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Zen and the Art of the Journey

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ZEN AND THE ART OF THE JOURNEY
by
BRENDA CHRISTIAN BROWN
(under the Direction of Jason Hoelscher)

ABSTRACT

The works in this exhibition represent the transdisciplinary research and practices used to explore humanitarian concerns with stress and suffering. It is a Buddhist principle that all humans suffer. And it is the inner journey that allows the guidance out of suffering and towards freedom. For me, the recognition of suffering was there since infancy. I have spent a lifetime searching for answers through the philosophy of Zen, the study of Buddhism (as religion), the study of neuroscience, the arts (both liberal and fine), the practice of meditation, and the psychological process of mindfulness.

The attention to the present moment allows me to find that one place where suffering does not exist. It is through this moment to moment life, the journey, that I have found freedom, creativity, and happiness. Mindfulness’ gift is trust of self which in turn gives permission to create art that is both self-regulated and straightforward.

This exhibition replicates my journey; the discarding of life as I knew it, the power of nature as teacher, the study, the research, the meditations and inner journeys, and finally, creation without stress and suffering.

INDEX WORDS: Zen, Journey, Installation art, Transdisciplinary, Mindfulness, Meditation
ZEN AND THE ART OF THE JOURNEY

by

BRENDA CHRISTIAN BROWN

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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ZEN AND THE ART OF THE JOURNEY

by

BRENDA CHRISTIAN BROWN

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DEDICATION

TO MY SUPPORT FAMILY

Jill, Beau, Patrick, Stephen, and Heidi

Thank you for your love and encouragement on this journey.
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I would like to thank Robert Farber for his mentorship; without his help I’m sure I would not have found my voice, which found its way into various forms of expression. Thank you so much.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Thesis Statement, Significance, and Objectives

I have always been intensely curious about numerous unrelated subjects, enjoy the act of discovery, and love to pull things together to see a bigger picture. Throughout my studio work and while researching and writing my book on contemporary aesthetic polymaths and multidisciplinary artists, I found several common threads between their work and mine. One of them being that our work included everything we learned about art, everything we unlearned, and everything we thought about. Our work reflected the fact that we knew ourselves and how to live a life as an artist with a capital A, as coined by e.e. Cummings in “The Agony of the Artist (with a capital A)”. The article appeared in one of the forty-nine essays in the now out of print book entitled A Miscellany Revised. As Cummings defines it,

It is Art because it is alive. It proves that, if you and I are to create at all, we must create with today and let all the art schools and Medicis in the universe go hang themselves with yesterday’s rope. It teaches us that we have made a profound error in trying to learn Art, since whatever Art stands for is whatever cannot be learned. Indeed, the Artist is no other than he who unlearns what he has learned, in order to know himself; and the agony of the Artist, far from being the result of the world’s failure to discover and appreciate him, arises from his own personal struggle to discover, to appreciate and finally to express himself.¹

In pages from *Theaster Gates Notebooks, 2016*, Gates defines his future of Art as different from what art is today.

When I build my school, I’m going to teach people that whatever is taught at the MFA level is akin to elementary school. In elementary school students will learn replica, mise-en-scene, and representation. In middle school, they will learn about reflexivity, reproducibility, reaction, and reflection. In high school, students will learn to see the invisible, will learn physics and religion. As undergraduates, my future pupils will learn transgression, systems of power, how to be a system of power, and how to harness systems of power. They will learn how to mine for gold, dig for diamonds. They learn how to fish. In graduate school, students will learn how to levitate. Until we’re willing to think about the complexities, until we’re willing to think about the human capacity to understand complex symbols and thought forms and the invisible, we will think that murals alone can solve social problems. I would never make a mural to solve a social problem. It takes money to solve social problems; it takes hard conversations and political power—artists should also sculpt those things.²

An Artist must know who she is and why she is an Artist; that information has to motivate and inform the work. Cheryl Arutt, Psy.D., a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in creative artist issues, understands that “If you are an artist, you are your instrument. The greater access you maintain to yourself, the richer and broader your array of creative tools.”³ More than any other career, being an Artist means always starting from nothing. It’s almost entirely inquiry based and self-regulated. A great deal of time is spent alone, which allows the Artist time to embody non-discriminatory wisdom vis-à-vis the meditational experience. It allows for the time that is needed to know herself well enough to ascertain her own strengths and weaknesses. By doing this, she can identify her own creative obsessions which will become so specific that her

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work can only be recognized as her own. As Georgia O’Keeffe said, “I feel that a real living form is the result of the individual’s effort to create the living thing out of the adventure of his spirit into the unknown—where it has experienced something—felt something—it has not understood—and from that experience comes the desire to make the unknown-known. Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant—there is no such thing. Making your unknown known is the important thing.”

The value of agony or difficulty cannot be overemphasized; it is a part of life and will become a part of who she is and possibly why she is an Artist. It is this personal work that must be handled in a thoughtful and respectful way. In Japan, there is a reverence for the art of mending pottery named kintsugi. It means to repair with seams of gold. The most common history I’ve found for this practice dates to the 15th century when a shogun needed a broken bowl repaired. Those repaired bowls became more prized then the original pottery. There were a limited number of craftsmen that were proficient in this repair technique. These bowls with their rivers of gold became distinctive because they resembled nothing but themselves. These times of struggle, these searches for answers, these starts and stops, these breaks and repairs eventually steer the Artist in the right direction.

The willingness to stay vulnerable is a major part of the work too. No matter how many successes there are, there will be failures also. Every work starts off blind as a profound mystery and the need to lean in to get a closer look at what you are creating is always there and must be pursued from both the inside and outside at the same time.

But it is with that need to take a closer look that you realize the inside is driving the outside. As an Artist, you will be the only one to recognize and enjoy that internal success. Satori is a Zen Buddhist term for this type of awakening. The literal translation is “seeing into one’s true nature”.

Zen Buddhism has produced an understanding of reality about one’s own self and her connection to nature that is different from those offered in Western philosophy. It is not a systematization of knowledge built on a discursive mode of reasoning anchored in an Aristotelian either/or logic. This type of self-binding traps the Zen practitioner into a mode of attachment that is the source of suffering and disrupts the sense of freedom expressive of the original human nature. Zen cherishes simplicity and straightforwardness in grasping reality, and acting on it in the present moment; it offers a constant state of aliveness.

Dualities and multiplicities mark my personal life and my work. These ambiguities mark the momentary movements of form, combinations of sound, light, and sensation. They are a play of consciousness. I have practiced Zen Buddhism all my life to find the still and quiet guidance I need to help me convert concepts into works of Art and my reality. The object of my installations is the poetic expression of the unexpected and the journey that is pursued. These works represent the Art that exists between Zen mindfulness and the heredity of my Low Country culture. The balance of the two makes difficult things simple and poetic—a world worth thinking about and being open to.
CHAPTER 2

Zen and The Art of the Journey

CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Conceptual Art is high Art in which the concepts, or ideas, involved in the work take precedence over the traditional aesthetics and highly disciplined skills of traditional art, such as those found in painting and sculpture. Explained further by art historian, Alexander Alberro, “Conceptualism was pivotal in breaking art from the constraints of self-containment. That reframing of art was not due to representations of social structures, contradictions, or identities. Rather, it was the result of a greater aesthetic open-endedness that allowed art to intersect with an expanded range of social life”\(^5\). Conceptual Art thrives today in highly reconfigured forms. “While they may or may not term themselves ‘conceptual artists’, ideas such as anti-commodification, social and/or political critique, and ideas/information as medium continue to be aspects of contemporary art, especially among artists working with installation art, performance art, net.art and electronic/digital art”\(^6\).

While attending Art Basel in 2015, I ran across a work of Art that had been bought and was leaning against the wall in the office of the Martin Z. Margulies Collection in the Wynwood district. I was struck by the Zen of the object; its straightforwardness, its honesty, and its vulnerability. It was a painting that had become an object of statute, decreed by the Artist, Lawrence Carroll. I liked the way it

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fell “in the gap between art and life”, as Rauschenberg used to describe his combines. And I liked the intimate poetic chord that registered in me as kindred spirit.

In 2013, the Venice Biennale’s Vatican City Pavilion commissioned Carroll to create a body of work with the theme being “Re-creation”. Five large pieces were made; all of them exerting a commanding, yet fragile, presence. They were inspired by rosaries Carroll saw hanging on a statue in an Italian chapel. One of these pieces, The cloud, 2013 (Fig. 2.1), was the Art I saw that day and the piece that changed the way I thought about my paintings.

Figure 2.1, Lawrence Carroll, The Cloud, 2013, Martin Z. Margulies Collection, Miami, FL.
The installation Artists who have informed my work are Teresita Fernandez, Xu Bing, and Ann Hamilton. All of them engage in vast amounts of exploration, create experiences that are contemporary and alive with qualities and characteristics that are specific to their own voice, and they understand the intimate immensity of human nature. In Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, we find the description of this type of intimacy.

One might say that immensity is a philosophical category of daydream. Daydream undoubtedly feeds on all kinds of sights, but through a sort of natural inclination, it contemplates grandeur. And this contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity.

Far from the immensities of sea and land, merely through memory, we can recapture, by means of meditation, the resonances of this contemplation of grandeur.

If we could analyze impressions and images of immensity, or what immensity contributes to an image, we should soon enter into a region of the purest sort of phenomenology—a phenomenology without phenomena; or, stated less paradoxically, one that, in order to know the productive flow of images, need not wait for the phenomena of the imagination to take form and become stabilized in completed images. In other words, since immense is not an object, a phenomenology of immense would refer us directly to our imagining consciousness. In analyzing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination. It then becomes clear that works of art are the by-products of this existentialism of the imagining being. In this direction of daydreams of immensity the real product is consciousness of enlargement. We feel that we have been promoted to the dignity of the admiring being.

This being the case, in this meditation, we are not “cast into the world”, since we open the world, as it were, by transcending the world seen as it is, or as it was, before we started dreaming. And even if we are aware of our own paltry selves—through the effects of harsh dialectics— we become aware of grandeur. We then return to the natural activity of our magnifying being.

Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and cautions arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are

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7 Gaston, Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, Beacon Press, 183.
dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.8

Most of my Art pieces are initiated through dreams, intuition, and the practice of Zen Buddhism. Since I do understand this immensity, it is my intention to create works of Art that communicate that depth with a level of vulnerability. In order to expand my knowledge about presentation, I study contemporary Artists whose works I feel demonstrate these characteristics. By combining my mediums of choice—that is painting, sculpting, furniture building, and installations—I can create ambient immersions that allow me to fully express myself and invite my audience to become part of the conversation.

Globally, many painters have begun to explore the possibility of developing art in a fourth direction—that of theatrical space (not as illusionism, but physically). One such Artist is Teresita Fernandez, who had an exhibit named As Above So Below at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts. In it, she expressed her version of the Vedic act of creation by representing an abstract version of origin with the Golden Embryo, Rorschach, (Fig. 2.2) as the Creator. The act of propping apart the earth, as in, Sfumato, (Fig. 2.3) and the sky, as in Black Sun (Fig.2.4) completes the glimpse of creation. All of Vedic creation is cyclic and evolutionary as evidenced in our landscape with its massive to miniature elements, cycles of light, and the lunar pull of the tides. Fernandez established its trails through the

8 Ibid, 184.
gallery space so that the audience could feel these amplified natural processes by traveling through the exhibit. As she describes it, “You look at one thing and then another, and you see a sequence of images, like stringing a set of photographs together. It’s immersive and meaningful because it affects your body. Your body is an extension of the artwork.”

Figure 2.2, Teresita Fernandez, Rorschach and a painting from the Golden series, 2014, MassMOCA, North Adams, MA.

Figure 2.3. *Sfumato*, Site specific Installation of 40,000 graphite pieces and marks, 2014, MassMOCCA, North Adams, MA.

Figure 2.4. Teresita Fernandez, *Black Sun*, Installation of polycarb tubes, 2014, MassMOCA, North Adams, MA.
Fernandez describes the philosophy behind her work, and in doing so expresses my objective.

While I love the research and developing the conceptual part, in the end the real challenge is not to entertain myself with narratives but rather to translate those ideas I’m thinking about into an installation or a sculpture that puts you in a place where you’re experiencing those things without me having to call them anything or rationalize its meaning. That’s alchemy! That’s the kind of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, where something magically shifts and becomes bigger than the sum of its parts in some mute, inexplicable way...There’s nothing to get, they’re actually just in it, which is what happens when you are standing in awe in the real landscape or when a poem makes no logical sense but resonates with some hidden chord inside of you. So rather than trying to create overt landscapes, or fake landscapes, or mini landscapes, what I’m really trying to create is an experience that offers that sense of just staring back at yourself, a quiet mirror to yourself. More than anything else, what I seek is to make an artwork that offers intimacy: it’s the reaction I most value and it’s the exact word to describe what I’m after. ¹⁰

Xu Bing’s life has been a study in contradictions. Early in his work, as a student, he was heavily influenced by an exhibition he saw at the National Art Museum of China of Robert Rauschenberg’s work, and was moved by his bold direction in Art. This influence, his experiences with the two different communist Chinese cultures—the peasant class and academia—plus his adoption of Zen philosophy was the amalgamation that brought together all of his subsequent work.

Where Does the Dust Itself Collect? (Fig. 2.5) represents these facts the clearest. It was made of dust collected by Xu Bing on 9-11 in New York and presented ten years later in an empty New York storefront for contemplation on the relationship between the impermanent material and the eternal spiritual worlds. It is based on a poem

written by Hui Neng (638-713), the father of Zen Buddhism. “As there is nothing the first, where does the dust itself collect?” It is based on an argument in poetry between two seventh century monks; whereas, Shen Hsiu described how a soul collects dust as it goes through life and must be continually cleansed, and Hui Neng argued that the soul always remains pure, it collects no dust.

Figure 2.5, Xu Bing, Where Does the Dust Itself Collect? 2011, New York.

Xu Bing returned to China from living in New York in 2008, as vice president of the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. The World Finance Center was under construction and he was asked to produce an art piece for the lobby. When he arrived at the construction site to look and make notes, he was horrified to see the migrant workers that were living and working in squalor while they worked on the site. The disparity between the ostentatious show of wealth and extreme poverty was overwhelming. He decided to use the debris he found on the site to make his Art piece, a large flying object inside a glass cage (the building) unaware that he was trapped in a
cage. The team that was chosen to make the Art was made up of the migrant workers. The commission was withdrawn when Xu described the concept of the project.

Over a two-year period, four phoenixes were built; two were experimental and two were used as a linked version of rebirth and the complications of China’s propelled growth. Phoenix (Fig. 2.6) was made to resemble Chinese folk art where cheap materials are used to express hope for tomorrow. Thousands of LED lights were embedded all over the birds so that at night the figures looked like distant constellations. Phoenix was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2013.

In all of Xu Bing’s Art we find obstacles to habitual ways of thinking. They were all created to estrange concepts. This discomfort forces the audience to reorganize preconceived notions. Xu Bing discusses this concept:

This approach is related to a kind of Zen training of the mind to receive enlightenment. The Zen term for it is koan, a dialogue in which an answer is given that defies logic. One famous koan has the student asking, “Where is Buddha?” The Zen master replies, “three bushels of hemp”, the student’s thought processes fall into a great empty space, without any kind of support or foundation. Then one day he breaks through to enlightenment with the realization that the essence of Buddha exists in every moment and every aspect of life. The Zen approach to enlightenment forces you to open up your mind in the midst of something that completely goes against logic and common sense in this way one achieves wisdom.11

I am strongly influenced by Xu Bing, in many ways. One of these, his choice of materials, is prominent as a major part of his process and makes me mindful as I choose mine. He defines a good Artist as one who can find balance between the times he is living and the Art work he is making, and the interaction of the two in keeping the work alive and universal. Success, to Xu, depends on whether he can undermine attachments to thoughts and concepts by directing his audience to forms of awareness beyond theirs. He does that by making the Zen philosophy visible. We both share this philosophy and therefore practice meditation to tap into the intimate immensity of universal knowledge. Both of us practice mindfulness, as process, which informs us to
live in the present. Our work allows for chances to grow; to unhinge the contrast between what was and what is.

Ann Hamilton describes creativity as making room to trust your own process and the ability to respond to that process. The reason we try to control things, or contain things, is fear. Fears get in the way of something being alive. We must give ourselves permission to do something we don’t already know, to recognize the possibilities within something is healing. To be creative is to respond in different ways, to trust, to let go of rigidity.\textsuperscript{12}

In her works, Hamilton explains, “We’re always trying to find a way to talk about those things that are hard to talk about, that doesn’t easily end up in language. My way is through materials. How they hold meaning for us helps establish how we make metaphors. We need objects because they tie us to history.”\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Myein}, her 1999 Venice Biennale piece, she used the American Pavilion to shed light on America’s racism and its influence all over the world. As the viewer walks up to the architecture, he is met by a steel grid of rippled glass panes 90 x 16’ which blurs the building (Fig. 2.7). By liquefying the view, one senses a sadness or a suspension of time. She uses the neoclassical Monticello type building to house a gallery of braille affixed to the walls depicting Charles Reznikoff’s \textit{Testimony: The United States, 1885-1915}, which were

testimonies of witnesses in court cases involving property disputes, accidents, and acts of violence. Over loud speakers, the audience hears Abraham Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural Address*, which is spoken in phonetic code. Fuchsia powder falls from the ceiling at intervals revealing the braille bearing witness to racism not easily seen within an idealized projection of democracy. As the audience leaves the pavilion, he takes the message with him in the form of fuchsia dust footprints which track throughout the international biennale (Fig. 2.8).

Figure 2.7, Ann Hamilton, *Myein*, 1999, front entrance, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.
Hamilton was commissioned by *The Quiet in the Land*, a non-profit organization that creates projects to enhance communities around the world. The Artists are confronted with world issues in a provocative new way over an extended period of time without the making and selling of art objects by focusing more on the process. This project, *Meditation Boat* (Fig. 2.9), was described by Hamilton. “The (Mekong) river became for me a visual embodiment and confluence of cultural currents, where a traditional past mix with the modern present.”\(^{14}\) Her proposal was to design a boat inspired by the form and function of a traditional meditation hall. The Buddhist monks use it to escape the hustle and bustle of the city, overrun with tourists, to quieter sites on the river where they can meditate and chant.

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From Ann Hamilton, I find true inspiration as I consider her the artist’s Artist. She shows us how to trust our own process and develop the ability to use that process as the vehicle for making complex Art. She encourages us to boldly go forth without knowing what we are looking for—it is a step by step process that begins with intuition and inquiry. She encourages us to find ways to talk about things that are hard to talk about and use materials with history to create metaphors. She knows how to transform a space through minimal means into meaningful experiences. She explores the sensory and spiritual dimensions of our bodies with the spaces we inhabit: delving into ways of seeing and touching that are tactile and immediate as they are subconscious and invisible.
The conceptual Artists’ works described here inspire and inform my work. We are all conceptual Artists’ who use our own voice, our ideas, to take precedence over other considerations. We all understand the intimate immensity of human nature and know how to tap into it. We allow our vulnerabilities, or humanness, to be exposed; so that common truths can be seen.

After researching hundreds of artists for my book on multidisciplinary artists and aesthetic polymaths, these are the Artists that I consider the professors of my studio work. They have all inspired, informed, and produced meaningful works of Art that have encouraged me to dig deeper and aim higher.
Discoverying how my mind works, and why specializing in one medium was not acceptable to me, was a major step in discovering more of who I was, what I wanted to say, and how to say it. I started researching multidisciplinary Artists to find commonalities and unravel this mystery. I soon discovered that all of them had found their way out of a specialized medium. I then discovered other similar characteristics that I could relate to, such as, no tolerance for boredom, curiosity about almost anything, and the ability to constantly process fresh material. Motivations include learning by doing, projects that have impact and make a difference, pulling together the Big Picture—seeing the relationships between things, and challenges that test limits. These characteristics belong to a classification of personality type named polymath. If nothing else, this research led me to the realization that nothing was wrong with me; I was just wired differently than most folks, those who specialize and profess they know what is best for all of us. This knowledge allowed me to have more confidence in my thoughts and less in others’. I stay current on these types of Artists and their work through research for my book and the periodical writing of blogs.

My work always begins with a persistent thought; I never know where that thought will take me. It is then heavily influenced by dreams, meditations, and interaction with nature. The philosophy of Zen Buddhism usually plays a major role in the development of the idea. As the concept is germinated, I study anything and everything. Mindfulness is used to visualize the installation; I start developing one of the mediums, usually painting or sculpture. This piece of the puzzle may or may not
stay in the installation, but it gets me started in the right direction. As thoughts of communicating my vision develop, I solidify my concept by identifying writers and fine Artists who have approached the same or similar ideas.

As I add other works to the installation, the parts of the puzzle start to fit together. If this does not happen, I start looking for the glitch and must spend time unraveling the reason. When I fully understand the concept myself, I plan out the rest of the installation, and then work through the rest of the pieces. I use my Fujifilm X-M1 camera to take photos of the work as it unfolds to tweak design and technical issues with shapes, colors, relationships, and details.

I have found that the most difficult part of my work is to keep the work emotionally dry so the gestalt can be felt by the audience. Influences and opinions of others are welcome at the thinking stage of my work, but as the work progresses this is no longer invited, as it negates my ability to communicate my concept as they are totally original to me. Even though my work is conceptual, I use the process of mindfulness to show intention.

*Sweet Tea Garden* (Fig. 3.1) was constructed with a specific site in mind; the university gallery. The installation was constructed to implicate the audience as active participants by walking through and behind the structures. This six-month long project began with three mandalas I created by staining raw canvas with inks to demonstrate the process of mindfulness. They were presented lying flat on standing desks that I built to replicate the tables used by the Buddhist monks while making sand mandalas. In a dream, I saw “prayer flags” made of T-shirts. I bought forty white shirts from different thrift shops to dye and made linocuts to represent specific symbols, or
prayers. The T-shirts represented the history of each person that wore the shirts, their transformation through the dying process and their new identities represented by the symbols they carried on their backs. The T-shirts were then hung on clothes line to link the practice of Zen to the Low Country where I practice this philosophy. The path to “enlightenment” was made of raw canvas that had been printed by inking OSB, covering the canvas with blankets, and pressing the design by driving over the canvas with my small car. This printed canvas was cut into pieces and finished with bias tape around the edges. The pieces were laid out to represent the eternal knot indicating that the road to enlightenment is never a straight line.

Figure 3.1, Brenda Brown, Sweet Tea Garden, 2016, University Gallery, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA.
The focal point of this installation was heavily influenced by Xu Bing’s
*Background Story 8* (Fig. 3.2). His use of dried materials arranged to make a landscape
“painting” influenced me to gather and dry materials from the Low Country and make
my own. I used a bookcase from surplus and converted it into a showcase by fronting it
with a frosted acrylic sheet of Plexiglas. The cabinet size was doubled and finished by adding wood veneer. The piece was lit with six fluorescent lamps attached to the back. It was designed to be walked around so that the audience could see how the “landscape” was made and understand the process (Fig. 3.1).

Figure 3.3, Brenda Brown, Meditation Walk, 2016, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA.
Meditation Walk (Fig. 3.3) was inspired by my daily walks in the maritime forest near my home. I wanted to show the relationship of size and energy of the hundred-year-old trees to myself, which helps me keep my life in perspective. I wanted to show how and why meditation became important in my life from an early age, even before I knew what that word meant. I created two process pieces to demonstrate this idea.

I created *I'm with Stupid* (Fig. 3.3) to show the abuse that was begun in infancy and continued throughout my childhood. My reliance on self, began at age six. I learned to remove myself from the chaos, stress, and beatings by retreating inside myself and shutting the door on the rest of the world outside. According to Zen Buddhism, life guarantees suffering. How we deal with this condition assures us healing or more suffering. In my case, I healed the scars over years by expressing myself through Art—the one thing I knew to be authentic to me and the “cause” of my abuse. To show this process, I collaged one of my old paint rags over the gashes and layers of white washed cover ups. It repaired the broken canvas in much the same way as the repairs of Japanese *Kintsugi* bowls.

*After the Love is Gone* (Fig. 3.4) was created to show another example of why I continue to need meditation in my life and to show another way of finding a quiet space to hear the guidance inside myself. After the dust settles and the relationship has found its closure, personal healing and growth becomes mandatory for creating new life situations. The process begins with cleaning the walls of mud and removing the attachments, the ball and chain. The foundational work begins by making repetitive gestures on a blank slate. Through this act of mark making, I can achieve catharsis from the stresses and pain in the world and reach a state of mindfulness. I do not deal with
the past that is gone, nor the future which has not come. By emptying myself in this way, I stay in a position of receivership in the present. This is the Zen philosophy of pure emptiness that allows people to connect, and is the gateway to enlightenment—to truly find happiness and freedom, one must give up attachments.

Figure 3.4, Brenda Brown, *Meditation Walk*, 2016, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA.
Through process, I can demonstrate how to heal both relationship problems by physically changing the artwork from their original stages and therefore move forward with my own personal progress. Process Art emphasizes the physicality of the work’s creation. Through the process of making, it merges the conception with the physical and pulls back the curtain on the process itself. Emphasize is on the creative journey rather than on producing an end product.

My work is an integral part of my life and I have found it a valuable tool in my practice of Zen Buddhism as a way of taking full responsibility for myself and the decisions I make. This is my way of searching internally for answers and forming no attachments to outcome. The work becomes a learning experience of mindfulness for me and, I hope, for my audience.
CHAPTER 4

PRODUCTION & ANALYSIS

My work is transdisciplinary, conceptual, and mindful; my personal life motivates and informs it. It is entirely inquiry based and self-regulated. The actual practice of mindfulness is built into the results as process. My admiration and research of the Art of Xu Bing, Teresita Fernandez, and Ann Hamilton have informed my work and directed my presentations. I, like them, am seeking an intimacy with my audience.

This theatrical ambient immersion allows me to express my own truth and invites the audience to become part of the conversation. It embodies my individual struggle to come to terms with my inner thoughts, my stresses, and my identity in relation to the constantly changing world. When an audience is willing to become an extension of the Art, I hope they feel the mindfulness that is process and that it resonates with some hidden chord inside that knows suffering and understands healing. We are capable of understanding truth in this passive way; which in turn, helps us understand ourselves and the world.

By expressing the Zen philosophy through practice and manifesting it physically in my bounded space, the Low Country, I have found my rhetorical language, my spirituality, my aesthetics, and myself. Every moment is my genesis and the series of moments is my journey.

I began this passage by wrestling with every aspect of suffering in my life; finally giving up the fight and heaping my baggage outside the door; as I show in this exhibit. I use materials like burlap to represent the Low Country heritage, tied in bindles as
metaphors for my emotional baggage. To metaphorically indicate the time, I have included a crib-like painting representing infancy and an antique suitcase representing old age. Learning to meditate allowed me to begin to focus in the present moment, to let go of the past that is over, and the future that has not yet come. With meditation came mindfulness, which opened the first gateway, or torri. The four gateways in this exhibition were painted in the Hitsuzendo style; or “way of Zen through brush”. It is believed to be a method of achieving Samadhi; or “unification with the Highest Reality”. The resulting calligraphy represents that one moment of creation.

The first section of the journey begins with the maze that naturally exists in a forest, which allows for the practice of walking meditation and for communion with nature. Spatial navigation allows us to record information about our environment and mix it with our spiritual journey. The lit trees represent the sacredness of nature as stained-glass windows, and the lighted path that sunlight makes as it dapples the floor of the forest. The maze leads us to a river’s edge where we are wonderstruck with inspiration from the sunlight that dances across the water.

The second section of the journey is the Reading Room. The Tao Te Ching is the oldest known book written, and is the philosophy of Taoism, the “Way”, which is the basis for Chinese Buddhism. In this section, I have interpreted twenty-four of the eighty-one chapters with illustrations. The two benches were made for this room and allows a place to sit and read the scrolls; to contemplate this part of the journey. All things read, or learned, should be interpreted and taken to the center of one’s heart for confirmation as truth or denial.
The third section of the journey begins through the gateway that leads to the trilogy of spiritual practices. Prayer beads hang overhead as testaments to the daily practice of meditation as one of the means for quieting the mind and allowing the practitioner to listen to the quiet voice inside. The first standing work table houses the mandala, which is used as a tool to practice mindfulness and as a meditation tool. The mandala, in this case, is made of stained canvas rather than the traditional sand, but still represents the universe and establishes a sacred place. The infinity well, on the middle table, reminds us of the intimate immensity of deep meditation. The ceramic box, on the third table, holds the eighty-one chapters of the *Tao Te Ching*, with illustrations that I drew with ink and graphite. The box is made of clay and is my first attempt at ceramics. It was important to me that I make a vessel to house this very personal book. I wanted a way to file the chapters in order and pull each one out as I read and meditated on meaning. This clay box is a perfect example of *Wabi Sabi*; the ancient aesthetic philosophy rooted in Zen that reveres authenticity above all things, and prizes pottery that is handmade, irregularly shaped with uneven glazes and cracks. The gateway leading to the next section, is flanked by T-shirt that have been printed with Buddhist symbols: they metaphorically represent the transformation of humankind; the evolution of each individual, and their subsequent contribution to the whole of man.

These “blessings” lead to the fourth and final gateway that enters upon a section with only one painting; a triptych measuring 54 x 108”. The colors represent peace and truth zipped by courage and enlightenment. This crack in space and time is filled with the human impulse to find meaning in the void; the Artist’s urge to draw a line. Art is
very much alive as creative force that energizes the only thing we truly ever have—this moment right now. Every aspect of human life is inherently creative; we move forward by detaching from the known to explore new territory. Our identity, and our healing is a liquid process that unfolds from one moment to the next.

This installation is a form of transdisciplinary Art using various forms of research and methods to explore a problem of humanitarian concern, through metaphors and the use of materials with history. The philosophy of Zen Buddhism is made visible through this creation of the journey as its centralized network. It enlivens the philosophy and the Art, directing the audience to forms of awareness beyond their own, and hopefully causes them to reorganize preconceived notions.

By placing language and text at the metaphorical center and combining that with aesthetic senses, the network reorganizes itself as distributed and the audience can construct faculties of memory, reason and imagination. The outcome is rhetorical and phenomenological, allowing the audience to be in a position of control and to take an active role in the construction of meaning.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

I know that personal meaning cannot be taught, or learned: it is a singular journey of discipline, self-experience and self-expression that leads to insight. From here my journey will continue, and so will my art as a constant companion. Every action and event of my life, including this MFA experience, leads to understanding through its completeness. I look forward to all the moments of my life, as I know them to be pregnant with creative opportunities and happiness, void of stress and suffering, as I now understand these things to simply be opportunities, too.

My experiences, as expressed through Zen and the Art of the Journey, represent very condensed portions of my life. A fuller presentation and another part of this transdisciplinary Art is presently being written in book form; as my concern for humanity lies beyond the boundaries of installation Art. I visualize the expanded version of this journey as a book, in the same styles as Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha and Eugen Herrigel’s Zen and the Art of Archery.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

WORKS OF THE EXHIBIT: ZEN AND THE ART OF THE JOURNEY

Note: All works are untitled, and are interrelated parts of the total exhibition.