

Satoko Motouji

Research of Zen Philosophy and Practice of its Aesthetics in my Art.

Summary of Intent:

The main Intent of my sabbatical work includes studio work, research and giving lectures based on my research.

1. Day to day studio work on the concept of “Impermanence and Changes” of nature and human existence.
2. Continuous study of Japanese calligraphy, that will lead to future black and white pictorial pieces on Japanese paper.
3. Research on the philosophy and history of Zen Buddhism and its aesthetic tradition, especially Zen Dry Garden.
4. Giving three lectures at Meiji University on “Abstraction as Process” which I will write during the sabbatical period.

Chronological Order of my Sabbatical Activities:

1.  
Day-to-day studio work is a continuation of my work based on my long- term concept of “Impermanence and Changes” of nature and human existence. Originally I planned to work with ink on Japanese paper, but I decided to continue working primarily with watercolor and some in oil.

After my sabbatical proposal was approved, I was offered a chance to have a one-person show at White Lotus Gallery in Eugene. It was a privilege for me as an artist to have such an invitation. Having a one-person show is a demonstration of my research as instructor/artist as well as a great opportunity to share my work with my students and the audience in the local community. I engaged in this project during my sabbatical time. I had only about five months to prepare for the show. This is unusually a short preparation time, since in most cases an artist is given one to two years of preparation time before the show. Having such a short notice, it was more sensible for me to continue my study of watercolor to accomplish my task, rather than creating a body of work with a completely a different media, such as Ink.

I have been working on a theme of “transiency and ephemerality of our reality in nature” for about five to six years. This concept is stated in “Heart Sutra” in Buddhism. I have been studying “Heart Sutra” and have been developing artwork on

the theme of acceptance of the changes in nature and the impermanence of beings on earth. In order to develop images, I had to be in my studio for long hours every day.

I jumped right into my studio work in early July when, I consider, my sabbatical work practically started. For the first month in my studio it was a constant struggle of not having any good work worth seeing or showing. I am always very aware that it takes a tenacious and long effort to bring myself to the point where I can produce meaningful work. I just had to keep working everyday persistently. In a way I had to achieve a productive point in my work and feel “being” in a painting rather than “doing” a painting. At the beginning of August, some positive and slightly encouraging elements started to emerge in my work. In order to support my in-the-studio work, I went outside to do plein-air painting (outdoor painting) regularly to relearn how to see the changes of light in nature. I kept working in this manner into September. At the first part of October, I started to concentrate on the preparation of my show, which started on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012.

I probably produced about 200 pieces, including very small pieces in watercolor in about three months. I realized, though, only 30 to 40 pieces among them were worth showing or sharing with others. Art making is always challenging, yet I appreciate this complete immersion in my studio work tremendously. My struggles and problem solving in the process of art making is significant experience which I share with my students.

I was given a chance to give a short lecture on my work at my show at the White Lotus Gallery. I appreciated encouraging comments from my students and other local audience during and after the show.

2.

In terms of using Japanese ink, this time I limited my work to study Japanese calligraphy, since I realized how important it is for me to re-visit the basics of Japanese calligraphy before painting. (Traditionally, Chinese and Japanese artists studied prior to their training in painting.) In the summer of 2012 and during the sabbatical time, I consciously relearned the basics and revisited the practices that I did in the past. Along with the studio work in watercolor and oil, I practiced Japanese calligraphy diligently, hoping to develop immersion of pictorial images and calligraphy in the future. Hopefully, covering the basics will help me to create convincing images in the future.

Prior to taking a calligraphy course from a master in January 2011, I had nine years of practice in Japan and the U.S. Since I had some experience, I needed to find someone who could teach someone of my level - an intermediate to advance practitioner. In the last two years I have commuted to the class held in Portland twice a month to relearn the basics of Japanese calligraphy. Time and energy spent on taking the class and driving is challenging, but studying with a master has given me a very important insight in this field. Next year, I will be granted a

“calligrapher’s name” which signifies an achievement which allows the person the possibility of being a calligraphy teacher in the future. In December 2012 in Japan, I was able to visit to Mr. Futou Suzuki, who is a calligraphy master, and took a lesson on December 9<sup>th</sup>.

I keep working with ink and create black and white two-dimensional and three-dimensional work in my studio as an extension of my sabbatical work. I will show my work at the Lane Community College Gallery in the academic year from 2014 to 2015.

### 3. Research:

I started to do research on Zen Buddhism and its aesthetics at the beginning of November immediately after my show started. This was an extension of my research on the history of Japanese gardens and the development of the Zen dry gardens, which I have concentrated on for the last three to four years.

I also started to prepare lectures that I was asked to give three times at Meiji University in December. The title of my lecture was “ Abstraction as a Process” in which I incorporated my thought on the aesthetic theory of Mondrian and Kandinsky, who are the first painters of non-representational artwork in the early twentieth century. My intention was to relate the Zen gardens to the notion of abstraction created by Mondrian and Kandinsky. Zen Dry garden and 20<sup>th</sup> century non-representational work seem far distant in their history and culture. Yet, there is similarity in stressing the need of spirituality in the visual expression that links both art forms: painting and garden, since Mondrian and Kandinsky saw “theosophy” as an alternative philosophical basis for their work. This research was personally important, since I strive toward the abstract expression and give a spiritual depth in my work.

In December I spent about three weeks in Japan where I continued my research: re-writing lectures, visiting some Zen gardens in Kyoto and Fukuoka, recording them in small drawings and digital images.

During my visit in Japan, I was also able to view two Noh-theater performances, tinged with the teaching and aesthetics of Zen philosophy. These performances are very sporadically held, so catching these opportunities was a privilege. Each performance usually lasted for about five hours.

### 4. Lectures

In late September, I was given an unexpected opportunity to give a lecture at Siena Art Institute in Siena, Italy on September 25<sup>th</sup>. I was thrilled to give a presentation at this institution, so I accepted the invitation. I prepared my lecture some days prior to my departure, and talked about the concept of transiency in relation to the process of my work.

On December 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, I gave lectures at the Meiji University. (Originally a lecture was planned in June 2013, but the schedule was changed.) The first one was for some graduate students in the liberal arts. The second one was for a general audience who was interested in the relationship between the religion and art. This lecture was followed by the panel discussion by Professor Kaneyama at Meiji University, Mr. Mitsukuni Takimoto, a sculptor in Japan, and me. The third lecture was for the students in one of the architecture classes who are taking this course offered in English. The first two were done in Japanese and the third one was done in English.

One of the most productive and exciting elements in these lectures was to engage the audience in hands-on drawing activity. At the beginning of each lecture, I asked the people to draw with pencil. Each person did four sets of short drawings of someone near: blind drawing, unfamiliar drawing, gesture drawing and familiar hand drawing. My goal was to make them understand physically the importance of “abstracting” the reality (conceptualization), which occurs not only in non-representational images, but also representational images. Also I wanted to emphasize the importance of observation of the reality without being self-consciousness. It was delightful to see them having a sheer joy of drawing.

In between the lectures, I visited some Zen gardens where I would spend at least two to three hours to experience the shifting light and dark which occurs in each garden. Visiting the gardens was a spiritual experience as well as an opportunity to create more visual examples, which I included into my lectures.

In the winter term 2013, I had several occasions to do a digital presentation of my work. One was in the Modern Art History class and the others were in my classes at Lane.

Conclusion:

Each activity in my sabbatical is a part of a larger picture of my activity as an artist/instructor. My research and practice are continuous and will be continued into the future. The work I accomplished during my sabbatical gives me a basis to further investigate the subject that I am interested in.

Even though I think that I have done variety of work during my sabbatical consistently, I feel that I only scratched the surface of a huge mountain. This sabbatical gave me a chance to continue my work from the past and look into my new artistic direction. I had an opportunity to share my experience as an artist and will continue to do so with my students and other audiences.

In my studio, I struggle to search for a new direction in my work and continue my work with ink on paper, which I hope to bring to more fruition. My research in Zen

Gardens and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism continues and my research always will be the backbone of my studio work.

I am extremely grateful that I was give time and space to reflect on my work and my philosophical and esthetic interests. I would like to extend my gratitude to LCC and the faculty members who support and work to maintain this program.

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