire experience. It becomes like a symphony, with each part working together to produce a single, riding image; discord in any of the parts can sour the entire melody.

And so a moment came, silently doodling in a sketchbook after lunch, where the space of Mozart’s room not only looked different but also felt different. The floor was tilting, and the furniture was being pushed at strange angles as though we were finding him in the midst of an earthquake. I began to paint the six-by-five-foot canvas that had been waiting for weeks. At that point, I realized that not only did the space need to tell a story, but the paint needed to have the same motive as well. To sustain energy in mark-making became an extremely difficult task. The heavy, energetic marks I felt were needed were draining physically and mentally, but in a sense it came together faster than I had expected.

The space began to tell another story—the story of the reclamation of the material world. The next sketch pushed it even further, pulling
floorboards and candlesticks apart. In the last sketch, the elements of the room were being pulled apart into a floating furnace. I had found a new direction for the piece, and its eccentricity and strangeness intrigued me. After a final preparatory drawing to refine the space and composition, I began to prepare the last two canvases for attachment to the main piece.

At this point in the painting I was extremely excited for the work and where it was headed, but in for a surprise lesson. In adding the two new canvases, I had found a better expression of the space I had sought, but much of the painting lost the energy I had hoped for. Even worse, the slower brushwork found its way into the panel that I had already begun, deadening the life that I had originally found in it.

In retrospect, as difficult as it is to refine a painting, it is just as hard to know when to leave something as it is. The constant push and pull between over and under development is a balancing act that I am far from mastering, though I think that being aware of it is the first road to dynamic interaction with it.

The process of conception, search, and re-invention that *Vanitas und Veritas* took is similar to the path that the three other major pieces of my thesis took. Though the others may not have been as extensive, I feel that
the learning process that occurred while working on the Mozart painting had a direct affect on all of the others.

Each painting represents a different personal journey, and can subtly tell its story. Sometimes, as is the case with my most recent work, *Prelude to a Dream*, I find that I can only hear that tale in hindsight. *Prelude* began as an attempt to execute a piece with a narrative that I felt spoke directly on what my thesis project was “about.” I wanted to explore the difficulties of being disconnected from a reality by simulations and simulacra, and the idea that praise, disrepute and even death could be set aside in attempt to tap into a deeper connection with reality. These were all ideas that I had originally planned to incorporate into my thesis works since the beginning, but which I had not yet had the opportunity to explore in painting.

Once again, academic timelines came into play, and I found myself pushed to create by time constraints and not by the inner propulsion that I previously found. The time for research, development and careful consideration of narrative, characters and space was short; I began to rush to produce a final product. Without realizing it, by trying to quickly create a narrative piece specifically about the ideas I had encountered over the last year, I had ceased using the methodologies that had become so important to my work.
The paintings *Prelude to a Dream*, and *Median: A Study in Aggregates*, represent the beginning of a struggle to express and explore the complex questions, values and ideas that I have encountered as a result of exploring the many different practices of meditation in painting. Though this was my original intention for the subject matter of all of my thesis project paintings, I believe that my initial deep exploration of the tradition of Western painting through less specific subject matter. By intertwining the practice of representational painting and meditation, I have found richer avenues in both. It is only now, after developing a closer understanding of meditation through this double practice, that I can begin to explore it as subject matter.

To see this now evokes both a great sense of disappointment and accomplishment. In one sense, I failed to produce an end product that directly conveys the wonderful experiences that I have found through meditation practices; in another sense, I have dug into deeper ground from which to begin a discourse as a painter and practitioner of meditation. I now feel newly resolved to continue on the path that I set out on originally; this time, it will be as a professional painter.

My approach to making art has been changed over the past year by the experiences in meditation, and conversely my art has fed my meditation practice. Insights born of both have allowed me to turn mistakes and
successes alike into adventitious experiences. As much as I feel that the artwork itself is a testament to these changes, the value that I have derived from the Thesis Project experience can be found in the way that my attitude and methodologies have changed through the values of attentional training and Buddhist compassion. How I interact with art, myself, and the world that I am a part of has been fundamentally altered. I can think of no more valuable change to help begin my career as an artist and a member of the global community.
Sources Cited and Consulted


## Appendices

I) Artwork

**Vanitas und Veritas: Mozart’s Deathbed**
Acrylic on linen; 72 x 108”

**Spacial Studies for Mozart’s Deathbed**
Charcoal, ink and graphite on paper; various sizes.

**Portrait and Hand Studies for Mozart’s Deathbed**
Charcoal, graphite and conté crayon on paper; various sizes.

**Embers of Discord**
Oil on linen; 54 x 68”

**Selected Preparatory Studies for Embers of Discord**
Graphite, pen and charcoal on paper; various sizes.

**Median: A Study in Aggregates**
Charcoal, acrylic and conté crayon on separate pieces of illustration board; 57 x 65”

**Prelude to a Dream**
Oil on Linen; 76.25 x 125”