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# Meditative Art: A Diversion from Stress and Anxiety

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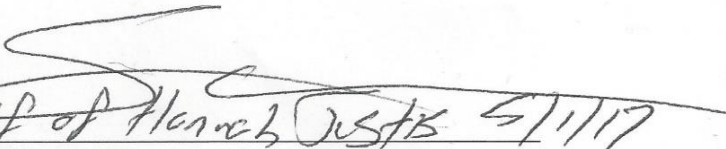
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Meditative Art: A Diversion from Stress and Anxiety

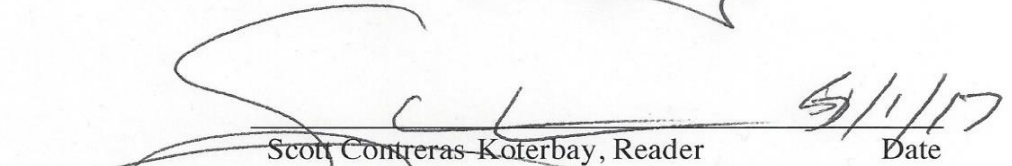
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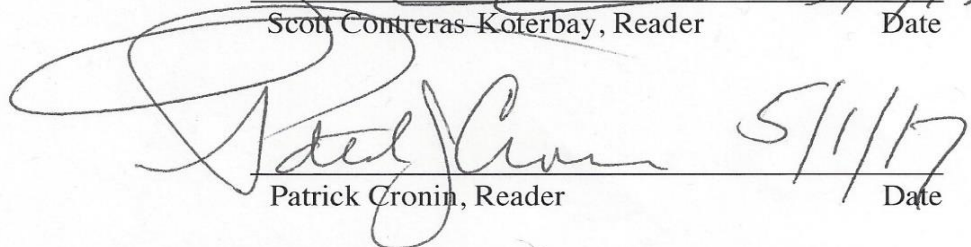
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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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and the  
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On behalf of Hannah Justis 5/1/17  
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In preparation for graduating with a bachelor's of fine art, I wished to present a body of work that visually represented my own meditative process of managing stress and anxiety. Towards the end of studying for my undergraduate, I began preparing for my Final Exhibition Show, and with these preparations, my life, as well as my work, changed drastically. Within the past two years, my drawings began to take on a meditative therapeutic process. It was this development that then helped manage my growing stress levels and well as the symptoms that stemmed from high levels of anxiety and bloomed from losing control in my day to day life. It was then conceived, through this carefully crafted systematic means of creation, the notion that my mind could relax and take time to resolve the matters that plagued it, while at the same time, construct something artistically productive. It was not soon after this notion, whilst experimenting with my art, that my drawings took on and maintained abstracted compositions representing visuals of repetition and pattern, as well as clean minimalistic forms and lines. When creating this work, I had found a sense of peace and resolution among my stress by constructing these simplistic configurations. While drawing, I achieved a juxtaposition of varying means of visually representing the idea of control and order within my work as well as within my mind and body. It was this, the creation of these drawings, that hence became my meditative escape in managing my stress and anxieties as well as my obsessive compulsive tendencies, where; without structure, had the potential to turn self-hindering and painful.

The universal term of 'stress', according to the health professional Jerry Kennard from the organization *Health Central*, is now so integrated into our culture that it seems nearly mundane and insignificant. The notion of stress as a mental state of being is a relatively new concept, however, and one that millions of people suffer from long term. The execution of stress as a psychological problem, is frequently attributed to the "General Adaptation Syndrome"

created by Hans Selye in 1936, though the term 'stress' was not adopted until around 1949.

(Kennard) Selye's syndrome consisted of a three stage process, the first being the response to some external factor, as our minds seem to react by, "mobilizing our physical resources to deal with or escape from the stressor" (Kennard). This is called the alarm stage. Resistance comes next and is the way our bodies and minds cope with the alarm stage as a way of struggling with the external problem. Lastly comes exhaustion, which of course if when we as people are unable to escape our stressors and, once repeatedly exposed, fall to mental and physical fatigue.

(Kennard) This "General Adaptation Syndrome" is something that many of us can relate to in intimate ways. Who has not been panicked by a problem or worry in their lives? Who has not tried to then fight that problem, to then only become more stressed and finally succumb to absolute exhaustion? It happens every day; be it a deadline, an appointment, or whatever trivial or colossal outside contributor that may be responsible. Stress and anxieties manifest constantly and within everyone, effecting people in unpredictable means and producing various unique symptoms and problems. Stress and daily anxieties are pervasive in our society and the percentage of those suffering are only increasing. According to PhD Lynn Keegan in the writing *Alternative and Complementary Modalities for Managing Stress and Anxiety*, "More than two thirds of office visits to physicians are for stress related illnesses..." (Keegan ). Though normal stress and anxiousness are components of growing older and taking on the responsibilities that dictate an adult's reality, when the combination of these anxieties consume an individual's life in an encompassing way, a means of managing should be considered necessary. Dr. Keegan mentions, "The problem occurs when stress exceeds a productive level and interferes with the ability to think, remember and focus on tasks" (Keegan). Finding a way to manage stress and anxiety is important, especially when the amount of stress is hindering day to day quality of life,

but as stated before: everyone is different, and it takes time and patience to find the method that works best for an individual person. In a nationwide study of American adults, which was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, it was indicated that one in three Americans find success in using therapeutic exercises that were considered unconventional when managing their stressors (Keegan). According to the article *Alternative and Complementary Modalities for Managing Stress and Anxiety*, such methods included; relaxation techniques, imagery, massage therapy, herbal medicines, self-help groups, exercise and hypnosis (Keegan). As well, the *Anxiety and Depression Association of America* gives various approaches to learning how to deal with regulating and controlling stress disorders on their website. Eating a well-balanced diet, limiting alcohol and caffeine intake, getting plenty of proper sleep, deep breathing exercises, art practices, and meditation techniques were only a few of the recommended alternative remedies to normalize stress levels in healthy control ways.

For the intents and purpose of this writing, the focus will concentrate on both the alternative ideas of art as a therapeutic process as well as the act of meditation. Before understanding the personal relationship with my own decision of choosing such a means as a healing, it is important to understand what exactly ‘art therapy’ is and by what definition I find influence. Edited by Judith Aron Rubin, in the book *Approaches to Art Therapy: Theory and Technique*, within the past several decades of the original research, the field of art as a therapeutic exercise has progressed considerably. The book goes on to explain that, though ‘art therapy’ is often misrepresented and misunderstood there is currently more security among those who practice as well as a greater awareness and acceptance of what has been defined as an unconventional approach to anxiety relief (Rubin). It is because of this awareness that the field has been able to return to its original roots, focusing on the ‘art’ part of the hybrid as the core

concentration. For without art as the foundation, according to Rubin who has practiced art therapy as a professional for over fifty years, none of the therapeutic or technical approaches to the ‘therapy’ half of the definition would be possible (Rubin). *The Handbook of Art Therapy*, which makes it clear that it does not claim to be a manual in which to follow verbatim, gives a clear account of the guidelines and detailed understanding of the theory and practice of art creation as a therapy. Within the handbook, several different definitions are then defined in relation to understanding what exactly ‘art therapy’ is, and how each regard the importance of art process as the essential core. So what exactly is ‘art therapy’? According to Caroline Case and Tessa Dalley, co-authors of *The Handbook of Art Therapy*, “Art therapy has a dual heritage from art and a psychodynamic way of thinking. As a result of this there is a spectrum of definitions and ways of working. Some therapists put an emphasis on the art-making process itself as healing, where’s others focus on the therapeutic relationship with the therapist in the context of image-making as additional communications” (Case and Dalley). Currently, in reference to the *British Association of Art Therapists*, or *BAAT*, the definition of art therapy is summarized as the following: “Art Therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of communication...The overall aim of its practitioners is to enable a client to effect change and growth on a personal level through the use of art materials in a safe and facilitating environment” (Case and Dalley). It was earlier disputed by professionals within the *BAAT* in the mid-1900s, if the practice should be defined as ‘art therapy’ or ‘art psychotherapy’. Joy Schaverien, author of *The Revealing Image: Analytical Art Psychotherapy in Theory and Practice*, an informative publication about the importance of the image in art psychotherapy and analysis, usefully distinguished between three definitions of art therapy which are all currently being implemented within professional practices (Schaverien). All varying classifications respect the innate healing

power of art, but instead differ in three ways. Analytical Art Psychotherapy, as Schaverien describes, focuses on image and relationships with a therapists as equally important; neither having priority over the other. Art Psychotherapy primarily puts emphasis on the therapeutic relationship, the art and image coming secondary. Finally, Art Therapy; which centers on the actual art process and creation (Schaverien). Though I have never personally spoken to a professional therapists regarding my own stress and anxieties, I would later consider the definition of 'Art Therapy' as my personal means of coping; my emphasis being solely on the process of creating my artwork and resulting in an almost meditative state.

I have no one but myself to blame for my own stress, I have always been an individual to be, as they say, 'my own worst enemy'. I am a perfectionist, anal retentive, and practically textbook definitely of the 'A' type personality. The constant fear of letting others down in any endeavor I encountered was constant, but even worst was the fear of disappointing myself. No particular catalyst resulted in me being this way; this is simply who I have always been. It was when I was eleven years old, however, and made an innocent decision to succumb to a childhood friend's dare, that my overwhelming *need* to 'control' developed. It was because of this trivial childhood injury, one that only required a handful of stitches and my favorite t-shirt ruined, that I began to develop what I call, 'spells'. I would later learn that what I was really experiencing were mild seizures called 'complex partial seizures', or as they are referred to now, 'focal onset impaired awareness seizures'. "Onset" seizures manifest slightly different for anyone overcome by them, but for me they started as random attacks of unaware dream like rambles. I was capitulated by these 'spells' of unawareness, where I had no control over my body and mind. I would speak if spoken to, even hold entire conversations , my body moved as it pleased, and sometimes I would cry out in distress, but once the 'spell' was over with, I had no recollection of

it ever occurring. Often after having an attack, I would fall asleep, only to wake up a little while later completely disoriented as to why I was laying on the floor. These ‘spells’ acted as my alarm stage of the “General Adaptation Syndrome”; my body’s way of warning me to an overwhelming stressor. As I grew older, however, and became more aware as to what theses ‘spells’ were and to what generally triggered an attack, I learned to somewhat control them, or rather, resist them. One unique symptom of ‘Onset’ seizures are they are often accompanied by a warning ‘aura’. This almost hazy nausea, as I would experience it, could sometimes be cautioned off if I controlled the desire to yield it so. As well as the indicative warning feelings that accompanies these particular seizures, automatisms; such as repeated swallowing and picking at skin or clothing are common side effects. I learned as I grew older, that when I began to feel as if I could fall into a ‘spell’, if I focused my mind on one particular action, something relatively absent minded and repetitive, such as an automatism tick, I could focus enough to will away the full onset of the seizure. It was here, that the beginnings of my obsessive compulsive behavior also started to manifest. As I struggled to learn how to control the seizures, I entered into my first year of college, as a bachelor of arts. With this new endeavor in my life, as I moved away from home and, as expected, took on new responsibilities; I developed an aching need to control these ‘Onset’ occurrences desperately. As of now, I have been struggling with learning what these ‘spells’ were triggered by; mainly stress, and how to resist them from interfering with my day to day life, for seven years. They were not a constant occurrence, but a nagging fear persistent in my mind. It had at this point become a major safety concern, as to if I would be safe if one were to occur. By now, I had learned, to a degree, how to keep my mind focused to nearly consistently fight off a ‘spell’ when I felt one approaching. I used the automatism ticks that I would subconsciously do while deep within a seizure, consciously as a means of defense. The most



common, and most successful tick, was repeatedly picking at a part of my skin; nail beds and parts of my lower neck were most effective. It was from these actions that I began to develop other obsessive compulsive actions; namely skin picking, organizational tasks and grooming habits, and as a result was falling into constant exhaustion because my own resistance. As the first two years of my undergraduate flew by, I had nearly mastered how to successfully control the 'spells' with focusing my mind on mindless tasks and actions. Yet, these 'therapeutic' actions were becoming draining distractions and a major hindrance to my development as a student and artist. It was during the middle of my junior year of my undergraduate, while struggling to find a compromise between managing my anxieties to control the spells, and creating a unique body of artwork, that I began experimenting with abstraction as a therapeutic art process.

Up until the latter half of my undergraduate degree, my artwork was as far from abstraction as possible. Having grown up in an artistically influential family, it was very much up to that point, 'monkey see, monkey do' regarding my artistic style. Yet, as college progressed and the pressure to grow beyond what I have always known persisted, I slowly and, rather reluctantly, began experimenting with my drawings. It was during this rather experimental part of my education, that my personal life began to change drastically as well. I was slowly, and then rather abruptly, made aware of pressing problems within my private life; all feeling completely out of my control. My day to day stress seemed to skyrocket; I experienced my first 'spell' in nearly a year, my obsessive habits increased tenfold and I began to experience mild panic attacks, all of which I tried to control and keep to myself. At this point I was living away from home, practically by myself, and it seemed easy to try and ignore the stressors that were only increasing, until they were no longer avoidable. As any college student experiencing real adult life for the first time, I began to take on more and more responsibilities. I worked two

specialty jobs, remained a full time honors student, and managed to stay on the Dean's list nearly every semester, but still I felt like it was not enough, that I was not in control enough. My life was changing and with it, my art. In time, I began to notice my obsessive habits were hindering my creative process, I was becoming too distracted by my current coping methods of managing my anxiety, to risk breaching my comfort zone within my practice. It just seemed too easy to not try to 'fix what was not broken' in my opinion. Why should I experiment with my art if I was comfortably in control of it? I then became aware that I was not trying my hardest, I was failing myself, and I came to a realization; that only I have myself to please, and that only I have complete control over my own happiness. I may not be able to completely control what was happening within my life, but I could control how I handled it. It was then that I made a life changing decision: I cut my hair. Cut in stages, I began to feel more and more liberated from certain problems that were triggering my stress and as well, I nearly completely eliminated one of my biggest obsessive grooming ticks. Junior year when my hair was at its shortest, I felt lighter, and because of this liberation I became more willing to experiment in other aspects of my life, including my artwork.

The first body of work that stands out to me in this transitional journey, was a mixed media triptych entitled: *No Evil*. As was comfortable and rather predictable of me, I very carefully and meticulously rendered three pen drawings of a mouth, ear and eye. Yet, I wanted to somehow express the feeling of losing a sense of control, of feeling as if the work was being deconstructed from something so familiar and comfortable. Here I was taking something I very carefully and precisely planned out, and was forcing myself to 'destroy' it, or at least attempt to. So, as my first experiment, I cut the three drawings up. Yet, because of my obsessive habits, and this gnawing sensation of remaining in control of what I was creating, the drawings were not

dismantled by forceful tearing, but instead very carefully punctured into perfect circles. It then became this idea of creating an illusion of still remaining in control, even when things were seemingly being forced apart. I felt like I had something to prove; anyone could still see these images that I had created, could still see the time and effort I contributed, even though I was attempting to destroy them. For the rest of that semester, I experimented more with my art than I<sup>1</sup> ever had before; each new work being both equally rewarding as well as frustrating. I attempted



Figure 1

to let go of my tightly coiled expectations over my creative process, yet, as I played around with various pieces, I was becoming more and more frustrated. My art had always been one of the few things I had complete control over, it acted as a means of managing my anxiety of not having control over other things in my life. Now, creating my work was becoming its own stressor. As the semester continued, I began struggling with conflicting ideas. In one sense I wished to continue experimenting with different techniques, to be strong and confident enough to allow myself to let go of representational rendering and breach the world of abstraction. Yet, on the other hand, abstraction screamed ‘lack of control’, ‘messy’, ‘not good enough’; and I was not

willing to let myself lose one of the few things I believed I had complete control over; my art. Finally, however, towards the end of the semester, I had a breakthrough.

<sup>2</sup>At this point, I had been feeling tremendously overwhelmed, and even though I was pleased with how my art was slowly changing, I felt like the process of creating the work was no longer satisfying. Creating my artwork had unfortunately become a chore and that was not at all comforting. I was putting too much pressure on myself, determined that everything had to be perfect from the very start to the very finish. It was not until the end of the semester, when simply doodling in my sketchbook, that the concept for my next project began to take form. For the longest time I had been struggling with the contrasting concepts of classic representation and abstracted depictions, until finally, I decided to try and combine them. Stubbornly at first, the drawings stood for the idea that I felt like I was being consumed by the pressure to add contemporary and abstracted elements to my work; that I was being invaded, if you will, by these art styles that I had so readily avoided up until this point. The triptic, *Contemporary Invasion*,



Figure 2

would then later set the tone for the entirety of my Final Exhibition show. The anchoring drawing depicted a partial self-portrait, the subject being overwhelmed by geometric shards, each

detailed in various techniques. The set of three drawings were riddled with contrasting couples: soft and harsh, light and heavy, picturesque and symmetric, and finally, realism and non-representation. I admit, the original idea in the conception of the work was rather smiteful; the depicted being represented as being attacked and overtaken by these forced upon abstracted elements. Yet despite the intention, the self-portrait ended up looking far from attacked. When I actually sat down to create this body of work, it in no way felt like a chore, and if anything, I was as relaxed as my rendered face looked. Even more importantly, I felt at peace with these drawings; the abstraction just as much as anything else, if not more. When I was creating this tryptic, my mind was at ease, my stress and anxieties forgotten, and for the first time in a long time, I felt completely in control.

During the duration of creating the tryptic *Contemporary Invasion*, I was exposed to an almost meditative state. When going through the process of curating my compositions, my mind could not, and did not, focus on anything but the tasks in front of me. The feeling was almost numbing, as I was forced to invade the paper's space, stay within my created lines, and simply, very meticulously, color in each shape. This realization, however, did not come until much later when struggling for concepts for my Final Exhibition show, where I repeatedly seemed to return to the same geometric shapes. Later I would realize that I was no longer focused on the actual art pieces per say, but the process of actually creating them. It was this process, of filling in these shapes with obsessive pen marks, organized repetition, and the physical movement involved in the making of the drawings; that became the core of the work. Completely unaware I was returning back to my previous obsessive coping mechanisms of dealing with my stress, but instead of completely wasting my time in absent minded tasks; I was being artistically productive. Here I was, creating something that was both artistically and academically

stimulating and prolific; while still organizing my mind and managing my various anxieties that seemed to plague it. A man of the name Adrian Hill, is regarded by many as the founder of art therapy. Moran Bush, an intern for the *London Art Therapy Center* explains that the birth of this concept is illustrated in his book *Art Versus Illness*. The 1945 writing documents his recovery of Tuberculosis in a sanatorium, where his boredom and worries spurred the desire of the “simple act of drawing” (Bush). Hill is quoted in Bush’s article, “I became... a diligent and leisurely composer of precise pencil productions, each of which, in the terms of my restricted medium, sought to express my personal reactions to the unreality of my existence” (Bush). Prior to his illness, however, Hill acted as an enthusiastic advocate of modern art; claiming the need to enlighten the public by exposing them to art movements such as Surrealism and abstraction (Bush). Found within the reading *Healing Arts: The History of Art Therapy*, the author Susan Hogan notes that, after falling ill, Hill’s diagnoses did nothing to abate his own creative practice, as a critic then notes in 1945;

Now illness served to bring him into touch with a deeper source of inspiration which for many is reached only through neurosis. It is, perhaps because the cause of the disturbance was primarily illness that with health again has come balance, though a different and richer balance than the one that he had before. The permanent effect of this period on Adrian Hill’s work has been fundamental. In a sense he had to start again... Adrian Hill seems undoubtedly to have reached a period when he is doing better work than he has ever done before. (Hogan 134)

Hill then placed heavy emphasis on the practice of art-making itself as healing. In his experience the necessary healing was of a physical nature just as mentally, and because of that, today’s modern art therapy is founded on the basic principle alone that art can indeed heal (Hogan 13).

Adrian Hill noted that art seemed to engage all facets of oneself totally, both physically and mentally, and while working with WWII soldiers suffering from ailments procured from the war, Hill states; “...It is natural that the soldier as much as the artists should turn to see mental refuge in the creative arts and thence to hope. When the world is seething with death and despair the man in the street and his brother at arms crave for such antonyms as expressed by life and faith: Art provides nourishment for such longings”(Hogan 136). Similarly, though in rather different circumstances, the artist Ida Applebroog too found creativity in illness. Having suffered a mental breakdown in 1969, Applebroog checked herself into Mercy Hospital, where she would <sup>3</sup>then



Figure 3

create art contending her depression. Years later, the work was rediscovered and showcased in an exhibition as well as documented in her book, *Mercy Hospital*. According to *Hyperallergic Media Inc.*, Applebroog’s Mercy Hospital series, much like her other intimate bodies of work in

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Fig. 3. Ida Applebroog. Installation View of Mercy Hospital Series. 1969-1970. Ink and Watercolor. *Hyperallergic*. Web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Image.

the past, is applied as a means to analyze and discover herself (Steinhauer). As an artist, as well as a sufferer of high anxiety, I had been looking for a creative means of retreat from my stressors as well as a process to intimately familiarize myself with my anxieties, and finally I found the process that offered me such relief, and strangely enough it came from abstraction.

Despite Adrian Hill not devising the term “Art Therapy” until 1942, the concept of using art as a means of healing, therapists or not, has flourished in cultures and through various artists and practices for years. Unfortunately many people are still under the impression that art in general is unimportant and lacks substantial benefits, when in reality art has been a significance for thousands of years. Though a number of various therapeutic practices thrive in the healing properties of art, the most pertinent to my own experience is the idea of ‘meditative art.’ In the article, *Meditative Art Soothes the Soul* by scholar Jane Hart in the publication *Art Business News*, the term ‘meditative art’ has become somewhat of a buzzword in recent years. Though the concept is still rather ill defined, it reveals this universal trend in our culture and is gathering emergent interest within the art community; consumers and producers alike (Hart). Acting as a “re-emergence”, art practices resulting in meditative mindsets have long been an active tradition of the introspective or spiritual, within historic contexts. In fact, according to Hart, most art prior to 1875 was somewhat spiritually derived. In today’s society, plagued by chaos, mass distractions and new aged stressors consequent by this modern time, people are desperate once again for a form of meditative healing, myself included. Currently, the act of meditation is among the most popular forms of alternative therapies, as noted earlier, and is performed in hopes of focusing one’s attention to provoke an immense sensation of calm. Though there are various meditative practices, one such technique elicits the act of focusing on one particular object or symbol. In the practice of meditative art, the derived works may serve as



this object, or it perhaps instead reflects a sense of composed to the viewer, supporting an environment of peace (Hart). Paul Heussenstamm, who claims himself an ‘artist of spiritual paths,’ is a prolific and renowned artist, often recognized in spiritual and religious groups. Heussenstamm delineates the act of meditative art as, “art which takes someone out of the normal realm of thinking and feeling and calms, focuses and transforms someone into another awareness”(Hart). In her article, Hart reflects on the artist’s work; noting his combined use of



Figure 4



Figure 5

colors and inspirational qualities to create his introspective paintings, many of which emphasize<sup>4</sup>the created process of constructing mandalas.

Mandalas are one of many observed practices related to the therapeutic arts that enhance and reflect on one’s mind, resulting a sense of calm to both the creator as well as the viewer. Depicted in circular forms, the word Mandala comes from the Sanskrit language meaning ‘sacred life.’ Dr. Cathy Malchiodi explains in the publication *Psychology Today*, that for thousands of

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Fig. 4. Paul Heussenstamm at Work. N.d. Photograph. *Pomegranate.com*. Web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Image.

Fig. 5. Paul Heussenstamm. *Chakra Root Mandala*. N.d. Acrylic Paint. *Mandalas.com*. Web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Image.

years the construction of these circular, and often geometric, designs have been a substantial part of a multitude of spiritual practices across the globe; nearly every culture having discovered the power of the circle (Malchiodi). Mandalas ultimately act as objects of devotion in a number of different cultures including Tantric Hindu and Tantric Buddhism as well as in Jainism. Derived from ancient origins, these symmetric designs are also often used as a meditative tool, as the meticulous creation of these circular forms require mass discipline and concertation, similar to other religious practices found among cultures. Some mandalas even depict religious deities as their central theme. Dr. Malchiodi goes on to explain that spiritual seekers have, through the years, created mandalas to evoke the circular design in rituals and the creation of art for the purpose of mindfulness and wellness in both body and mind (Malchiodi). The *Ancient History Encyclopedia* explains that the techniques necessary for the construction of a mandala are extremely precise and are riddled with numerous rituals, such as chanting. Created in a number of various mediums, Mandalas can be rendered by paint on various surfaces, as well as in more ephemeral materials such as colored sand (Violatti). Paul Heussenstamm claims that traveling the world greatly influenced his spiritual discipline required for his art. Having explored everywhere from Africa to New Zealand as well as The Middle East and Central America, the artist explains his experience of the, “subtle inner unity among all beings”(Artist).

Heussenstamm has also explored ancient Hindu and Buddhist temples in Nepal and India, resulting in his enlightenment to a world described as both profound and life changing. For him, the process of creating his work opens “the doorway into the symbolic language of the soul” and that “just being in the room with a mandala is a blessing”(Artist). Another such example of meditative art is the Korean traditional practice of *Sagyeong*. The *Korean Art Forum* describes the custom as a practices that designates both the labor-intensive transcription method of the

Buddhist sutras, which are scriptures of Buddhist short dicta, as well as the actual product of the act itself. In relation, it is rather comparable to the tradition of manually copying religious texts from the bible found in Christianity or instead the Qur'an in Islam (Oegil). Regarded as a



Figure 6

practice necessitating a great sense of self-discipline, the act of *Sagyeong* requires intense concentration, severe control and proficient techniques. From an artistic standpoint, the ritual involves literature, iconography, and design knowledge and practice, as well as the spiritual regimen of meditation and purification of one's mind. Meditative art, however, is not restricted<sup>5</sup>to religious background only, and can just as well be non-denominational.

Among spiritual rituals such as the construction of mandalas and sacred scripts, there exists artists who explore meditative techniques and results in their own individual art practices. Artist such as Joe Novak, whose paintings are often compared to that of Mark Rothko's and Morris Lewis, explores the notion of meditative states within his work. Often regarded as "open-

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Fig. 6. Intricate process of creating traditional Korean Sagyeong. 23 Nov. 2016. Video. *Google*. Web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Still Image.



Figure 7



Figure 8

eye meditation”, supplied by Jane Hart in her article, *Meditative Art Soothes the Soul*, his curiosity in the idea of mediation in creation is in part related to his interest in returning to concepts of color and aesthetics as oppose to the more conceptual approaches (Hart). Having explored the infinite nuances of color manipulation and its interactions among light for over thirty years, Novak claims in regards to his paintings, “If you close your eyes, there is a visual field you see which is light and color dependent. These fields of color draw you in and facilitate a frame of mind that is akin to a meditative state” (Hart). His work experiments across the artistic realm, from being minutely small to large-scale, to exploring the vast notions of minimalism and “monochromatic renderings to grandiose gestural movements and colorful compositions. In his artist’s statement, Novak states, “ For me it is almost like having a vision, doing the work, being open, taking risks, respecting the materials and listening to the eye”(Novak). In response to being compared to that of modern artists such as Rothko and Morris, Timothy Rub, director of

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Fig. 7. Joe Novak. *What Matters Most*. 2013. Acrylic on canvas. *Joenovak.com*. web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Image.  
 Fig. 8. Joe Novak. *Black Series I #1*. 2003. Monotype. *Joenovak.com*. web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Image.

the Philadelphia Museum of art is quoted claiming, “This is not a matter of superficial resemblance but of a spiritual kinship with those who believed in the language of abstraction and the power of painting to offer the viewer an experience that is, in essence, transcendental” (Novak). The concept of utilizing abstraction as a transcendent language, or experiencing a mindset beyond normal or physical levels is heavy with Novak’s work just as it is found among Rothko’s Chapel in Houston, which is dedicated as ‘a sacred place’(Stocker). The chapel consists of fourteen paintings, all dominating the eight walls of the chapel. As said by Dominique de Menil and her husband, who commissioned the entirety of the works exhibited in the chapel:

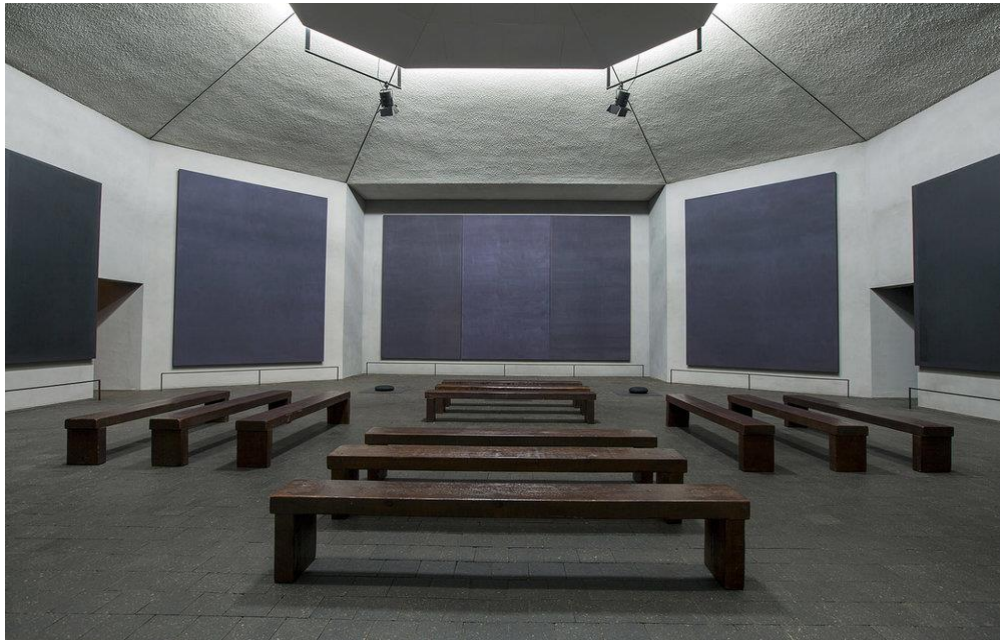


Figure 9

<sup>7</sup>Rothko created a modulated ensemble of majestic paintings. The dark purplish tones have a soothing effect, yet they retain enough brilliance to stimulate the mind. The black surfaces invite the gaze to go beyond. The chapel is a place conducive to spiritual activity. We are cut off from the world and its suffocating multiplicity, able to wander in the infinite. Lacking the immensity of the desert, it is in the confines of a restricted place

that we can embrace ‘the whole’. Here we are nowhere and everywhere; here we can find a blessed wholeness, a sense of unity. (Stocker)

As noted by Wessel Stoker, author of the research, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the Urgency of the Transcendent Experience*, in the instance of the ‘Chapel Paintings’, Rothko began expressing with a much more radical abstraction. To better communicate his theme of a divine experience, Rothko evokes abstraction as an advance to a more critical language to express his purpose more effectively (Stocker). Similarly, the artist Yayoi Kusama partakes in practices evoking meditative mindsets, while also breaching a sublime personal exploration within her work using abstraction as her conveying language.

<sup>8</sup>Yayoi Kusama, an avant-garde artist from Japan, is often self-described as an “obsessional artist.” She began painting as a young child, after she began experiencing hallucinations. Susanna Ferrell, author of the article *Pattern and Disorder: Anxiety and the Art of Yayoi Kusama*, speaks of the artist’s initial encounter with her hallucinate visions. She writes that the artist seems to describe these visions as purely terrifying, as the artist recalls staring at “the red floral pattern of a table cloth” and later suffering the effects of a lasting after image (Ferrell 1-2). This exchange, according to Ferrell, informs to the motif of control within Kusama’s



Figure 10

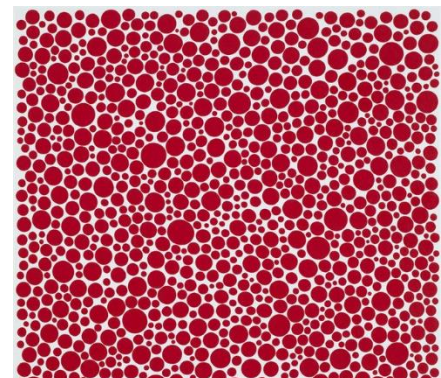


Figure 11

Fig. 10. Yayoi Kusama. *Kusamatrix*. 2004. Installation. *Google*. Web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Image.

Fig. 11. Yayoi Kusama. *Dots TQQZ*. 2008. Acrylic. *Rosly Noxley9 Gallery*. Web. 30 Apr. 2017. Digital Image.

artwork. Due to the age of the artist of that time, however, it is rather unclear if young Kusama was aware that she unknowingly brought this first hallucination upon herself by staring at a repeated pattern too long. Nonetheless, the repeated imagery of the red dots has hence become one of Kusama's most recognized and famous subjects, and reflects the artist's obsessive thoughts over her own hallucinations (Ferrell 2). Within her art practice, Yayoi Kusama returns frequently to similar patterns and shapes, and incorporates her anxieties and fears into her work. She had essentially created this habit that seems to parallel the psychotherapy exercise of cognitive behavioral therapy (Ferrell 4). Normally used to help treat patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression and anxiety, CBT, acts as a treatment that aims to manage psychological problems by altering the way a person acts and thinks. In Kusama's case, the artist, while creating her art, continually exposes herself to her fears which underline her obsessions and compulsions. By persistently exposing herself to these fears, her famous patterns, shapes and forms become a tool, of a sort, to instead suppress her obsessive thoughts over her fears (Ferrell 4). The idea of using a mental illness as a motivation, however, is nothing new. The article, *Pattern and Disorder: Anxiety and the Art of Yayoi Kusama*, brings attention that it has been commonly accepted that, for years, artists have drawn inspiration from personal and psychological stressors (Ferrell 4). One artist most prominently known for his mental health trials is that of Vincent Van Gogh, who once wrote; "It constantly remains a source of disappointment to me that my drawings are not yet what I want them to be. The difficulties are indeed numerous and great, and cannot be overcome at once" (Ferrell 3). Unlike Van Gogh, however, Kusama's obsessive work is not created for beautiful aesthetics or a desire to better her ability, but instead it has acted as a therapeutic ritual to implement control over her mental illness. When speaking about her artwork, Yayoi Kusama notes that, "Painting pictures has been

therapy for me to overcome the illness” (Ferrell 3). Again, Susanna Ferrell clarifies that it would seem that Kusama understands her own role in the creative process of treating her psychological ailments through her artwork.

For my own art practice, even after the breakthrough of the *Contemporary Invasion* series, I struggled to create work that lent itself to a truly meditative state. With the new prospect of possibly studying abroad, and my final exhibition fast approaching, I again found it difficult to create work for my show. Using the *Contemporary Invasion* series as inspiration, I slowly returned to the automatism process of creating compositions composed of geometric shapes and patterns. Just as Yayoi Kusama, I wished to evoke a sense of control within my art. I wanted to yield control over my obsessive tendencies, which I believed I could convey with both my new abstracted depictions as well as with detailed graphite representations. At the time, I just could not relinquish the idea that I had to have a component within my work of traditional representation. To me, that was what declared to my audience that I had control over my work. Yet, as the semester was drawing to an end, I began to question why these figurative elements were important. Was I rendering these figures for myself as therapeutic stress relief, or to prove something? I had continuously preached to myself, as well as others, that it was vital that I maintained a sense of control by not losing myself completely to the ‘chaos’ of creating abstract art and keeping this tether to representation was my safety net. For example, in the *Evidence* series, I meant to literally represent my anxieties, by showcasing one major indicator of when I am overwhelmed with stress: hands. Many people, myself included, obsessively pick, wring, and flex their hands when overcome with anxious feelings, and by vaguely representing the imagery of reaching hands, I had hoped to convey control among a stressor. In the end, however, it was not the physical rendering of the represented hands that gave me peace to create, but the





Figure 12

abstracted decorative forms accompanying the figures. As I had<sup>9</sup> learned with the *Contemporary Invasion* triptic, it was not the figurative representation that was allowing me control over my anxiety, but instead it was the minimalistic abstracted components of my work that became the meditative control I needed. The exhibited body of work then become somewhat of a pictorial timeline of my understanding and coping with my stressors. I began to explore more into evoking a visual consumption by repetitious mark making and pattern. Much like Yayoi Kusama, I began focusing on configuring a physical means of managing control over my stressors. Visually my compositions began to reflect an immense sense of self-discipline, as it



Figure 13

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Fig. 12. Hannah Justis. *Evidence Series*. 2016. Mixed Media. JPEG File.

Fig. 13. Hannah Justis. *Waxing and Waning*. 2016. Mixed Media. JPEG File.

was within a meditative state that a resolution of my own anxieties took form. By finding aesthetic inspiration from artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Kazimir Malevich, I began accepting structured forms of abstraction, like suprematism and constructivism, into my art. As the work progressed, certain elements were eventually dropped, until the final pieces solidified my meditative therapy. Do not be mistaken, however, that each individual piece of the final show was not of importance. I believe it took this entire process; of creating this body of work while trying to control my anxieties under tremendous pressure, that ultimately lent itself to my own acceptance of what direction my art needed to develop to become meditative therapy.

So what makes an art practice meditative? According to Jane Hart author of *Meditative Art Soothes the Soul*, “Artists and gallery owners familiar with meditative art agree that meditative art enhances and reflects a sense of calm in the onlooker. But what makes art meditative? Is it the artist’s creation or the perception of the audience?” (Hart) When asked a similar question in regards to his own work, the artist Paul Heussenstamm, who’s work focuses on the construction of mandalas, claims that the success of an artist’s achieving a clear meditative mind is provisional on their understanding of personal rituals. He believes that consistently partaking in repeated tasks and habits, or as what he calls rituals, during the conception of the artwork, only adds to the meditate qualities. Eventually I discovered, while producing work that would be used for my final exhibition, that I had unknowingly constructed a set of rules and procedures for my own artwork. Though different from Heussenstamm’s ritualistic habits focused on nature, yoga regimens and collections, I religiously partake in rituals surrounding obsessive planning, clean environments, and organization. Just as within Heussenstamm’s mandala art, where his spiritual practices shine through to his viewers, my own



Figure 14

<sup>10</sup>compositions too began to reflect my essential ritualistic makings. In the end, my final abstracted compositions were visual representations of my physical coping mechanisms of controlling my anxieties and stressors. My art was planned out, clean and organized and allowed my eye and mind a safe and orderly environment to escape to, both when creating the work, as well as when viewing it. Joe Novak, whose meditative paintings evoke inspiration from artists such as Rothko, describes falling into a meditative state while painting and claims to channel his awareness in only the “here and now” when composing his paintings. Novak notes; “Thoughts come and go and you keep working on the piece, and the nature of creating is such that you are present with the art” (Hart). When finalizing the body of work, it became only too simple to focus my mind on the art itself, all I had to do at that time was be present with the drawings and nothing else. I was not focused on stressing over if the work would be good enough, or meet a certain level of expectation that I had fabricated in my mind like with all previous work. Instead, I simply had to lose myself in the ritualistic creation.

As a student preparing to graduate with a bachelor of fine arts, I presented a body of work that visually represented my meditative process of managing my stress and anxieties. From a young age, I had no one but myself to blame for my stress. As mentioned, I am a perfectionist, anal retentive and a classic 'A' type personality. The overwhelming desire to control, however originally stemmed from developing absent seizure attacks, or "spells", that were triggered by high levels of physical and mental stress. My need to control these psychological attacks eventually resulted in obsessive compulsive tendencies that, eventually began to cause more harm than good. I wished to then create a series of work that channeled these initial coping methods, to turn something self-detrimental into productive and creative. After having struggled to separate my work from my safety net of classic representation, I eventually found relief in the form of geometric abstraction. These new methods of thinking and creating my compositions easily lent themselves to meditative rituals such as detailed planning, clean environments and structured organization. Overall, I believe my final exhibition was a success. When creating the work to be exhibited, I learned a great deal about my art practice, as well as myself. Though it was difficult at times, I learned to accept failure, as not all of my pieces were a complete success in visually representing my meditative method of creating. I believe, however, that it was important I discovered what did and did not work when constructing this newly discovered meditative mindset. When creating, as well as viewing, my recent works, I am evoked into a clean composed environment, where structure and control are evident. When viewing my artwork, it is desired that my audience becomes aware of the control and time placed within each composition and too can ease their minds in an organized environment amongst a chaotic world. Currently, I am studying abroad in Nottingham England, where I have been expanding my

<sup>14</sup>reflective practice. Away now from a handful of my stressors, it has been liberating to have this freedom to experiment within my meditative art without the extra weight of judgment. Recently I have discovered a curiosity in Alexander Calder's work. The vague similarities between Calder's compositions and my own influences interests me and I am now referencing Calder's mobile sculptures in creating my own moving drawings. I find the preciseness and care it takes to create something as delicate as a mobile interesting and the concept of the control it takes connected well with my meditative process. Currently I am working with the idea of bringing life to my compositions by animating my drawings in dynamic mobile form. With breaking this two dimensional plane, I am bringing a deeper sense of depth and balance to my compositions.



Figure 15

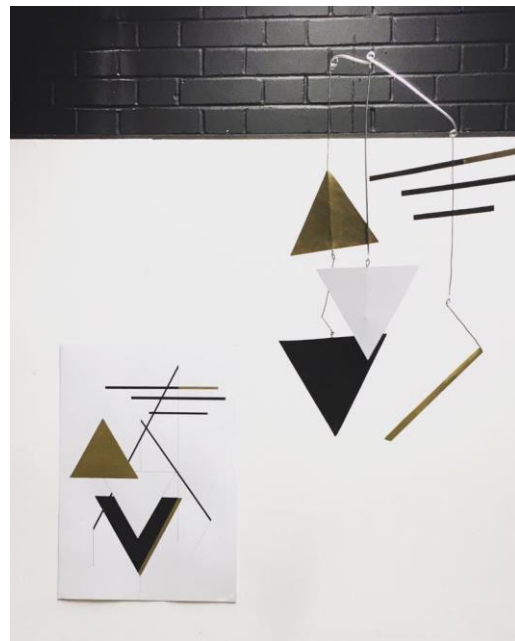


Figure 16

Balance, just as it is in life with managing stress and anxieties, is of physical importance in my mobiles; one wrong calculation in its creation and the art will not function. Everyone has stress and some form or another of anxiety, and I believe it is of dire importance to learn what triggers

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Fig. 15. Hannah Justis. *Balance 1: Elements*. 2017. Mixed Media. JPEG File.

Fig. 16. Hannah Justis. *Balance 1: Elements and Mobile*. 2017. Mixed Media. JPEG file.

a stressor as well as how to control it. If I have learned anything from the turmoil of the last few years, of reading deep into my mental health and how I can heal through my art practice, it's that no one is perfect. A plan is not always needed, sometimes it does well to simply breath, trust and see what happens.

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