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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The college of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

HARMONY

BY

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I. INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes more globalized, people can learn about other cultures much easier than before. We learn not just about different ways of living but also other ways of thinking. When we interact with people from different cultures, communication and understanding become very important. Different histories, geography and social structures create different philosophies and attitudes. Differences are everywhere and conflicts are unavoidable. When a different manner of greeting someone can cause misunderstandings or arguments, greater conflicts arise when religion and government policies are at issue.

Our world is the result of past decisions, and our future is based on our current decisions. In reviewing those decisions we made before, we see that some have brought us famine, war and pollution. They didn't bring a better life. The world is much worse than before. Our shortsighted and misguided decisions brought much suffering to many. Unless we respect other cultures, we probably will make the same mistakes.

To be able to obtain a balance in conflicts is my explanation for the word "harmony". Even though we can not avoid conflicts, we can learn how to solve the problem caused by differences. In Dalai Lama XIV's books, he talks about violence, environmental dangers and many of the issues that I am interested in. The Dalai Lama exhibits his characteristic warmth and clarity of thought throughout each of these talks, but what I found most valuable is his ability to cut through to the essence of each issue and offer insightful guidance. After reading his books, I looked into Buddhist philosophy to find answers to conflict and violence. They offer many solutions to solve our current problems.

For my thesis series, I focused on the topic of the disagreements and problems that arise because of cultural differences. These are currently serious concerns, and everyone should make some effort to solve them. To present my findings from Buddhist philosophy and to respond to the terrible events that have happened recently, I created the Harmony series.

Proposal

I will describe harmony and balance in our world through my paintings. Our world and communities include not only different races and religions, but also dissimilar cultures and backgrounds. We argue or fight because we insist we are right and we deny the values of other people.

We should try to understand and respect our differences whether they are cultural, religious or racial. There are many contrasts between various customs and cultures, and we can choose to see these contrasts not as better or worse, but simply as differences. Many individuals compose this world and each person is as important as the other. If we try to accept differences, we can possibly produce a more harmonious world.

I intend to show various contrasts in my work. For example, two topics I focus on are the contrast between simplicity and complexity. I express the simplicity and complexity of the world by painting simple, geometric shapes with contrasting colors, over complex surface textures. Color is a strong element in my work. To reinforce the sense of complexity, I utilize a variety of color combinations. The different color combinations also present variety of human characteristics. By creating balance between these differences I try to achieve an inner balance. My final pieces will resolve the juxtapositions of colors, shapes, materials, textures, and brush strokes. It is my hope that, through my work, I can show how understanding and respecting differences can lead to the happiness and peace I seek for myself and the world.

II. RESEARCH AND INSPIRATION

Our world has changed since the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. People live under the threat of unpredictable attack. I was horrified and scared, not only when the U.S. was attacked, but also when the U.S. went to war in Afghanistan. Mutual slaughter is the cruelest sin of human nature, and now it surfaces again in the beginning of the 21st century.

Wars, clashes and strife have always been a part of human history. To learn from history, we must understand that wars or other violence doesn't solve any problems. Indeed, people need to make a lot of efforts to recover from their damage and harm. However, some people still choose violence and think it is a way to solve disagreements and conflicts. How can we solve the disagreements and conflicts between cultures without violence? Are there any guidelines that we can follow? Since pursuing happiness and living in a more harmonious world is the theme of my artwork, I researched how individuals can achieve real peace and happiness and how they can solve cultural disagreements. I found that the philosophy of Buddhism provides explanations and answers to my questions.

Compassion & Violence

Why do we need to live in a world of suffering? Nobody enjoys suffering. But in fact, we create suffering for ourselves. It is not logical that, if we want happiness, we would create something miserable?

Freedom and peace does not belong to exclusive groups, but belongs to all living things. Even a small creature has the right to happiness and avoids suffering. "... All wars, big or little, are negative. They reveal the worst in us and only lead to new conflicts."¹ In Buddhism, compassion is a very important lesson. What is compassion? "... Compassion doesn't mean pity or mercy, but rather refers to a sense of universal responsibility. ...A wish to work for the benefit of every living being by means of elevating their sufferings and bringing them to temporary and ultimate happiness."²

¹ Dalai Lama, *Violence & Compassion*, (New York: a division of Random House, Inc.), p8

² Topgyal, Geshe Dakpa. "*Compassion*", <<http://www.angelfire.com/yt/fairtibet/compass.html>>, April 15, 2002.

By finding the compassion inside oneself, people would want to make others happy and help others live free from suffering. That is the way to end our disagreements and conflicts between people.

Using violence can get immediate results, but as we learn from wars, human communities don't benefit by using violence at all. For those people who use bombs to pursue freedom, and use violence to reach peace, they need to understand the negative circle of using violence. Hatred and anguish happen easily, and people, under these emotions might exhibit some regrettable behavior. There is an old saying "Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love. It is an external law." Of course, it is difficult to exhibit proper behavior when we are under the influence of negative emotions. However, to search for compassion inside and learn better ways to solve problems are not as difficult as we thought. "Every human being has the same potential for compassion; the only question is whether we really take any care of the potential, and develop and implement it in your daily life."³

Unselfish compassion is a way to lead to happiness. Basically, people can spontaneously express compassion toward the people they already know, such as friends and family. For those people they do not know, it is easy to ignore their feelings. It is difficult to have unselfish compassion and to make other's happiness as important as your own. How do we learn and practice being less selfish? In Buddhism, there are unbreakable relationship and an interdependence between all things. People find their role inside their community and our planet.

"Every object needs causes and conditions to exist, just like we need our parent, food, air, clothes and many more things. Apart from that, our perception of an object is strongly colored by our own senses, mental states and memories. In this way, it becomes impossible to maintain that I am separate from the outside world, however much it feels that way."⁴ You will automatically consider the welfare of others when considering your behavior, if you realize the interdependence between you and the rest of the world. You help others and show concern about their welfare --- actually these are the major factors of your own happiness.

To reach a peaceful and harmonious world is our goal. It is not an option but rather it is a fact that human nature includes positive and negative characteristics, but

³ Harderijk, Rudy "[A View on Buddhism](http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/compassion.html)". <<http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/compassion.html>>, March

⁴ Rudy Harderwijk, "Wisdom of emptiness". January 11, 2002
<<http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org/wisdom.html>> April 29, 2002

as intelligent human beings, we should try to control our negative desires and confirm our desire to seek compassion and peace. As the Dalai Lama says, “ I believe the individual is the key to all the rest.”⁵ Even if we have many difficulties now, if individuals can take responsibility, it will be possible to create a harmonious world.

The artwork that follows explores my thoughts and feeling about these ideas and ultimately provides metaphors for achieving peace and harmony in life.

Artist' influence

There are two contemporaries whom I admire: Robert Ryman and Andy Goldsworthy. Robert Ryman's painting uses mainly white color that is gently brushed or knifed on canvas. It is a very pure image and conveys a very peaceful space, but the brush (or knife) marks are like people speaking to each other across space. I am always interested in simplicity and complexity; Robert Ryman shows me a way to combine both simplicity (color) and complexity (different textures). Even though I like to use various colors and also different textures, I believe I will someday figure out a way to combine simplicity and complexity well in my paintings.

Andy Goldsworthy is an British sculptor whose works touch me so deeply. He places stones to built arches, digs into snow to make squares reflecting light, or arranges leaves into a beautiful color table. Sometimes he place works of stone and sand on the seashore, and takes pictures to record the transformations caused by the changing tides; he structures branches as nests, places them in the forest, and then observes the changes through seasons. His shapes and proportions are very excellent, but what I really appreciate is his idea. His works show the message of time passing and it is the rule of nature. I am always amazed by the power of nature, the power of seasons, life and death. Humans have great power, and are strong enough to change the environment. We enjoy the convenience that technology has brought to us, and sometimes we forget that we actually depend on the nature more than machines.

Andy builds his work from natural materials and lets time erode them. I too, want my works to reflect the marks of time. I have several ideas, for example: the water in paint dries out as time passes, then texture results from cracking paint, and

⁵ Dalai Lama, *Book of Love and Compassion*, (published by Thorsons, 2001), p17

the painting transforms into another view. Another way to present time passing is to create stories in paintings. People can image the continuing episode. It is very interesting to let viewers think about what stories are told in paintings and to image how those stories might develop. In my arts, I tried experimenting with different paints and observed various ways of cracking, in order incorporate textures and other elements (color, proportions) well. Furthermore, through telling stories, I hope to evoke a sensation with viewers.

III. MAIN SECTION

The process of creating is the most meaningful part of painting for me. I enjoy experimenting with different paints and materials, and there are always some surprises that happen, offering me many possibilities in developing my work. To develop my thesis work I experimented with color, surface texture, and shapes. In the written thesis I start to analyze why I present these shapes and colors in my artwork, and what they symbolize.

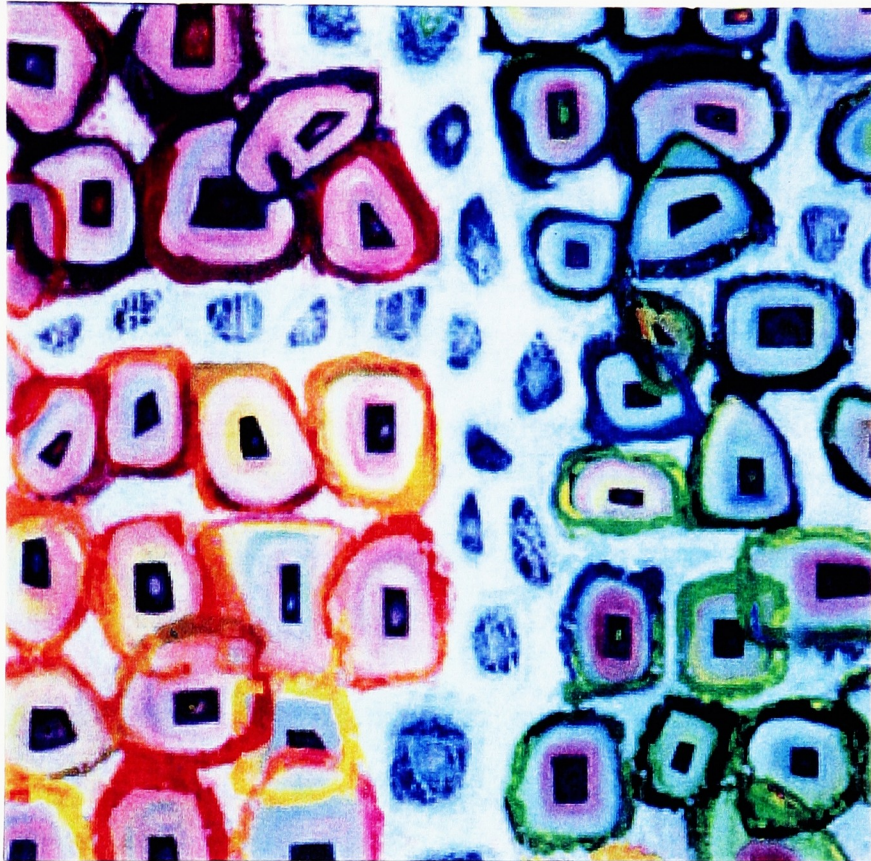
Harmony I (fig.1)

What I want to show in my painting is reality, a world which includes everything, no matter whether it's a personal emotion or a universal issue, nature or humanity, basically, everything. Geometric and organic shapes present the basic, original units, and everything is painted in simple, abstracted forms. If the shapes present simplicity, the colors of my artwork explain the complexity.

This painting was finished in Fall 2001. As if seen through a microscope, these organic shapes with similar elements of color, structure and size live together in harmony. However, they are not exactly the same. Indeed, they present a metaphor for humankind; they have similar outlooks but different individual characteristics.

There are three groups that co-exist in the work: two groups are recognized by warm and cool tones, and the third group, a white group goes through the other two groups. It is like the different races on the earth where each group has its own unique/special culture. These cultural differences might conflict and clash especially when different racial groups get together, but if we try to understand our differences and respect others many current problems, like wars, and discriminations, might be solved or avoided, altogether.

Figure 1.



Harmony I, 49" x 49". Oil color, Latex and Acrylic color.

Untitled-H1(fig.2), Untitled-H2(fig.3) and Harmony II (gif.4)

After creating harmony I, I noticed some interesting phenomena in my work, such as the integration of shapes and surface textures. For the following work, I zoom in and focus on how these shapes could integrate with each other. So, I enlarged the organic shapes and composed them in two different ways (in Untitled-H1 and Untitled-H2). Like communication, we exchange different types of thinking with other people, and learn about different life experiences. Through this understanding, we start friendships and learn more from each other. Since effective communication needs time, the change is little by little.

We are used to living in an efficient, technical life, where we even expect change and the notion that it could be done in a minute. Reviewing our history, the progress of human society is slow. For example, discrimination between races, no matter whether in the western or eastern countries, was much more serious in the past than it is nowadays. We still need to work a lot, but I believe, someday the line between human races will be erased more. So, people need to plan ahead at least ten, twenty or even more years from now, and learn to be patient about the efforts we make already.

In considering the contrasting elements of my work, I explored the possibility of using different shapes. Geometric and organic shapes are contrasting elements. In Harmony II, I tried to integrate different shapes and predict the different results from this integration.

Figure 3



Untitled H2, 22" x 22". Oil color, Latex and Acrylic color

Untitled-H3 (fig.5) and Harmony IV (fig6.)

Trying different paints and materials, I finished Untitled-H3 by using latex and crayon. The combination of shapes was an exploration resulting in the presentation of different creatures. It is a challenge to see how many shapes I can create. Harmony IV is a collage, and I really enjoyed it a lot. I now see another possibility for expressing complexity. Harmony IV is close to my image of the reality of this world; diverse natural species, a variety of human characteristics, and different relationships. With technological development these days, it is easy to receive information from other countries and learn more about other cultures. Through learning from different cultures, we can combine certain traits with our traditions; we can create a new generational culture. In the process of accepting different cultures we can learn to be tolerant and have compassion for different groups of people, and these two characteristics are the most important way to face our cruel life.

Harmony V (fig 7), Harmony VI (fig.8) and Harmony VII (fig.9)

Contrasting colors present a variety of characteristics in my work, and I am looking for another element which can present the same idea and bring more interest to my work. In these final paintings I concentrated on developing surface texture. From the beginning of the Harmony series I used latex paint drippings on the canvas and used it as a background, then I composed different shapes on top of the texture. However, shape, color and texture are not working consistently well and sometimes they are discordant. I tried to find a solution and figure out how I can use texture in a better way. After different experiments, finally, I found a solution. I don't use the dripping texture as a background; I use it as a method to find shapes. Using this method, the shapes and texture collaborate well.

What I want to show is the complete integration of everything, which means there is no clear boundary between anything. In Harmony VII, I am satisfied that every shape is integrated with the others, and it is hard to define the contour of the shapes. They create a community and show their interdependence. Breaking down boundaries and building interdependence becomes the direction of my artwork.

Figure 5



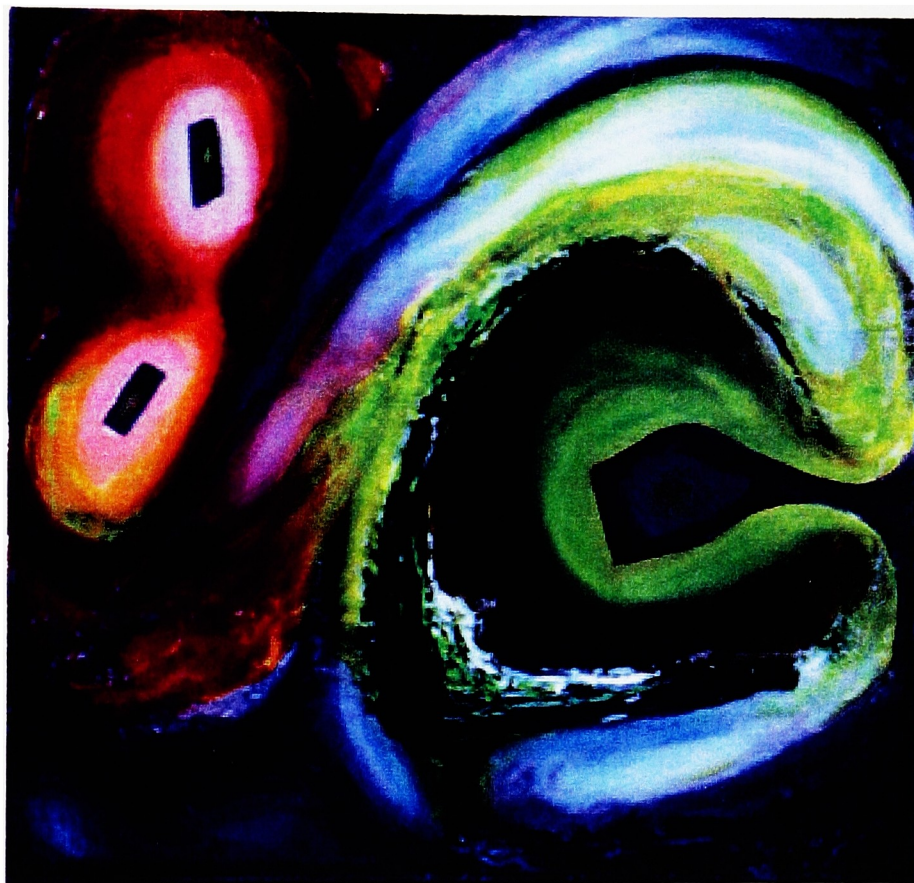
Untitled H3, 24" x 24". Latex color, crayon and Mix media.

Figure 6



Harmony IV, 24" x 24". Oil color, Acrylic color and Mix media.

Figure 7



Harmony V, 34" x 33". Oil color, Latex and Acrylic color.

Figure 8



Harmony VI, 33" x 33". Oil color, Latex and Acrylic color.

Figure 9



Harmony VIII, 33" x 33". Oil color, Latex and Acrylic color.

IV. CONCLUSION

It was a very enjoyable process to create the Harmony series. From experiments with different materials and expressions, I realized that humans have an unlimited ability for creation and imagination. As far as plans for my painting in the future, I will continue to develop my skill using oil colors and try combinations with different methods. I also wish to improve my skill with other materials such as acrylic paint, latex and mixed media. However, I believe the most important thing in creating great art is the knowledge and concepts that an artist has. So I will do more research into different philosophies and cultures. Hopefully, I will be able to use my knowledge to help others.

In my painting over these past two years, I have been capable of exploring my thoughts deeper and clarifying the issues that have concerned and interested me. Human beings have so many unique abilities which can make a difference in this world. The most valuable lesson I have learned is to explore my own knowledge and be more responsible to this world.

A very pertinent saying by the Dalai Lama said that compassion doesn't mean that you look down at others, but you take others as more important than yourself. To live in peace is our wish, and compassion is the way to lead us to a peaceful world. The conflicts between different cultures are impossible to solve in a short time, we need to be patient and choose good solutions. It will take a while to see the changes, but it will eventually affect this world, this planet for eternity.

As a painter, I want my painting to bring happiness and peace to others, even though I still have a lot to learn. I expect to be a more compassionate person and practice my compassion both toward the people I know and the people I don't know, as well. It is hard work and it will definitely take my whole life to learn about it. I have just started my journey, and hopefully I can reach my goal someday.

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