

THESIS

HEART MATH

Submitted by

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Heart Math

"This is one of the mysteries: that the mind can speak, and knows nothing, and the heart knows everything, and cannot speak." —Osho

"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."

—Albert Einstein

In coming to understand myself as a painter, the years have seen exploration with various media and technique. I began in oils, but experimented extensively with collage, assemblage and most intensively, splatter and pour techniques with Sumi and acrylic inks. Ultimately, the nature of my research led me back to my roots in oil painting. The traditional qualities of oil, its language of viscosity and its relationship to earthen elements all could, I discovered, emulate the drips and splatters previously explored through inks and water media. In addition to pour techniques, I found that I could blend various painting styles together (crisp and blurred, textured and smooth) onto the same surface, creating a sort of photomontage of painting styles, simultaneously speaking to my process of taking disjointed thoughts and feelings and transmuting them into a harmonious whole both in the mind and heart, and on the canvas. The oils are congruent with the essence of research that led me to return to the beginning.

This work speaks directly to the theory that any person's known reality is a result of perception. The old Zen riddle asks: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does

it make a sound? The answer is no, because sound is a process of dialogue between two points. There is sound only because there are ears to translate vibration into sound. There is light only because eyes exist to translate waves into light. What, then, of more abstract concepts of sensory perception, such as "I have been hurt," or, "I am in love." These feelings are not directly relevant to survival and yet may place the body into a state of stress or relaxation just as if some tangible danger or ecstasy were present. Painting, for me, has become a process of transforming and recreating my own reality into a more desirable state.

PTSD is suffering as a result of trauma. Trauma is the result of perception to a past event. The Zen philosopher Alan Watts said that "the past is created from the present like the wake of a ship flows back from the prow. The wake doesn't steer the ship any more than the tail wags the dog." I am interested in the theory of time not as a linear continuum of past-present-future, but prefer the model of a circular spiral. When viewed aerially, a spiral becomes a circle and a circle is also a point in space. In my work, I am emulating the point that this point of presence and prescience is where past and future both are made. Past and future both exist only in our perception of them in the present moment. The past therefore is created by the present perception of it, and as such can be recreated by changing perception. Working through trauma and internal scars is a slow process, as is the slowness of the process of oil painting which speaks in harmony with the slowness of my physical nature. I feel most at home in the languid nature of oils, as time is allowed to push forms and change the composition. I never work directly from a photograph or sketch reference, but always through channeling what is happening inside my body each time I approach the canvas. The exterior process of painting therefore becomes a mirror of the internal state of being. For this reason, I have always been attracted to the automatic creation process of the Surrealists.

The subject of my research is the correspondence of the development of a visual language (mark-making) with the intention of bringing about an altered state of consciousness. How did

premodern humans use visual symbols to evoke qualities of higher powers to protect themselves against the vulnerability felt in the face of what was beyond their control? The talisman, also known as the charm, amulet, totem, or fetish, has been a practiced craft and an intrinsic part of human consciousness since the dawn of recorded history and, quite possibly, even earlier. Freud's concept of the fetish points out the significance of objects that function for individuals and groups on a psychological level. The art movement of Surrealism is known for using verbal and visual signifiers to jar the subconscious mind – in effect, to conjure up a particular emotional state with the use of object as fetish. The adoption of a totem, as in the making of a talisman, is the creation of a signifier with the purpose to give form to the formless. American art critic, theorist, and professor Rosalind Krauss defines the formless as "[n]othing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery . . . The formless is an operation." For this purpose, the formless is a feeling of awe that derives from an attempt to understand the intangible forces of nature – both human nature, and the nature of the world humans inhabit. The fetish can be used to control people through religion in the form of religious symbols and it is used to persuade, control, or garner sympathy.

I provoke the question of art making itself as my fetish by delivering messages to the viewers via the elements of design, to strike on a subconscious or gut level. My fetish, for this purpose, is the tangible object (my painting) representing an intangible force (my magic). Thus, my desire for control over my environment is performed through the meaning ascribed to the fetishized object as it is used within the process and the result. I feel that the oil paint I use speaks to this process of fetishizing and evolution of consciousness, as described, by the slowness of its process and the application of many layers. What was old peeks through what is new, but the old cannot be what it once was and is forever changed by evolution. I am interested in exploring the psychological conflict and connotations of the fetish as an automatic process through form, color,

space, mark-making and layering within the medium of oil painting. The oil paint is applied in many stages, based on the abstract concept of vulnerability: more specifically, how the creation of a painting can act as a totem, talisman, or fetish, allowing the human psyche to bring about a desired change of an emotional state. I am interested in bringing under control in the only human way possible, the feeling of vulnerability in the face of natural forces and experiences that one is subjected to. The forms I use are derived from experiences that invoke a sense of danger and entrapment, soothed by the possibility of escape.

The area where the viewer feels enclosed is primarily a place of safety, with the promise of relief where space opens up again. I sketch in the morning when waking up and at night before sleep, when the mind is still lingering in subconscious state, recording the essence of dreams had the night before, or the detritus of the day and interactions just experienced. I practice transcendental meditation techniques to go fishing in the subconscious for significant images. The goal is to evoke those universal and uncanny feelings as the viewer interacts with my work. Sketches are modulated as collages to further define a language that is not copied verbatim within the paintings, but rather an exercise of preparation. What is real and what is fantasy? Fantasy that has been created from the tangibility of human interaction is redefined in the fantasy painted on a surface. The magical object is crafted thus.

This exhibition contains two seven by six foot oil on linen paintings that act as fraternal twins. They were created and gestated together, side by side, but are not identical. The two paintings represent polar opposites and address the topic of the dark and light sides of human nature. They are and are not necessarily a diptych; They go together and yet each stands on its own as a singular piece. *Eosphoros*, with light pastels and fleshy browns, exists here as our representative of the dawn. In Greek mythology, he was the god of the morning star, or *Asteria Venus*, and is the origin of the biblical "Dawn-Bringer," Lucifer. *Hesperos*, the evening star, is representative of the twilight and the day's end. The paintings represent the same environment at

different times of day and in opposing moods, acting much as symbols of Yin and Yang to one another. The forms of the inner landscape are static, but the atmosphere is fluid. Though the paintings are evocative of landscape, they are presented in the portrait style indicating that they act as self-portraits of an inner being. The edges of the linen are soft and rounded over beveled edges, purposefully wrinkled in certain areas to suggest a veil or tapestry, as might hang in a Medici bedroom. This work refers to a 14th century tradition of oil painting paired with brilliant colors indicative of commercializations, speaking to the duality of ancient and contemporary feelings of being. That the two paintings ambiguously exist separately or together as a diptych references the unity of the Goddess of Love and War, as the twins Eosphoros and Hesperos later morphed into the singular goddess, Venus.

How have humans, both premodern and contemporary, used visual language to evoke a sense of control over an environment to which they felt vulnerable? Alchemical symbols such as those used by ancient astronomers to represent the planets do not merely denote the planets themselves. Each sign bears a connotation of all the attributes that planet represents in terms of power, such as the ancient Greeks associating the planets with mythological gods. It is this deep belief that makes a symbol a talisman. The act of fetishizing an object, according to Freud, is a function of imbuing that object with the significance of a desire the individual wishes to control. Rob Lapsley's essay "Psychoanalytic Criticism" (*Routledge Companion to Critical Theory*) describes Freud's grandson Ernst's fetishizing a bobbin attached to a piece of string, which he throws behind a curtain and makes reappear. This obsessive act the boy engages in with the object is the seeking of a mastery over things that come and go. According to Freud, it is the boy's fear of the loss of his mother that creates his fetish with the object under his control. The fetish object stands in as a replacement for the mother that is beyond his control. By using a talisman or totem as a visual signifier, the artist makes of the object a fetish, attempting "a mastery as illusory as the pleasure harbored by its fantasies." The fetish is not merely an object of desire, but the act of fetishizing an

object is a means of demonstrating the desire. That is to say, gaining psychological control over something that is physiologically uncontrollable.

Fetishizing objects is comparable to the way that premodern people attempted mastery and understanding of the intangible forces of the universe, such as the sun whose life-giving warmth and light could disappear behind a cloud, eclipse, or the onset of night. The magnitude of earthworks such as Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* are a snapshot of the significance of the sun's life-giving properties. Is this not comparable to the drawing of a contrived symbol of the sun upon the body? These demonstrations are powerful psychological expressions of self-defense and the accompanying desire to gain control of natural forces that the individual feels at the mercy of, or vulnerable to.

There is magic in the talisman. Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* provoke this feeling of awe at the natural power of the sun, and demonstrate the artist's desire to funnel, draw out, or invoke the power of light. Arranged in the shape of an 'X', four concrete tunnels sit in the desert. The tunnels have holes through which light moves as the sun travels across the sky, giving the impression of moving constellations and night inside the tunnels. In this way, Holt's massive work is her personal microcosm for a particular function of our planet in relation to the sun. She has captured in a snapshot of what the earth does with light as it moves. More significantly, she has harnessed the sun's power into her rather impressive, personal talisman. Artists both ancient and contemporary have appropriated and created their own talismans and totems to signify the intangible powers and give form to the formless; to acquire protection or power from natural and supernatural forces.

Similar to the talisman is the totem, in that it provides a means of psychological power and protection to the group or individual identifying with it. The totem is not necessarily of religious origin (as a talisman can be). In his book *Totemism*, James Frazer says, "If religion implies . . . that the object of worship is superior to [the worshipper], then pure totemism cannot properly be

called a religion at all, since a man looks upon his totem as his equal and friend" (Frazer 5). In some Native American cosmologies, the totem animal is about the transmigration of the souls of dead ancestors. Frazer explains that "the animal in which the souls of the dead are thought by preference to be incarnate becomes a kinsman, an ancestor and as such is revered" (Frazer 46). The Surrealist painter Leonora Carrington's *Self Portrait* (1938) depicts herself seated in a room with a white rocking horse floating behind her head. Carrington's art is "mysterious if only because she was a surrealist, a style said to be largely indecipherable because it depicts an artist's inner world . . . a mental portrait" (Alberth). Through a picture window framed in gold curtains, in the distance is the image of a white horse romping in a field, which seems to be the real, that which is signified (and ironically, because it is a painting of a horse, still yet another signifier). The rocking horse (a manufactured object) drifting behind her head seems to be the imaginary signifier. Approaching her outstretched fingers is a hyena with heavy, milk-laden teats, its paw raised in a mirror image of her own raised hand.

"Carrington sits in her mind (the room) while her imagination of the horse is transformed into the framed "painting" in nature on the far wall. All is in process. Posed as an artist, her fingers "measure" out - and in an illusion touch - the squared spaces of her painting (right). The other hand folds over the seat, its fingers "becoming" the folds of the blue fringe below. The legs of the chair are her shoes. The end of its little blue arm echoes her hand (and an animal's claw) which is linked by the blue strip to the round decoration above, "hand" and "eye" united" (Alberth).

There is a sense that Carrington has revered the animals. She uses them in a totemic way to represent certain powers she wishes to invoke for the purpose of uniting heart and mind, hand and eye, intention and action. The duality of the horses, both real and fake, and the hyena are used as totems and fetishes in their relationship to the signifying image of the artist herself, seeking psychic immunity through her own painting.

This animistic use of totem is nothing new to human expression, and continues in many cultures. In certain Aboriginal tribes, according to Frazer, it is thought necessary to eat the flesh and spill the blood of the totem animal to further commune and become one with the power it

bestows. Cuban-born artist and refugee Ana Mendieta performed and recorded an untitled *Chicken Piece*, 1972 (in which she stands naked with a decapitated chicken while the dying bird flails and its blood splatters both her body and the floor), bears many undertones of the religious Other. As the chicken relinquishes its life force, there is an intimacy between herself and bird that suggests the relationship between an individual and a totem animal. The sacred bird gives of itself and imbues the artist with its vital power. Though she stands naked, and should thus appear vulnerable, there is nonetheless a sense of her being armed and protected by the spilled blood of the animal.

The quest for manifestation of self through art can take endless forms. American painter, sculptor, photographer and video artist Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus* series (1992-93) in which she documents the deterioration of her own body to cancer was "dismissed by art critics as being indulgent exercises in narcissism that only served to reinforce the objectification of the female body . . . [but] Wilke wielded her narcissistic self-love as a powerful tool of critique, defiantly placing her own image into the . . . male-dominated art institution" (Linton). Wilke's obsession with her own image during the slow course of dying may have been her way of overcoming her own fear of the inevitable, the supernatural force of death that was beyond her control. By documenting herself, she was not only inserting and asserting her face into the art world, but using her own body's image as as a fetish. Wilke challenged the idea that dying is a personal shame and refused to be shamed by it. The photographs were published posthumously. Through the work, she took control of the event of her own death by sharing it with the world.

Whether or not these artists were fully aware of it, their use of the fetish has raised a question about meaning. Mendieta's use of the chicken is an esoteric component of religion native to her culture of origin. Yet, the way she uses it makes it both more personal and more universally accessible. The magic in the blood means more than just casting a spell, but becomes

a visceral expression of the naked woman's self realization. As Surrealist painter Kurt Seligmann so lovingly includes in his book of personal research, *Mirror of Magic*,

"The genuine alchemists . . . were not in pursuit of worldly wealth and honors. Their real object was the perfection or at least the improvement of man. According to this theory, such perfection lies in a certain unity, a living sense of the unity of the human with the divine nature, the attainment of which I can compare to nothing so well as to the experience known in religion as the New Birth. The desired perfection or unity is a state of the soul, a condition of Being, and not merely a condition of Knowing." (E.A. Hitchcock quoted by Seligmann 138).

Carrington's use of animal totem is a means of creating her own guardians or protectors. The fetishes that these artists have used are, ultimately, self-created components that merge with the total being of the artist themselves. Signifiers become fetishes in the work with the purpose of performing the ultimate ritual of self-transformation. If the artist is particularly successful, they may translate their personal language so well that a viewer is also forever changed and ideally, both inspired and empowered by the experience of this art.

I called this body of work *Heart Math* because it represents the visceral, unwritable equation of the components of the inner world. The phrase "heart math," came to me intuitively and effortlessly, and I was certain I had invented it. I have described in this paper my methodology and influences, but could never write enough to convey the inward journey that the process of this work springs from. It was only after I had chosen this title that a friend of mine brought to my attention a technology called HeartMath, developed by NASA. HeartMath Institute researches the information present in the electromagnetic field of the heart, and has provided access to this to the individual via a small sensor. The device is clipped to the earlobe and used to detect one's pulse to measure heart rate variance (HRV), giving a tangible reading of an emotional state and what HeartMath calls "coherence." I have since begun using a HeartMath sensor as an accompaniment to my daily meditation discipline, and have included it as a part of my preparation each time I approached this body of work. Like the fresh perspective fostered through the process of art, the universe has provided another window to look inside through the lens of science.



Andrea Pacione. *Eosphoros & Hesperos*. Oil on linen. 7'x6'. 2016-2017.

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