

EASTERN SEEDS, WESTERN SOIL:  
A PATH TO TRANSCENDENCE



*Trees Loosing Leaves*  
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# EASTERN SEEDS, WESTERN SOIL: A PATH TO TRANSCENDENCE

## ABSTRACT

This paper traces the conceptual roots of Eastern philosophy found in my abstract landscape painting. It examines transcendent themes dealing with the nature of perception, impermanence and the role of emotion leading to the ineffable.

Introspection, contemplation and meditation are investigated as part of my creative process. Concepts found in Romanticism are discussed in relation to Asian landscape painting.

Common aesthetic ground and distinctions among the religious, the occult and the transcendent are compared to identify the role of spirituality in contemporary art practice.

## I. INTRODUCTION

EAST      *The gift of truth excels all other gifts. —Buddha, 563-483 B.C.*

WEST      *Among the great things which are to be found among us,  
the Being of Nothingness is the greatest. —Leonardo Da Vinci*

### WHY PAINT?

Sooner or later I will not be able to paint, I will not exist physically. I paint because I accept the fact that I will die. This is not a morbid thought, quite the opposite. Accepting this fact beyond intellectual knowing has ignited a passion in me to live fully and create works of art.

Life is impermanent, the time I have to create art in this physical world is finite. To act as if this were not so, would mean to not see the world as it is. Seeing the world as it is, in Buddhist thought, is the way to free oneself from suffering. To not see the world as it is, causes suffering through ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Comparing the time line for the earth's existence with my life span, the time I have to live is remarkably insignificant under the best of circumstances.

Daily living seems to be an illusion of infinite sequential moments strung together. When remembering, I remember moments, not days. I make art as a search for connection to an experience of something greater than my impermanent self. I aim for understanding the nature of reality, finding my place in it and on a good day, revealing spiritual truth.

Why *do* I paint? What *are* my artistic values? What *is* Art? The answers are to be found in what drives my work. I paint for intellectual, emotional and spiritual expression. I enjoy the dialogue of the work as it unfolds. Painting is an immediate, sensuous act that traces the mark of the human hand. For me, nothing comes close to the physical act of painting as an experience for making images. Once, an image is created I have little interest in recreating it. When there is just enough visual information to capture the energy of an image, in my eyes the artwork is complete.

### A. NATURE OF PERCEPTION

Rudolf Arnheim makes a clear distinction that visual thinking is not simply a mechanical recording of images and regurgitating them repetitively. He states that perception is intelligent,<sup>2</sup> thus visual images are a form of knowledge.

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development takes a behavioral view of intelligence which Suzi Gablik applied to the history of art in part, to question the progress of art. "The changes in the modes of representation in art are reflective of the long and complex development of human consciousness. Art, literature, philosophy and particularly science are parallel and interrelated expressions of the predominant structural models of reality of each cultural period."<sup>3</sup> Western culture is oriented toward growth and evolution, in essence, becoming, doing and having, over being.

Art does provide a window on culture and visually traces human consciousness through images. Yet, Gablik goes astray applying Piaget's theory by stating oriental art is at the pre-operational developmental stage "where artists lack the logical capacity to construct a rational system for depicting objects in space".<sup>4</sup> This prejudicial statement highlights important differences in the basic philosophic intent of Eastern and Western art, furthermore it is not logical even in a dualistic and Eurocentric paradigm.

Asian landscape painters depiction of space is not from a fixed point of view. Conceptually, landscape painting is a complex vehicle for the philosophy of being and non-being. Buddhist and Taoist philosophers came to discover "emptiness in becomingness of things...and the discovery of nothing...group(ing) emptiness and nothing together as depicting non-being".<sup>5</sup> This choice for depicting objects in space is not from a lack in cognitive ability. "To paint exactly what is seen within a restrictive framework of space and time contradicts the concept of Tao, excluding the artist from being part of the nature portrayed and stressing a separate and independent existence."<sup>6</sup>

In learning to draw, I was taught a method called Correct Observation, or basically how to see. Gesture was comprehended by finding the essential energy of the subject and identifying the sympathetic emotional response in myself to "penetrate understanding".<sup>7</sup> This concept is very close to the Taoist idea of Direct Perception where "the artist strives not to re-create the appearances but to re-establish a vital breath in the forms, marks, textures, and spaces. This vital breath refers to a self-generating life force, which the Chinese call ch'i... Showing the presence of a vital breath, a painting is no longer a dead thing, but has acquired a life of its own".<sup>8</sup>

## B. ILLUSION OF IMPERMANENCE

The visual search for what constitutes reality and non-reality is why I paint. Specifically, I am interested in how physical reality interacts with the less tangible realms of thought and feeling. Thoughts and feelings link to transcendence and painting can show the illusion of

the impermanent physical self and alludes to the idea of a permanent eternal spiritual Self. The exploration of perception and illusion is a reoccurring theme in my work. Generally in my painting, light and space signifies the spiritual, shapes and form stand for physical qualities and color expresses the intuitive emotional.

I have the ability to create worlds of real and non-real states of being, in painting. I consider painting as a means to create visual metaphors for the spiritual idea that the world we think of as real, is not real but is illusionary. What is real does not change. Māyā is a spiritual idea originating from Vedanta and ties into Correct Observation (Art), Direct Perception (Taoism) and Right Understanding (Buddhism). The physical world offers up the impermanence of our senses (body and mind) that distract us from discovering our true Self. This is what in means to be in Māyā. In this Vedic concept, the illusionary veil of Māyā, is said to keep us from discovering we have an eternal and permanent true Self. The literal translation of Māyā is, that which is not.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Color Scroll Paintings*, I create a scroll with one hundred and fifty eight paintings that begin with gestural mark making. Painting on a two dimensional surface creates the illusion of space, just by laying down marks. Each composition is a challenge to keep non-objective. Images form themselves enticing me to develop them into to representations of physical reality. The longer I paint on a piece, the more effort is needed to keep it abstract. The results are semi-abstract paintings that reference nature and walk the line between the real and the unreal.



Rebecca Moran, *The Color Scroll Paintings detail*, 2/24, 2/22, 2/25, 2/26. Rice paper, sumi ink and gouache, 3" x 3" 2008.

These images visually document a series of moments to imply impermanence. *The Color Scroll Paintings* pictorially alternate between far away and close up in partially abstracted views of landscape, symbolizing a macro-micro schema for portraying space. The sequential images make my thoughts and feelings visible freeing me to transcend physical states through surveying qualities of the physical. The irony of investigating physical reality through imagined landscapes to reach a transcendent state, does not escape me.

But, how can we get to the spiritual if not through the physical? The physical holds the mind and it is through the mind that thoughts and feelings occur. The path to transcendence is from the mind, into thought and feeling, to the experience of being and essential reality.

The paintings on the scroll are not about what is seen, rather they are about what is felt. As the scroll is rolled and unrolled, the paintings simulate a journey leading the viewer to travel inwardly at their own pace, as groups of paintings are hidden and revealed. The paintings are a search for spirit in the physical landscape and an attempt to capture a sense of the divine found in nature that was pioneered by the traditional Asian subject of landscape painting. “The arts (ink brush painting) of Zen are not intended for utilitarian purposes, or for purely aesthetic enjoyment, but are meant to train the mind, indeed, to bring it into contact with ultimate reality.”<sup>10</sup>



## II. EASTERN SEEDS

EAST      *We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world.*  
—*Dhammapada, 1.1-3*

WEST      *My aim in painting is to create pulsating, luminous, and open surfaces that emanate a mystic light, in accordance with my deepest insight into the experience of life and nature.*  
—*Hans Hofmann*

### WHO PAINTS?

The task to investigate the “unseen” is given to Asian landscape painting. Artists informed by Taoist philosophy strive to paint a life force that is believed to animate all living substance. The life force is considered to be a subtle, creative permeating, living energy that makes the difference between matter being alive or inanimate. The life force is carried into the body through the breath and is felt as vitality or spirit. In Hinduism it is referred to as prana, in Zen as Ki. In China, it is called ch’i and “constitutes the yang side of the vital breath that affects the viewer with some kind of radiating energy, whereas the yin side, absorbs the viewer into the painting, providing them with transcendental satisfaction.”<sup>11</sup> It can not be pointed out in a work rather it is felt or sensed. This quality of feeling infuses the work with soul or spirit. To capture a sense of this energy in a piece of artwork is a worthwhile challenge and is the intention I have for creating works of art.

I often finish a painting and wonder for a split second who did this, where did this come from? Mondrian said “the position of the artist if humble... is essentially a channel.”<sup>12</sup> While I know my hand moves the brush, the work feels unfamiliar until I identify it as “mine”. It has been my experience, that if I stay conscious of myself during the creative process, as opposed to losing my sense of self in the creation of the work, more often than not, the resulting work is ultimately unsatisfactory. When I take my psychological ego or small self out of the creative process, I let go of trying to control something that I am not able to control, anyway. Trading in egoistic control for the experience of connecting to something greater than my small self, is to trade inferior work for artwork that has the opportunity to be marked by transcendence. In other words, I get to work from an infinite source or what I call my Higher Self, instead of my limited small ego self, with more satisfying and often surprising results.

There are benefits of not being self identified with the art I create. I gain objective clarity in my ability to evaluate it during its creation and can let go of the work when it is completed. At the same time, creating is the justification for my existence. The concepts of discerning small self from an eternal permanent Self, non-attachment from detachment and union with the divine are common to an Asian worldview.<sup>13</sup>



Rebecca Moran, *Geode II*. Oil on canvas and digital print, 18"x 18" 2007.

My creative process is intuitive and feeling oriented, “the immediate experience of what, as the bottomless ground of Being the inner form where art becomes ‘artless’.<sup>14</sup> ‘Artless’ should not be confused with lack of skill. While acquiring skill does not make me an artist, creating art makes me an artist and my cultivation of skills is a life long commitment to my art practice.

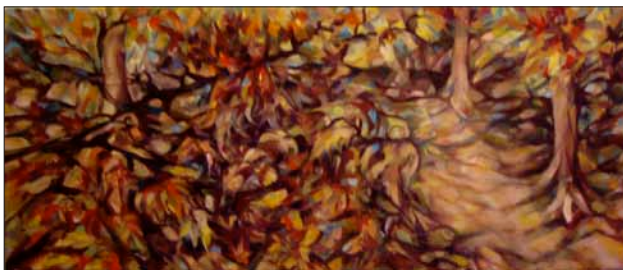


Georgia O'Keeffe, detail: *Music Pink and Blue II*. Oil on canvas, 35"x 29" 1919.

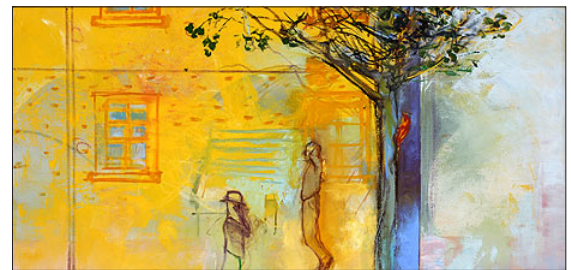
Kirk Norlin’s microscopic digital photographs of agates and petrified wood featured extraordinary naturally occurring landscape imagery that inspired me to paint, the *Geode Series*. I expanded upon the circular form of the digital image as the basis for these oil paintings. In the *Geode Series*, I have used similar visual language as Georgia O'Keeffe who was well known for her ‘S’ shaped organic forms swirling around a central axis.

My third semester mentor Robert Henry studied with Hans Hofmann in the 50’s. Henry often discussed with me in great detail, the push/pull theory of color and its ability to create space, depth and movement, a concept that distinguished Hofmann and his approach to painting.

*Long Forest* was painted by laying one stroke of color down next to another, carefully watching the color interactions while building form. I contemplated leaves decomposing to make soil, as I painted. The blaze of colored leaves against the sky decaying into rich brown earth, was the experience I tried to paint. The chaos of destruction evolving into the orderly rebirth of renewal is at it’s core transcendental and rooted in Romanticism.<sup>15</sup> Creation from destruction, although not overt is the optimistic origin of this work.



Rebecca Moran, *Long Forest*. Oil and canvas, 36"x 12" 2008.



Robert Henry, *Spring Is Here*. Oil on canvas, 30"x 40" 1990.

These paintings exemplify a difference in style and technique, yet conceptually they are consistent. Different tools make different marks and profoundly influence the outcome of any work. Being an artist, for me is to develop my sensitivity, perception and awareness toward techniques, materials and concept. Experimentation with new materials expands my ability for expression and allows me to handle media confidently.

#### A. COMPASSION

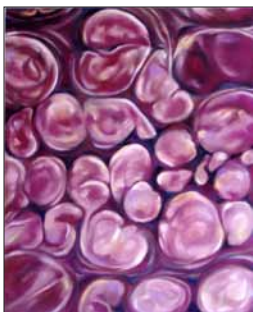
Compassion is the experiential heart of Buddhism and most religions encourages the cultivation of compassion. Emotions are a biologically based aspect of being human. Compassionate feelings are generated by the emotions. Emotions have a critical function as a guidance system for spiritual evolution. They offer essential data about the relationship I have to reality and my connection to my permanent Self. I have deep admiration for artists who uses their work to alleviate the suffering of others, particularly those who wield powerful emotional imagery for social good.

Käthe Kollwitz prints are powerful imagery that bypass the mind and communicate directly with the emotions. “Art is not only a form of action, it is a form of social action”. For art is a type of “communication, and when it enters the environment it produces its effects just as any other form of action does.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the artist is a catalyst for social change as art changes and evolves human consciousness. If I can communicate thoughts and feelings through a work, then it is possible for me to move others to action.



Käthe Kollwitz, *The Survivors*, Charcoal on paper, 19.5" x 25.5" 1923.

I want to raise consciousness specific to “we are them and they are us’. This is significant and reflects the idea “We are all one” not as a cliché, but as the literal truth. The idea of experiencing a transcendent unity of all things has the potential to profoundly effect social and cultural interaction, if this simple concept can be enacted as the foundation of human behavior and interaction.



Rebecca Moran,  
*Across the Species*. Chalk  
on sanded pastel paper  
24" x 18"



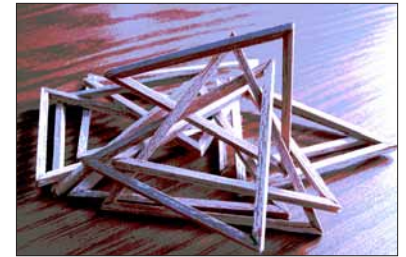
Rebecca Moran, *Mothers*. Ink and photographic transparencies 8.5" x 11" 2007.



*Across the Species* and *Mothers* [pg. 11] were created out of my feelings of compassion for suffering and loss. Vulnerable life represented by the embryonic forms are rendered in chalk pastel. The pastel contrasts with violent, chaotic gestures in the black and white monoprints. Photographic transparencies of Muslim women are held in place with straight pins above the monoprints in an obscure reference to women's work of sewing and being "pricked".

## B. GEOMETRY & GESTURE

Sacred Geometry is linked with mystical tenets from Pythagorean theory to Plato who alleged "God geometrizes."<sup>17</sup> I use geometry extensively in both painting and design. From grids based on the Golden Mean to exploring complex esoteric shapes in my digital work, geometric precision orders and balances out the intense disorder of my gestural work.

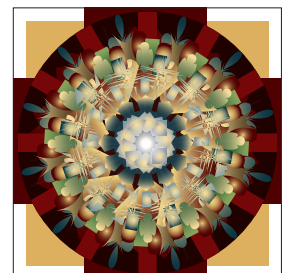
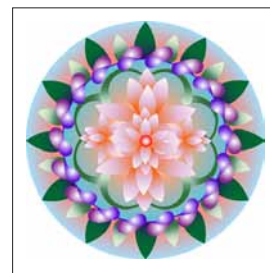
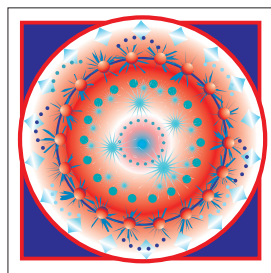
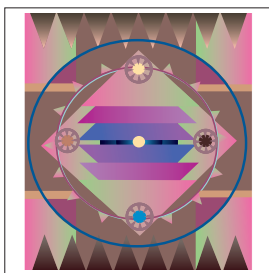


Rebecca Moran, *The Wreck of Ahtar: Blue Purple*. Digital print 24"x 36" 2007.

The series of digital posters called *The Wreck of Ahtar*, was an intentional study of disordered geometric form. I systematically photographed twelve equilateral triangles grouped in various stages of collapse. I intended to explore creation and destruction and create metaphors for architectural space in a constructed environment.

Within the circle as a sacred symbol the center signifies eternity while the circumference describes the cycle of death and rebirth. Between the center and the circumference the totality of the cosmos is contained. Tibetan Buddhist monks create sand mandalas comprised of sand, representing the impermanence of life. When the mandala is completed, the sand is brushed away and is reclaimed by the soil. Upon witnessing a sand mandala ceremony, I was inspired to create a series of digital mandalas called, *Tribal Regions*.

Various religious traditions use the mandala to focus attention in meditation, as a teaching tool and to establishing a sacred space. Carl Jung saw the mandala as "a representation of the unconscious self"<sup>18</sup> and believed mandalas enabled him to work towards wholeness in



Rebecca Moran, *Tribal Regions: Southwest, Icelandic, Lotus (China, India), Africa*. Archival digital prints, 24"x 26" 2007.

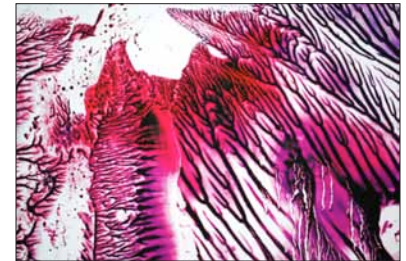
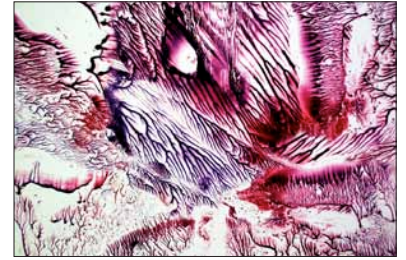
personality. Conceptually, I wanted to show a sense of cultural landscape derived from my perception of that place. Formally, I used radial symmetry, pattern and intricate color relationships to see if I could express landscape through pure geometric form.

For better or worse, the computer can do what the hand can not. I used the computer purposely as the tool for this work. Computer generated images look and feel differently than hand made work. I am acutely aware that art work done by my hand can not approach the precision of an image made on the computer. This awareness puts me squarely in touch with my limitations as an artist. Computer generated art has a recognizable quality that has to do in part with achieving a disquieting exactitude that is not human.

In *Digital Monoprints*, I challenged myself to create digital compositions that did not look like they were computer generated. This work led me to the study of Chinese ink brush painting. I was inspired by the natural forms of accidental processes as images made by chance resonate with our physical environment more so than computer generated images.

Monochromatic ink brush painting enabled me to concentrate solely on gesture and brush stroke. Adding color to my study of ink brush painting solidifies the value of the hand made mark, and reveals the basic ordering processes of the natural world.

The Northern Chinese Freehand style of ink brush painting has an ideology that closely corresponds to Abstract Expressionism. Artists strive to express their feelings and to capture the inner spirit of their subject instead of describing outward appearances. My mentor Qimin Lui, wanted to know where I learned to paint in a Northern Chinese Freehand style, which is markedly different from the minimal brush work found in the more popular Southern style. I studied neither painting style and could only answer him by suggesting that it was through my study of Abstract Expressionism.



Rebecca Moran, *Digital Monoprints*. Two Large format prints, 24" x 36" June 2007.



Wucious Wong, realizing vegetation. Ink brush painting. *The Tao of Chinese Landscape Painting*.



Wucious Wong, realizing vegetation. *Mountain Thoughts, No. 2*. Ink brush painting, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

### III. THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND MEDITATION

EAST      *When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be. —Lao Tzu*

WEST      *Meditation is the dissolution of thoughts in Eternal awareness or Pure consciousness without objectification, knowing without thinking, merging finitude in infinity. —Voltaire*

#### A. FORMLESS-NESS INTO FORM

Meditation has been practiced in the East for over five thousand years. It has been researched thoroughly by the West for the last fifty and is still being studied.<sup>19</sup> It is a core practice in Eastern traditions for self realization.

Physicist, John Hagelin discusses the Vedic understanding of consciousness as a field, and compared it with theories of the Unified Field derived by modern physics. Hagelin argues that both of these fields have almost identical properties and the most plausible explanation is that they are one and the same.<sup>20</sup> Asian philosophy names this field the Great Void, Nothingness or Emptiness. My understand of the Unified Field comes from my experience with meditation, not physics. I perceive relative states of being wherein “formless” evolves into organized form. It is no thing, yet all things in potential. It manifests and permeates all things: the whole universe, everything, while still remaining infinite and not manifest.

I was taught meditation as part of studying Vedanta. It is the practice and process of concentration and receptive awareness. It is not boring, esoteric, ascetic, difficult or weird. In fact, it’s fascinating, familiar, sensual and extremely powerful. It widening the aperture of perception and deepening insight necessary for discernment. It heightens my sensitivity and is indispensable for my gestural work and an intuitive use of color. Meditation’s purpose is for spiritual growth, not to advance my art practice, yet it does this for me.

Mindfulness is one of many approaches to meditation. The awareness of the here and now called “being present”<sup>21</sup> and has three purposes: to know the mind, train the mind, and to free the mind. The influence of mindfulness on my painting is significant. Being in the here and now teaches me to be present to what I am creating in ways that engage my whole self in one pointed concentration. The awareness of painting as it unfolds and my response to each moment I work, provides access to flashes of insight called ‘satori’ in Zen Buddhism.<sup>22</sup>

Being present gives me the ability to see my work 'as it is'. Immediacy informs my ability to respond to the dialogue between myself and the work. I immerse myself in the act of painting and momentarily forget I exist separately from the act of painting.

Meditation not only encompasses my creative process, it parallels it. Unanticipated insight occurs during meditation in similar ways. In painting, I suspend judgement of my work until it had been created and allow myself to fail. In meditation, I accept my failure to completely still my mind and keep trying with the reward of briefly succeeding. The work in painting for me is in ideation, preparation and full attention to the creative process.

Donald Kuspit's essay, *Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*,<sup>23</sup> compares William James "four marks" of the mystic state to Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill's alternative criteria. He quotes Underhill who said "True mysticism is active and practical, not passive or theoretical... Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual... The work is an object of Love... in the liberation of new or latent, forms of consciousness... inaccurately called ecstasy, is better named the Unitive State." Kuspit suggests applying Underhill's criteria to test abstract paintings success to convey the spiritual in art, yet concedes while most works do not satisfy all of Underhill's criteria, many satisfy one or more.

## B. OBJECT, SUBJECT

Thoughts have form, called "thought-forms" by Theosophists<sup>24</sup> and are said to arise and fall away from this Unitive State. I think the Unitive State is where I have access to unlimited sources of creativity, through an intuitive super conscious state. By suspending my intellect through meditation, I have access to cosmic consciousness which encompasses collective consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

First generation Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning and second generation Joan Mitchell take abstraction farther away from representation than I do, yet they inspire courage as I paint. In the paintings *Oil on Copper*, I use direct painting techniques in combination with traditional glazing techniques to suggest human form as landscape.



Rebecca Moran, *Ritual*.  
Oil on Copper, 7"x 9" 2008.



Rebecca Moran, *Lake*.  
Oil on Copper, 7"x 9" 2008.



Joan Mitchell, *Untitled*.  
Oil on canvas, 24"x 20" 2002.



Willem de Kooning, *Two Trees on St. Mary Street...Amen!*  
Oil on canvas, 80"x 70" 1975.

My artwork begins with an idea or constellation of ideas driven by curiosity or feeling. Once I focus on an idea, I choose the subject with the potential to reveal meaning or give layers of meaning to my idea. The subject directs my choice of media and sensitivity to the physicality of media brings the idea into visual form. I then make decisions as to how much visual information I put in a painting. It is the interaction and interpretation of the subject that interests me as well as what is essential for an object to be perceived. Abstraction has formal elements that communicate in a spatial context. In my landscape painting, the object perceived is ambiguous in order for visual recognition to subside. This Western duality of object and subject in my painting, asks the question, what is real?

My imagery is active, expressive and forceful. I am not letting go of the object toward a purity of abstract minimalist form. Minimalism comes close to visually representing the silent by removing the object into complete abstraction. I am not removing the object in my abstract work or in anyway renouncing the visible world. The intelligence in the human mind and in nature are identical. For me, the path to transcendence is through the natural world, not in it's denial, removal or control.

### C. THE LANDSCAPE

The canvas is a finite frame where each painting creates a new set of problems and directs the viewers attention to the concerns of the painter. Painting the landscape abstractly and imaginatively is an opportunity to create boundless space with infinite freedom. Exploration of pictorial sensuousness along with illusionary space for the mind to roam around in, gives voice to emotions that are both individual and collective. The earth stands as a metaphor for our physical, emotional and spiritual selves. I use natural forms to express difficult emotional, social and spiritual concerns through the metaphysical expressiveness of the emotional qualities found in gesture, color and space.



Rebecca Moran, left to right: *Assumptions*, *Crowded*, *Homeland*, *Triangle*,  
Oil on canvas 12"x 12" 2007.



## IV. WESTERN SOIL

EAST      *Truth is One, Paths are Many. —Rig Veda*

WEST      *The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance  
of things, but their inward significance. —Aristotle*

## A. THE MODERN IN ART

Western Artists represent the spiritual in art. During the Renaissance Leon Battista Alberti<sup>26</sup> described the “movements of the soul” and how to paint it. Rembrandt, Goya and Blake evolved Western painting by merging intense emotional imagery with innovative painting techniques.

Jacquelynn Baas, director of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum points out that Monet was “one of the first artist to articulate a meditative state of mind,”<sup>27</sup> perceptible in his water lily paintings. Additionally, the water lily or lotus is a traditional Buddhist symbol for clarity of consciousness. His obsession with the theme of impermanence was expressed in his paintings of the same subject over and over, in order to capture the illusive moment.

With the invention of photography, the camera freed artists to go beyond the customary role of a painter to capture a likeness of physical reality. The history of Western landscape painting was dramatically changed for example, in van Gogh’s fierce attempt to communicate the spiritual. His powerful use of the vocabulary of the mark was a precursor to Abstract Expressionism.<sup>28</sup> Palpable in his *Crows over Wheatfields*, the visceral qualities of paint joined the abstracted subject in expression of potent emotion articulating an experience of nature, to evoke the transcendent. The conventions of landscape painting were further transformed with Cubism as Picasso painted *Guernica* in an eerie precognition of World War II. Duchamp discussed his work, *The Bicycle Wheel*, “originally not created as an art object or ‘ready-made’, but as an object for contemplation,”<sup>29</sup> He was directly referencing The Wheel of Dharma, which is an ancient Buddhist symbol.

The Modernist idea of “primacy of method and technique over subject matter” is found in the work of Arthur Dove (b.1880), John Marin (b.1870) and Georgia O’Keeffe (b. 1887).<sup>30</sup>

Arthur Dove's *Tree* alludes to regeneration and growth, as does my painting *Eggs*. The ovoid form is tied to procreation and nature in an attempt to show unity between the forms found in nature and in the forces of nature.

Art can be thought of a conduit for human evolution with Post Modernism originating from the fragmentation of Modernist ideals. Could it be materialism, power and greed, not the ideals of Modernism that have co-opted art? The cataclysmic impact of World War I and World War II altered the progression of art. Much contemporary art has gone down a nihilistic dead end under the guise of Art for art sake. Is it possible that depicting the profoundly shocking or absurd is a kind of visual acting out in an anxious post modern era? Could it be a genuine effort by artists to heal humanity's psychic wounds inflicted by the abuse of power and misplaced idealism?

Arousing feelings of the infinite through natural forms, stem from Romanticism and conceptually dovetails with Taoism. Nature has an invisible and intangible aspect beyond the senses. The wholeness of nature is not objectively defined, rather it is meaningful only with in systems of human thought and experience.

#### B. CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

The first Western artist to advocate a universal language of abstraction was Wassily Kandinsky, who advised artists to "balance abstract form with semi-abstract form."<sup>31</sup> He believed along with Brancusi, Munch, Mondrian, and Klee that art serves as a guide to rekindle the spiritual dimension, a value I have internalized for my art practice.

The true values of Abstract Expressionists are "expression over perfection, vitality over finish, fluctuation over repose, the unknown over the known, the veiled over the clear, the individual over society and the inner over the outer,"<sup>33</sup> along with a belief in the ability of art to communicate common spiritual truths.



Rebecca Moran, *Eggs*, Oil on canvas, 12"x 12" 2007.



Arthur Dove, *Tree*. Watercolor, tempera, ink on paper, 5"x 7" 1935.



Wassily Kandinsky, \**Composition V*. Oil on canvas, 75"x 108". 1911.

\*Also titled: *The Last Judgement*, "the center is displaced in a sphere which approaches the divine".<sup>32</sup>



Rebecca Moran, *The Color Scroll Paintings: 2/15*. Ink, gouache on rice paper, 3"x 3" 2008.

As Western culture continues to advance technologically, the gestural mark answers a basic human need for connection to the natural world. Virtual space lacks physical human contact and physical space declines with the growth of human population. Progress, particularly in the digital world keeps intellectualism at the forefront of dominant Western cultural and at the same time, our inner selves continue to evolve. Abstract Expressionism is still necessary and relevant in contemporary art.

### C. LYRICAL ABSTRACTION

Abstraction is not oppositional to representation, nor does it “have a complete and prepared message that is a calculated and controlled.”<sup>34</sup> The lament over the commercialization of abstraction is a superficial reason to dismiss it. American Abstract Expressionism is powerful and continues to evolve. There are still vast areas to explore in Abstract Expressionism and Lyrical Abstraction provides a case in point.

Lyrical Abstraction, was coined in the late sixties to describe a return to painterly expressiveness by artists all over the country at that time and should be used today because it has historic credibility.<sup>35</sup> The style of this kind of abstraction is characterized by an intuitive, loose paint handling technique, spontaneous expression with the emphasis on the creation of illusionistic space.

Few contemporary artists work exclusively in Lyrical Abstraction; it is intense and demands a high level of intuitive energy that is difficult to sustain without balance. I have noticed artists who do create work in Lyrical Abstraction tend to create artwork in other categories, notably Geometric Abstraction and Color Field painting. Pat Lipsky, Ronnie Landfield and Jake Berthot are three out of the thirty three artists who participated in a show devoted entirely to Lyrical Abstraction in the early 1970's at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.<sup>36</sup>

Geometric Abstraction dubbed “cold abstraction” is systematic and uses a rational means for expression that balance out the high demands of my work in Lyrical Abstraction. When I work in Geometric Abstraction, I find digital media exceptionally well suited to Geometric Abstraction. There is something satisfying in creating pure shape, color and pattern that address the two dimensional picture plane. Unfortunately this method of abstract painting is not conducive for creating illusionistic space and tends to be viewed as decorative.

My paintings *Red Cliffs* and *Water Fall*, typify Lyrical Abstraction. The gestural mark carries energy that is felt and for me is the sensual, moving quintessential form of expression for describing life energy. It viscerally transports the spontaneity of inner states and connects it to visible outer expression. Gestural marks are a primal record of the artist's energy, with its own consciousness permeated by the humanness of the artist. Capturing the present conditions of a moment infused with the essence of what animates physical matter, my work evolves out of the landscape. Illusionistic landscape space becomes an object for the viewers mind, not an open window for the viewer's eye.

Overall, my work is reconstructive as opposed to de-constructive and seeks to revise Modernist ideals specifically regarding the idea of Art for life sake as opposed to Art for art sake. Art for life sake is a concept found in both Asian landscape painting and Romanticism.<sup>37</sup> Modernist values derive from Western ideals based on secular humanism, "affirming the power of human beings to create, improve, and re-shape their environment with the aid of scientific knowledge, technology and practical experimentation, thus in its essence is progressive and optimistic."<sup>38</sup>



Rebecca Moran Brine, *Red Cliff*. Oil, polypropylene paper, 12" x 36" 2008.



Rebecca Moran Brine, *Water Fall*. Oil, polypropylene paper, 12" x 36" 2008.

## V. INFLUENCES

EAST *I call myself a nationalist, but my nationalism is as broad as the universe. It includes in its sweep all the nations of the earth. My nationalism includes the well-being of the whole world.*  
—Mahatma Gandhi.

WEST *No one I know of has gone to the moon has not been affected in some way that is similar. It is what I prefer to call instant global consciousness. Each person comes back with a feeling that he is no longer only an American citizen; he is a planetary citizen.*  
—Apollo 14 Astronaut, Edgar Mitchell, February 9, 1971

Growing up in upstate New York, I internalized a Puritan work ethic from my Dutch Protestant father who was a nuclear physicist and rationalist. In contrast, my mother was from a demonstrative second generation, Italian Roman Catholic family and a passionate community organizer and social worker.

My paintings are marked with the concerns of the atomic age and planetary citizenry. The prospect of nuclear annihilation entered into my psyche in the late 50's, the anti-war movement in the early 60's, the first photograph of the earth taken from space in the early 70's, the fall of Soviet Union, the AIDS epidemic and the birth of the digital age all constitute my contemporary history and influence my image making.

Living in Germany as a child, I participated in the pleasurable national past time of "spaziergangen" (woods walking). The rolling green hills and Black Forest is where I fell in love with the landscape, coincidentally, the homeland of nineteenth-century Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich.

I was exposed to the major art museums of Italy, France and Spain which added to my education as an artist. The original Hieronymus Bosch triptych, *Garden of Earthly Delights* introduced me to a hallucinatory landscape where I learned early that representation could be used in fantasy.

As a young adult, I lived in Iran and traveled throughout the Middle East and Asia. Significant historic sites of Persepolis in Iran, Delphi, Crete in Greece, Agra in India and Bamian in Afghanistan and Buddhist temples in Candy, Sri Lanka and The Golden Palace in Bangkok, Thailand provided me the opportunity to experience art and spiritual traditions firsthand from other cultures.

Images that hold and transmit energy are powerful and inspire my sense of aesthetics. The Asian view values a harmonious balance of a perceived dual nature of energy and focuses on the expression of those qualities rather than a Western concern for creating beauty.

At age 82, Zao Wou-Ki's life time spans almost a century of art history which he has fully participated, successfully blending both traditional Chinese landscape painting and Western abstract painting. Zao's work inspires me to be aware of an intercultural exchange and models a simultaneous preservation of his own cultural heritage while enriching mine. I learn from studying Zao Wou Ki's work. I am attentive to how he integrates Abstract Expressionism with Asian landscapes painting using the language of modern Western abstraction. He paints atmospheric perspective with a range of textures and gestures that creates infinite space and was quoted as saying, "*I do not paint the landscape, I paint space*".<sup>39</sup> I fully concur, the visual language he uses to paint the landscape achieves transcendental qualities and opens my eyes to what I am looking to do in my own work.

Contemporary American abstract landscape painter, James Lavadour is another artist whose work I respond to in more than style or technique. Lavadour identifies the properties of paint as a model for the infinite. For me, it is the space, paint creates that allude to the infinite. As a Native American from the Northwest, Lavadour walks the landscape and has a visceral connection to the physical act of walking and painting. Lavadour believes being in touch with the ground connects us in a shared existence. He talks about his work as Romantic landscapes that unite all of our visions and cast light on the unseen. His focus is my focus, the transcendent qualities of the beloved earth.

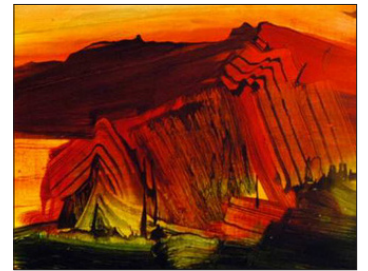
Both these contemporary artists are important to my current work. The majesty and feeling of these artists work with the landscape, strongly evokes states of transcendence. They are accomplished in the use of gesture and color to create movement and energy. I want my work to speak in this abstract visual language. It is my observation, that spiritual ideas seem to be culturally influenced by the same fundamental truths.



Zao Wou-Ki, *June 27, 1979* Oil on canvas, 51.25" x 76.75" 1979.



Rebecca Moran, detail: *The Color Scroll Paintings: 2/21*. Ink, gouache on rice paper, 3" x 3" 2008.



James Lavadour, detail: *Deep Moon*. Oil on panel, 72" x 90" 2004.



Rebecca Moran, detail: *The Color Scroll Paintings: 6/11*. Ink, gouache on rice paper, 3" x 3" 2008.

I subscribe to the idea that my finite mind can not comprehend the infinite unknown, except by alluding to indirect metaphors expressed by art or by evoking transcendence through experiencing works of art.

Post Modernism obscures distinctions, demask pretensions and encourages a sensitivity to cultural, ethnic, and human conditions. The expression of the unexplored and a blurring of previously established expectations of painting, distinguishes these artists and myself as contemporary. The abstract and figurative, Eastern and Western, this genre or that style are less defined presently leaving a wider range of possibilities for all contemporary artists.

#### A. FUTURE WORK

Geometric Abstraction balances my work in Lyrical Abstraction. So far, I have created separate work in both these areas and think about how to use both forms in the same piece of artwork.

Religious historian, Mircea Eliade identifies general religious archetypal symbols found in images as thresholds, cosmic mountains, world trees and sacred centers.<sup>40</sup> These symbols are consistently found in my work and are expressed unconsciously.

There are three paintings I plan to finish. The first one is *Into the Light*. I painted it with the idea of pictorially dissecting form into subjective geometric order. I am reorganizing form in a personal and dramatic way, not to explore cubist perception, rather in an attempt to express transcendent vision.

The second painting is a seascape started at the beginning of this program and the third painting, is *Māyā*. In *Māyā* the window functions as a symbolic threshold between the physical and non-physical worlds. In my painting titled *Māyā*, the intent was to show a window curtain pulled slightly aside, revealing a slice of light. The opening is a symbolic threshold, a metaphor for glimpsing the eternal.



Rebecca Moran, detail: *Into the Light*. Oil on denim, 26" x 36.5" 2008. World trees archetype.



Rebecca Moran, *Maya*. Oil on canvas, 18" x 18" 2007. Threshold archetype.

In opposition to the threshold archetype, *Sea Glass* shows a shallow space with individual bottles up against a wall representing the transparent and fragile self, in the finite space of the physical world.

Regarding new paintings, the figure as landscape is a reoccurring subject for me. I plan to create a series of paintings with the figure as the focal point rather than the landscape. The computer and camera will continue to be art tools used in my image making. I am inspired by contemporary time-based media artists working with movement and time to illustrate abstract and complex metaphysical concepts.

As I emerge as an artist, it is important for my growth to remain connected to a community of like-minded artists. I imagine seeking out experiences such as artist residencies to lead me further along my path as an artist. I will continue to examine how other artists create their work. I am looking forward to further study of the writings of Klee, Rothko and Pousette-Dart as they articulate their spiritual beliefs related to their art practice. Ancient texts on painting fascinates me. I plan on spending some time researching *The Vishnudharmottara* which is a treatise on Indian Painting.



Rebecca Moran, *Sea Glass*. Oil on canvas, 18"x 18" 2007.



## VI. CONCLUSION

EAST            *Before enlightenment “Chop wood carry water,  
After enlightenment: Chop wood, carry water. —Zen saying*

WEST            *It is the spirit that rules over matter, not the other way around.  
—Wassily Kandinsky*

At times, I have felt the need to search outside my cultural roots to find what informs my art practice. Maybe spiritual criteria is easier to judge from a position of being outside of ones own culture. The indoctrination of culture does not have the same effect on someone who grew up outside that culture. Is it a fresh eye, or an eye with the handicap of both sets of cultures?

While I dislike categorizations in general and particularly for works of art, the signs of being in a transitional period are evident. Cultural values are destabilizing and evolving globally, even as they are fought for and justified under the bid for power. A mixture of cultures is taking place as new visions are being born from old, anything goes in art. There is no one unified contemporary Western aesthetic to rebel against or to build on.

The commonality in Western transcendentalism and Eastern philosophy informs my work. The Eastern concepts I have adopted as my own are integrated at an experiential level. My paintings are fundamental transformations and authentic expressions born from the human values I hold as a Western artist and a global citizen.

Conceptually, transcendence is based on the mutual interdependence of exterior opposites. In Eastern philosophy, there is “no-thing” to transcend that is “in between” metaphysical reality and non-dualistic thought. It is a paradox that symbols and metaphors fabricate dualistic reality and at the same time function to transcend it.

We are rooted in the earth and to each other. To engage in behaviors that are incongruent with this fact, will result in more suffering and, ultimately, human extinction. Self-transcendence is a path to coexistence and to the recognition that we are part of a greater whole. East or West, if I can generate an awareness of spiritual truth in my landscape painting, I will succeed in being the artist I am.

## ENDNOTES

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  - <sup>2</sup> Arnheim, Rudolf. *Visual Thinking*. London: Faber, 1970. 37-39.
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  - <sup>6</sup> Wong, Wucius. *The Tao of Chinese Landscape Painting, Principles & Methods*. Design Press: New York, 1991. 29.
  - <sup>7</sup> Nicolaidis, Kimon. *The Natural Way to Draw: A Working Plan of Art Study*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1941. 5-31.
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  - <sup>9</sup> "Māyā (illusion) Concepts analogous to Māyā" Dr Joe Kiff (contribs. April 14, 2007), accessed August 17, 2008. <<http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Māyā28illusion29>>.
  - <sup>10</sup> Suzuki, D.T., Introduction. *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel. New York: Vintage, 1989. vii.
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  - <sup>13</sup> Prothero, Stephen. *Religions of the East: Paths to Enlightenment*. Boston University, 2005. 89-94.
  - <sup>14</sup> Herrigel, Eugen. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. New York: Vintage, 1989. 6.
  - <sup>15</sup> Rosenblum, Robert. *Modern Painting & the Northern Romantic Tradition*. 15.
  - <sup>16</sup> Rothko, Mark. *The Artist's Reality*. Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko, 2004. 10.

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- <sup>19</sup>. Benson, Dr. Herbert, Klipper, Miriam Z. *The Relaxation Response*. HarperCollin, 2000. 143-150.
- <sup>20</sup>. Hagelin, John. “Is Consciousness the Unified Field? A Field Theorist’s Perspective.” *Modern Science and Vedic Science 1*, 1987: 29-87.
- <sup>21</sup>. Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*. New World Library: California, 2004. 51-53.
- <sup>22</sup>. Herrigel, Eugen. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. 80.
- <sup>23</sup>. Kuspit, Donald. *Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art* Maurice Tuchman, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. 322-323. Kuspit is referencing Wassily Kandinsky’s book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in his essay title. Kandinsky identified the spiritual as a “search for the abstract in art”.
- <sup>24</sup>. Tuchman, Maurice, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Abbeville Press: New York, 1986. 135-137. Thought-forms is also found in Vedic philosophy in the ‘I’ sense itself, what seems to be the basic I or subject, is nothing but a series of thoughts whose subject matter is ‘I’. It is changing all the time along with the changes of the objects of my environment, the changing conditions of the body, etc., *Thought Forms* was written by theosophists Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, discusses nature and the power of thoughts as they considered art to be a realm of thought between life and spirit.
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- <sup>27</sup>. Bass, Jacquelynn. *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy & Western Art: Monet to Today*. University of California Press: 2005. 20-24.
- <sup>28</sup>. *The Power of Art: Disc. 2, Van Gogh*, Simon Schama, DVD-Video, 2006.
- <sup>29</sup>. Bass, Jacquelynn. *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy & Western Art: Monet to Today*. 86.
- <sup>30</sup>. Tuchman, Maurice, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. 113-115.

- <sup>31</sup> Tuchman, Maurice, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. 202.
- <sup>32</sup> Vezin, Annette and Luc. *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*. Pierre Terrail: Paris, 1992. 12.
- <sup>33</sup> Ashton, Dore. Introduction. *Abstract Expressionists in America*. William C. Seitz. Harvard University Press: Boston, 1983. xxi.
- <sup>34</sup> Tuchman, Maurice, et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. 313.
- <sup>35</sup> Ashton, Dore. "Young Abstract Painters," *Right On! Arts*. February, 1970: 31-35.  
Lyrical Abstraction is considered to have developed along side of Conceptual Art, Postminimalism, Earth Art, Video, Performance art, Installation art, Fluxus, Abstract Expressionism, Color Field Painting, Hard-edge painting, Minimal Art, Op art, Pop Art, Photorealism and New Realism to extend the boundaries of Contemporary Art in the mid-1960's through the 1970's.
- <sup>36</sup> Aldrich, Larry. "Young Lyrical Painters, Art in America," *Lyrical Abstraction, Exhibition Catalogue, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut*. December, 1969: 104-113. Originally coined Lyrical Abstraction by Larry Aldrich founder of the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield Connecticut in 1969 to describe what Aldrich said he saw in the studios of many artists, Aldrich donated the paintings from the exhibition to the Whitney Museum of American Art. The term Lyrical Abstraction was a pejorative, which unfortunately adversely affected those artists whose works were associated with that name.
- <sup>37</sup> Rosenblum, Robert. *Modern Painting & the Northern Romantic Tradition*. 71.
- <sup>38</sup> Witcombe, Christopher L. C. E. *Roots of Modernism, What is Art?... What is an Artist?* September 2008. <<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/modernism>>.
- <sup>39</sup> Wou-Ki, Zao. "Paper and China," *Marlborough Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, New York*. September, 2008.
- <sup>40</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion*. Harcourt: 1957. 39.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Integral Yoga.

The Power of Myth, Joseph Campbell.

Letters to a Young Artist, Art on Paper.

The Writings of Agnes Martin. Essays R. Krauss, A. Wagner.

Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science and the Spiritual, Lynn Gamwell.

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Pravas Jivan Chaudhury. "Aesthetic Metaphysics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 24, No. 1. Autumn, 1965: 191-196.

Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Essays, Series I*. 1<sup>st</sup> World Publishing: 2004, 7

"There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this Universal Mind, is a party to all that is or can be done, for is the only and sovereign agent."