

ZEN ART

Origins in Abstract Expressionism and Art Therapy

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Among the most remarkable features characterizing Zen, we find these: spirituality, directness of expression, disregard of form or convention, and frequently an almost wanton delight in going astray from respectability.

—D. T. Suzuki

A special thanks goes to my teachers, Leroy Parker, Patricia Sherwood, and Patrick Surgalski, for their encouragements to honor my inner voice and intuitions.

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ZEN ROOTS OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Zen art, like abstract expressionistic art, does not aim to represent the exact shape of an object or thought but rather its essence. The idea of seeking connection to true self through gestures that claim the spirits we truly are was strongly influenced by the Zen art movement that originally came from India to China some 2,500 years ago, and was later brought to Japan. Zen philosophy holds the idea that we all have a sacred self or “bodhisattva” at our core if we actively engage in freeing our minds from the shackles of artificial mind constructs. The essential truth of Zen (or the Tao) cannot be expressed in words. It can only be understood in silence and through walking the path of balance and restraint.

Just as a student asking a Zen master about what the highest truth is may not be given a direct answer, so that he can probe his own intuition instead, many questioners of abstract art are often asked to do the same. The answer about what a particular piece of art is assumed to be apparent for anyone who hasn't lost the ability to connect with a true self.

Zen philosophy states that a path of connecting with our inner voice consists of an explorative process in which we discover the true nature of our minds and learn to transform old thinking patterns by differentiating between our authentic self (which, by default, is always at peace) and our mind's chatter which may not always be accurate. As we become more authentic and things begin falling into place with less conflict in our lives, we see an increase in synchronicities that help us along on our journey.

The circle is centric to the art of Japanese Zen calligraphy in which a circle—the “Enso”—is brushed in a single, bold stroke, thus allowing free expression of one's soul. The Enso, which represents both everything and nothingness, also denotes the sacred

feminine, the sun, moon, portals into the unknown, or tribal origins. While triangular shapes symbolize spirituality, they may also stand for something as dramatic as arrowheads or blizzards.

Primal shapes like triangles, circles, diamonds, ellipses, and squares give hermetic meaning to the world of feelings. They also express a reverence for the elemental beauty on Earth. Everything in existence, even fractals, can be traced back down to a few simple shapes: a single point, a straight line, and curvy line—whether it be a snowflake, living cell, molecule, or an atom.

While Zen art represents emotion behind an object or thought, it is also about minimalism. This premise sometimes lies in opposition with modern abstract expressionistic art, which appears to be visually verbose. It should be mentioned that abstract expressionism can often be likened to be more like Zen music than Zen art: Zen music depicts the austerities undergone by an aspirant, including the sometimes difficult transformation of psychological structures that result in the emergence of his bodhisattva. In Zen music, there is a constant sense of push-and-pull—sometimes clash—and change of notes signifying movement toward a state of becoming, just as the modern abstract artist imitates the ever-evolving Universe with spontaneous brush strokes. The workings of life require that we regroup again and again. Through visual building blocks of brush gestures, light and color fields, a sense of balance or deliberate asymmetry can be achieved.

EXPLORATION, DISCOVERY, TRANSFORMATION, AND SYNCHRONICITY

Art imitates life as the artist, too, needs to first explore and discover the unique talent. After the emergence of a personal voice, transformation takes place. New techniques

serve as a springboard to the imagination. Epiphanies and accidental mistakes work synergistically with new explorations that lead to discoveries and synchronicities. The element of chance is an integral part of art-making. With continued practice the artist builds an individual set of visual tools that can be likened to musical instruments that play an infinite amount of tunes consisting of space, shapes, textures, gestures, color fields, and movements coalescing in an interplay between light and dark to express the artist's emotions, struggles, discoveries, and aspirations. Just as every brush stroke links up with another made before, it becomes more obvious that everything and everyone is connected. The images become a doorway to the soul, and viewers bring their own associations to bear as these visual symphonies unfold.

The four loosely connected sections of this book, Discovery, Exploration, Transformation, and Synchronicity, mirror my own path of finding an individual voice through abstract art. The pictures, which were created between the years of 1989 and 1993, are enhanced with classic Zen wisdoms. The process of creating abstract art, like the path of Tao, is one that emphasizes simplicity and independence from external input of judgment of any kind.

Exploration showcases a set of black-and-white intaglio etchings and monoprints. The medium of intaglio etching uses a process in which a drawing gets ingrained onto the metal in an acid bath. The finished plate gets inked up and run through a printer's press under damp watercolor paper. Each etching in the Exploration series aims to convey a different feeling by way of contrasts, values, and visual weight. The stylistic variances in some ways mirror life with all its diversities among unexpected surprises.

Discovery features works that display an enthusiasm for colors, geometry, and newly found techniques in the media of monotype printing with touches of gold-leaf and pastels. The element of surprise was a key part in all pieces where consistency of style was not

a primary concern. Just as each action a person may take can create an entirely new life path, unexpected dribbles or paint reactions on various backgrounds reveal new ways of engaging in the creation of something new.

Transformation contains a series of oversized black-and-white monotype prints that mark a turning point toward finding a unique voice of expression in this medium. Although each piece is very different, a sense of relatedness is more apparent—both from the visual tool set, contrast, shape, and balance perspectives, as well as speed in which the creations took place. The push and pull of opposing elements on a visual plane is enhanced with images of meaningful sacred geometry. These images were created in 1993, as were the images of the Synchronicity series described below.

Synchronicity takes emerging techniques to another level as color with its various inherent associations becomes an additional layer in the visual toolbox: colors and welcome accidents become synergistically entangled in a symphonic interplay of space, shapes, and contrasts. By forging ahead in an automatic manner while considering basic design principles, the deliberate chaos reverberating on a visual plane turned into a challenge for discovering new ways for regaining visual equilibrium.

Monotypes are unique paintings done on a metal plate with printmaker's oil paints. The plate is then placed under damp watercolor paper and pushed through a printer's press. Unlike monoprints (described in the Discovery paragraph above), which already have an etched image on the plate which may be enhanced with additional brush strokes, monotypes are always truly unique images.

INFLUENCES IN EXPRESSIVE ART THERAPY

Drawing from Zen art in which bold gestures are the primary vehicle for expression, the school of art therapy encourages self-directed movement where a continual forging ahead becomes the primary focus to enhance emotional health. By granting insights into the inner workings of the mind, the creative process may stimulate resolution of inner conflicts, unresolved past memories, traumas, anxieties, depression, mental disorders including substance abuse, or feelings of isolation. A better understanding of the workings of the mind can lead to reduced stress, higher self-esteem, and better interpersonal skills. Coaches and psychologists increasingly become proponents for expressive arts therapy, which may include drawing, painting, and sculpture as well as personal growth-writing and dance.

The word "therapy" comes from the Greek word "therapeia," which means "to be attentive to." Through automatic drawing and by allowing unexpected compositions to emerge in a dancelike manner, a subject learns to become attentive to a personal inner voice. The term "neuroplasticity" describes the brain's ability to change as a result of a unique experience. "Plasticity" refers to the ability to add or remove cells or connections between nerve cells (neurons) and glial cells where connections may strengthen or weaken as a result of learning. The crossover among pleasurable sensory experiences while drawing from within leads to an opening up of new, mutable brain pathways that result in new synapses being formed.

"Synesthesia" (in Greek: "together") is a phenomenon in which one cognitive pathway leads to automatic experiences in a second sensory pathway. While the condition of having these involuntary and automatic crossovers is rare, most people can understand "cross-sensory metaphors" in which one might be able to intuit the feeling or sound of

a color (hot, cold, loud) or taste what we see (sweet design, bitter tornado). A sense of flow or being in the zone, while engaged in the creative process, produces a state of transcendence in which mental images can weave across different sense and memory pathways, at times. Movement and awareness become one and old memories may get remapped through new associations. Abstraction becomes the object of meditative practice, which seeks to recognize essential truth and attainment of mental and energetic clarity.

The process reveals that there is order to everything beyond just a two-dimensional plane, including chaos. As without darkness, there is no light, without struggle, there is no harmony. Drama is a catalyst for resolution. Amidst conflict, greatness can emerge. Yin needs Yang. After the storm, there is calm. Opposed perspectives are a normal part of the human experience. When we learn to integrate objective truth without confusion, a sense of energetic harmony is achieved.

According to Karl Jung, mandalas are a symbol for individuation and self-realization. Dreaming of mandalas or circles or drawing them helps bridge a path to psychological balance. By honoring the visual outcome with all its imperfections, and by noticing unexpected beauty in the process, we create a mental pattern that might help with accepting our authentic selves, including foibles or parts of ourselves from which we dissociate. Purging creates bliss. "Catharsis" means cleansing or purging in Greek. Along those lines we may achieve catharsis by first taking an honest view at what created certain negative blockages, then purge old memories with help of the imagination and a positive attitude. By letting go of fear of judgment, we take part in a process of healing as we make unexplored connections.

About the Author:

Joanne Ehrich lives in Half Moon Bay, California, USA, where she also works as a designer and illustrator. She has attended photography trade school, and holds a University degree in printmaking. Joanne has created numerous figurative etchings, lithographs, and paintings of people, animals, and landscapes, as well as the abstract monotype prints and paintings featured in this book.

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