

Sabbatical Report

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Sustained Studio Practice in Spain

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1. Abstract, scope of project: The sabbatical resulted in ten diptych paintings (90 x 180 cm), six large-scale single canvases (200 x 200 cm) and numerous watercolors, the largest of which are currently on exhibit at Villa de Arte Gallery in Barcelona, a premier space in the city. I spent the year in Spain, painting in Arenys de Mar in Catalonia and hiking the ancient *Camino de Santiago de Compostela*. For much more about my work please see www.mills-pinyas.com



2. Objectives were met in all respects. I had the time and tranquility to consider many artistic and intellectual issues about my career as a painter and professor. I read a great deal about neuroscience related to aesthetics and perception and folded that into my thinking and my art. I will share my work with the Linfield community next spring in our main gallery.

Here is a preliminary draft of an artist statement that will accompany the exhibit:

I have nothing to say, I am saying it, and that is poetry. ~ John Cage

A painting is not a picture of an experience. It is an experience. ~ Mark Rothko

The aesthetic experience is a simple beholding of the object....you experience a radiance. You are held in aesthetic arrest. ~ Joseph Campbell.

To express unconscious desire spontaneously is to defy the world's militant denial of spontaneity as a threat to consciousness. This is another manifestation of the world's indifference to the inner life of the individual. ...Spontaneity convulses the psyche, engulfs it in a fit of desire (1). ~ Donald Kuspit "The Expressive Cure"

Pareidolia: the mind's desire to pretend it sees known images in abstract patterns, bunnies in the clouds, etc.

Qualia: perceptual sensations before they become named by consciousness, by mental conditioning, the sensory qualities prior to being categorized by the associative mind.

Artist Statement: My studio painting is simple; stirred by as-yet unnamed passions, exploring qualia, wooed through will and awareness. Complexes of marks, textures and passages of color appear in the flurry; layered, pushed and pulled by back-painting and cellular pattern-making, leading to what I hope is a rich field of plenty, a *tabla rasa*, ripe and fecund—like a well prepared garden plot from which a wide variety of wild and undetermined seeds are coming up, toward the light. Free of polemical issues, opinions or conceptual statements, even representational associations (even the garden analogy), the work begins an odd status as a proto-image with possibilities to be many things or none, depending on the mind of the viewer. As the painter, I have learned to let passing associations fall away. My work is in honor of the mystery of perception, the pure and the luminous eye; allowing the work to stand alone—even from my vanities— reconnecting the hand, eye and spirit. The work is, strictly speaking, not about me, at least not the me I know from the past. The work is rather a statement about the infinite present. That is the point.

Beauty and radiance are found in the silence of meditative gazing, before words are assigned, when prior experience has no correlate in the present. To say something is beautiful is an expression of a certain

perceptual acuity, savoring an unknown experience rather than naming it. It is similar to saying I love you as an emotional summary meant to state a truth, while ironically to do so lifts you out of actually loving. Similarly, when, before nature and art, we judge the object of our gaze to be "beautiful" we have already abandoned it by verbalization. It is the experience of awe, as our verbal thinking is overwhelmed by the delight, the delicacy, the tumult and the weighty drama of sensory *qualia*. The ineffable experience we babble about as beauty, even "terrible beauty", produces psychic vertigo; a longing and an implicit reminder of our personal insignificance in the sweep of time and space—and the inadequacy of verbal constructions. Such meditation stills the mental chatter and provides a new platform from which to experience an eternal moment.

References and Discussion: Sometimes writing about what appears to be a simple issue requires "clearing the field". I think about Edward O. Wilson's discussion free will and philosophical "mysterians" who create "qualia", that provoke the "subtle, almost inexpressible feelings we experience about sensory input, sensations and their related feeling tones that precede naming, i.e. redness before it is identified as red"; painting about how our minds work and navigate optical experience. How are our minds being constructed by the mysterious meeting of eye and mind? What might the artist add to that encounter? How does the mind come to interpret base-level sensory data, the tender, delicate, terrible, even brutal, jolting, life-changing qualities? The perception, the presence of mind to be fully with such sensations and to be actually composed of them without flinching comes in kindness and stealth, in searing sadness, the pain of unbearable beauty, speechless generosity, abundance, sometimes in grandeur, sometimes in the tiny and seemingly insignificant, in the penumbra, in the periphery of awareness, in silent depths that frame the multitude of sorrows, anxieties and insecurities of life and the certainty of its eventual passing. Such are the conditions of my inspiration, and of the *qualia* that constitutes aesthetic experience.

Not a postmodernist nor a modernist, I am intellectually informed by insights from neuroscience (Zeki, Kandel and others) that seeks to better define how we perceive, how we act in the moment and, emotionally and conceptually, experience concrete formal qualities, either found in art or nature. I am especially interested in Nobel prize winner Eric Kandel's work on "reductionism" (2) in art and brain science, especially how the mind processes abstract art ("bottom up") differently than figurative or conceptual imagery ("top down"). One assumes this also applies to the contemplation of natural patterns and fields, such as the motion of water, microscopic surfaces, etc. To this end, my "bottom up" work is not concerned with a specific narrative or a depiction, nor it is intended to be suggestive of known representational forms. Nor is my work concerned with expressing my response to a moment in my life, contemporary political postures, narrative fictions, environmental or personal identity issues or situations that are, to me, better left to documentarians and more qualified, more articulate novelists, scientists and journalists. Mine is an art that simply exists (in so far as any object is simple), as a thing sufficient in its singularity—rather than posing as a pointer in redirection toward a subtext of an idea that, in turn, one imagines to have some truth value. My works seeks to resist the run-away compulsion of the associative mind—for at least a moment—letting the work be what it is as a sensory object without imposing the past, a fantasy about what might be; rather to be in the moment. Mine is the cut below in this sense, perhaps more in league with Matisse, toward wooing the viewer into aesthetic arrest, temporarily relieving them of social-political and personal anxieties in favor of a tender moment of "radiant" wordless respite.

A mentor once commented in critique that one should look into the "background" to see what is coming next in an artist's work, as if the artist rehearses the future in the space surrounding and between the main elements, in spaces that are psychologically more filler than subject. Perhaps all of my work is, in this sense, background. Mine is not work about situations, per se, but conditions. I prefer grounds that emerge into the unbroken seamless present, in a kind of *horror vacui*, I am not so much horrified but fascinated by and wish to celebrate the density and space of matter.

In sum, I conceive of the artist as a disrupter of the stiffness of spirit, a disrupter of our habitual ways of thinking and perceiving. While the analytical mind taxonomically divides and names, through painting I attempt to remember and demonstrate how it goes back together again.

~ Barcelona, Spain and Salishan, 2018

1. To express unconscious desire spontaneously is to defy the world's militant denial of spontaneity as a threat to consciousness. This is another manifestation of the world's indifference to the inner life of the individual. ...Spontaneity convulses the psyche, engulfs it in a fit of desire. However short lived this fit, it is enough to discredit all conventional meanings. Indeed, it undoes the world's attempt to claim consciousness from the unconscious the way land is claimed from the sea. Spontaneity in effect pulls the plug from the dam of consciousness, letting the waters of the unconscious rush out violently. This is the famous violence avant-garde art does to the world and its representations and meanings. At the same time, this release and overflowing of primordial unconscious desire, and the chaotic flux of feeling that accompanies it, restores a sense of freshness and vitality to life, refertilizing in the process. ~ Donald Kuspit, "The Expressive Cure" from The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist, 1994.

2. Eric Kandel, 2016 [Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures](#)