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Joy in the Focus, Focus on the Joy

Alicia Cully

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JOY IN THE FOCUS, FOCUS ON THE JOY

by

ALICIA WEBER CULLY

(Under the Direction of Jason Hoelscher)

ABSTRACT

This body of work, Joy in the Focus, Focus on the Joy is an engendered unspoken symbolic language generated from handwritten words of the English language that are defined or viewed with positive connotations. These symbols are meant to spread the feelings each word embodies with what resonates with the a priori or memory of the audience. The symbolic language is a key for an individual to make their own connections with how the symbol's meaning makes them feel, resulting in an openly welcome invitation to reach a focused joy in connecting with the displayed feeling(s). My drive to create art is to focus on spreading positively and aesthetically. Accordingly, I apply hand-mixed, pigmented wood stains onto various wood surfaces to create a visually pleasing celebration, surrounded by copper leafing to create an auralike border, encasing each symbol in an abstractly surrealistic piece of the swirling lines of the symbol reminiscent of the Art Nouveau era. Each symbol is created to facilitate an environment where the audience is able to ponder and connect with contemplative freedom, resonating with the positive symbol of their choosing. The end game of my body of work is to encourage the viewer to leave with the positive feeling within, and in turn create positive actions in the environments they interact with; creating a domino effect to their life and communities.

JOY IN THE FOCUS, FOCUS ON THE JOY

By

ALICIA WEBER CULLY

B.S., Eastern Michigan University, 2003

M.F.A., Georgia Southern University 2024

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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JOY IN THE FOCUS, FOCUS ON THE JOY

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I think of creating art, two words come to mind: joy and focus, both of which are ultimately what brings me satisfaction in life. As an artist, my purpose is to focus joyfully on creating. In turn, my drive to create art is to focus on spreading joy positively and aesthetically. This thesis is about my work that symbolically represents a feeling, encouraging the viewer to bring joy and focus to their lives.

My artwork mainly consists of staining translucent pigments into wood with my fingers, creating visually-concentrated words reminiscent of Kanji and Sigil work depicting an unspoken language of emotions. The goal of these stained symbols is to create joy within the viewer by resonating with their connection to a specified word associated with positivity, which in turn invokes a pleasant feeling within themselves. Through this infectious emotional connection, the good natured feeling will carry out affable actions, causing a domino effect to spread similarly encouraging feelings to others. This chain of events happens through the audience viewing and taking time to look and associate with the intended feeling by following the swooping spirals and flourished linework of the symbols, as enhanced by specified colors that are psychologically associated with the symbols' meaning.

I have explored the idea of spreading positivity for years now, but the process really came into focus during my graduate studies, in a safe space to express creating through my own form of spiritual practice. Georgia Southern University's graduate program also pushed me to explore new concepts, embedded skills of historical and theory-based knowledge, and also offered

inspiration from my peers in the program. Each of these aspects moved me to this stage and facilitated my development to this point. As an example, if not for my being able to openly incorporate my non-conformed spiritual practice of my omnistic beliefs, I would never have had the ability to create symbols inspired by reiki and pagan-based language. If my professors had not kept pushing me past my comfort zone, I would not have continued to explore more concepts and subject matter in my work. My theory and historical art studies brought a deeper connection and value to support my work. My peers inspired me in immeasurable ways by giving me a better perspective of exploring new materials and techniques through which to present my work, including working with copper and stone sculpting to enhance my concept in newer ways that complement my staining as well.

Throughout my life, I have observed that in order to continue on a chosen path, we need focus in order to accomplish something. My path solidified when I started to follow both metaphysics and Reiki. I learned to create with positive thought through metaphysics, which Philip Webb from the University of Georgia describes it as “the branch of philosophy that examines the fundamental nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, between substance and attribute, and between potentiality and actuality” (Webb). I also learned to heal emotionally and energetically through Reiki as well. The Cleveland Clinic defines Reiki as “an energy healing technique that promotes relaxation, reduces stress and anxiety through gentle touch. Reiki practitioners use their hands to deliver energy to your body, improving the flow and balance of your energy to support healing” (Cleveland Clinic). Mikao Usui developed reiki in the early 1900s, deriving the term from the Japanese words *rei*, meaning “universal,” and *ki*, which refers to the vital life force energy that flows through all living things” (ibid).

Both of these systems gave me the mental tools to change my mental and physical reality with the focus on positive emotion. In my view, one can harness positivity and joy by focusing on the feeling of a word's meaning. On the flip side, I also experienced that if one is in the mindset to stay distracted and lack the drive to feel joy, you ultimately will find negativity and the inability to focus. I continued to study and experience the ripple effect of human interaction and the spread of positivity and negativity. Our individual relationships with words are vastly complex and intricately different, everyone's state of mind is much like snowflakes or grains of sand. There is also a connection between an individual's outlook on life in a particular moment, and their interaction with another. If a person expresses a happy and/or calm disposition, the other person tends to sense a similar feeling in their shared environment. Similarly, if an individual is in a foul mood, or quite possibly just in pain, their actions and reactions towards an individual affect their environment. I see that in the way individuals interact with their environment, by playing a role in an individual's perception and disposition.

When I began my masters studies, my mind was definitely in a mindset lacking joy and focus, and in the beginning of my program I was looking for a pathway to rekindle my joy and focus through creating again. With this anticipated respark, I sought to achieve a goal to develop a profession where I can spread focused joy. I needed to challenge myself to break the stagnant art I was making, inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe and the Fibonacci sequence's pattern. This subject was created by using my fingers to stain wood (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Alicia Weber Cully, *Spirals*, 2017

While I loved staining on wood as a medium, I struggled with creating by speaking openly about how I generated art with a direct purpose through a higher source. While my floral artwork held some aspects of spirituality, I hid a large part of my own ethereal studies due to fear of looking like a non professional, or a space cadet with a non traditional religion.

Since the beginning of my art career my intent was to benefit others to heal, and in these pieces I focused on attracting an audience that experienced similar pain, to make work that broke away from fear of judgment from my non conventional spiritual path. To achieve confidence and bring back focus to my future work, I needed to clear past trauma and negative experiences through creating a new format while continuing to use the same medium I found great pleasure in. Before finding a focus on joyful creation and to confidently speak about my spiritual path and its effects on my art, the first challenge came with shedding old parts of my past life that made me feel blocked and unworthy of success. I meditated on how to execute this release for quite a while, and decided I needed to open and expel hidden pains from spousal abuse layered on top of maternal psychological and emotional abuse from a young age.

CHAPTER 2

NEW SUBJECT NEW PATH

My first pieces were designed to help me to expose and purge hidden poisonous memories my mind and soul had carried for decades. I combined my own healing and offered to supply an outlet for any viewer who suffered from similar pain. To accomplish this, I carefully chose to omit any gender specification to my relational trauma, allowing any viewer to relate to the representation of the emotional struggle depicted. The subject matter I created was fabricated as an ambiguous humanoid silhouette, and in contrast, I made a dark Leviathan inspired serpent descending toward the figure (Figure 2). To represent the external and internal connection to the source, I incorporated a variety of colors to represent each Chakra connected to the human vibrational energy. These colors are vibrantly displayed in the background to show the strength and fight the illuminated body posed against the mythologically-intense looking serpentine monster. While these pieces served their purpose, I did not want my work to always be on the confrontational and painfully negative side of healing. I wanted to continue healing, but I wanted to create positive forms in order to focus on healing.

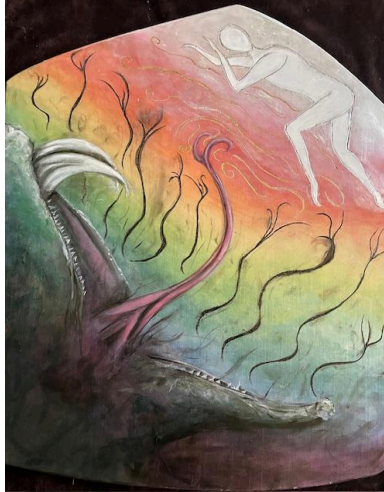


Figure 2, Alicia Weber Cully, *Healthy Communication*, 2022

While on the search for a newly inspired subject, I hosted a monthly women’s spiritual group one night in the winter of 2022 in my first year of graduate school. The craft for the evening was to create sigils, which is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a pictorial symbol used in ritualistic magic and supposed to have supernatural power” (Merriam-Webster). We all picked something we wanted to manifest within the next year, and carved these sigils into clay. During this craft, I thought why not instead of just creating symbols to make a positive impact on just my life; how about I create positively charged symbolized words, allowing others to experience similarly positive feelings. I began constructing symbols derived from my handwriting, and from there began working to forge a transition from language into art.

As I embarked on this conceptual journey with symbolic language, the discovery of my newfound concept spring boarded from my non conventional spiritual practice. At this point I believed I needed to incorporate my divine practices, and this part gave me hesitation and concern to move forward. I still feared that because my concept derived from sigil work, this would pigeonhole me into just a Pagan or Wiccan artist. It was through theory class and reading

media theorist Steven Johnson's writing on the notion of adjacent possibility that gave me the confidence to openly express my spiritually-driven purpose to create artwork designed for positive change.

In his text on the adjacent possible, Johnson—simplifying and streamlining for a mass audience a concept originated by the biologist Stuart Kaufmann—describes the adjacent possible as “a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself ... Each moment in our history unlocks new doors of adjacent possibilities. The trick is to figure out what they are exactly, and whether they're leading us to beneficial places” (Johnson). Coming across this idea allowed me to adjacently connect Hilma af Klint's art to mine, and her expression through spirituality and her brightly constructed abstracted expressions. Her work, coupled with Wassily Kandinsky's artworks such as *Squares with Concentric Circle* (Figure 3) and his 1911 book *Concerning Spirituality and Art*, gave me another inspirational motive to openly create from a spiritually intensive point of view. Although both af Klint and Kandinsky were both known painters at the same time, her respected professional artworks were landscapes and transformed into abstract at the same time as Kandinsky. Before 1906, Klint's works were exhibited through Europe, such as her *Summer Landscape* from 1888. (Figure 4) . Unfortunately, her abstract work, such as the work *Tree of Knowledge No.1*. (Figure 5), would not be seen for decades, in large part because she left instructions in her will that they not be shown until 20 years after her death, thinking that only then would the world to be ready to see them.



Figure 3, Wassily Kandinsky, *Square with Concentric Circles*, 1913



Figure 4, Hilma af Klint, *Summer Landscape*, 1888

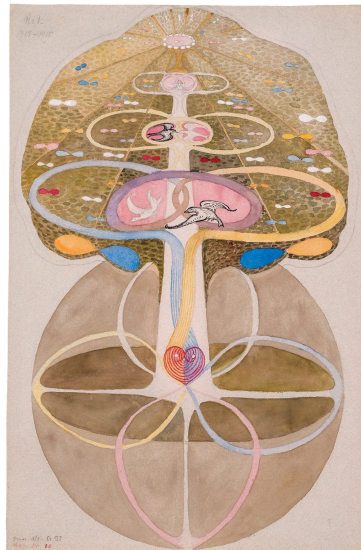


Figure 5, Hilma af Klint, *Tree of Knowledge No. 1*, 1913

Inspired by these precursors, their works an adjacent (as opposed to distant) possibility just outside the boundaries of my own work, I felt a new certainty to move forward with my own work. At first I focused on combining a communicative language and spirituality. Unfortunately I struggled with the reality that this avenue in creating would limit my audience, and that would mean I could not reach as many people to connect with positivity. I understood and cherished my creative process through a spiritually driven path, however it is unfair of me to force my beliefs and viewpoint on others. I still did not want to dissuade other viewers who would find great value in my spiritually charged creation process. After contemplation and multiple discussions with peers, the new challenge was to create but keep in mind that I needed to appeal to the mass of my audience without spirituality.

While I welcome my audience to connect to my work in a deeper way and as a spiritually fulfilling experience, I also wanted the viewer to have the freedom to make the decision on how deeply they want to connect with my symbols in their own way. My solution to this issue was to take my ego and spirituality out of my developmental process. However, I can also provide any interested audience with tools and input for understanding my intent. This reminded me of how the philosopher Susanne Langer—like af Klint an important but often overlooked figure sometimes decades ahead of her time, who received her PhD in philosophy in 1926 and whose work, also like af Klint's, is only now coming to widespread attention—articulated a point on the importance of an artwork's resonating with the viewer's feelings: "In the achievement of *effects* lies the abstractive function of art. The effect is sought because it conveys insight into human feeling that is, I think, the aim of all art" (Langer, 96). As her theory concentrates on the effects of art and feeling, or what she calls an artwork's virtual intensity that causes it to feel different from other, non-artistic material objects, I made a connection of how symbols could then become

a vessel to project the intended word's feeling and in turn effects to the viewer. The focus of my process starts with deconstructing a particular word in my own handwriting, then reconstructing the broken-down letters into an image for the non-verbal or non-spoken communication of focused feelings. My intent is that the positive feelings and commonality of the audience's access to the symbol's intent, will open pathways to empathy and shared emotional effect. Through this concept, the symbols can build relationships from multiple consciousnesses through emotion. In this case, not only am I creating a conduit to create pleasurable experiences in life, but also to develop an opening for shared positive experiences in an engaging way.

While keeping Langer in mind, when engendering my symbolic communication I ask myself the following questions:

1. What is the written intent of this word (definition)
2. Does the meaning have a positive or negative portrayal in its terminology?
3. How does this word make me feel?
4. How would this word make the *other* feel?
5. How can I deconstruct my handwriting of this word, and alter the embellished lines to create an image that makes the viewer embrace the design (symbol) to represent the feeling and essence of the chosen word?
6. How can this show depth and pleasure of the symbol without knowing deeper meaning, but allow the viewer to experience a pleasing and interesting moment when presented with my work?
7. How can I intensify the experience through the environment?
8. Can I build upon this word to create a cohesive image or find a word that can marry with another word to create a complex image?

By utilizing art as a form of expressive communication, my constructed symbol allows the viewer freedom to take in their own level of acceptance and connection with the displayed symbol. After solidifying my concept of *what* I intend to create, next came the *how*. Here, the development of each word's symbol turned into a structured process. I start by writing a chosen word that expresses positivity, such as Joy, Worthy, Release, etc. Then I break down every shape or stroke used to write each letter in the word (Figure 6). Any duplicate strokes are then eliminated to avoid too much repetition, and the individual strokes are reconstructed into one cohesive symbol. At first I kept every line in reconstructing the symbolic, but this made the images too busy and congested for the viewer to follow. Eliminating the duplicate strokes gave space for the lines to become fluid flourishing spirals for the viewer to follow easily. I formed three symbolic variations for each word. I did this to see different variations of the word and gauge their different effects.

Here I took precautions to reach more than my own connection by electronically sending the three variations to peers and friends of mine. Then I asked them to choose which symbol best portrayed how they believed the word felt, and then why they chose the particular symbol. Interestingly enough, although not in contact with one another, the group chose symbols that were voted in a definitive landslide for each word's representation. The explanations for the chosen symbol were very interesting as well. For instance, I was told the symbol "Joy" (Figure 7) resembles a bird or phoenix sitting on a wire with a tail and arms rising to the air. For the symbol "Peace" (Figure 8) many of the peer group agreed the image looked like someone comforted in a loving embrace. The consensus from my peers describing mirror-like characteristics in these symbols emulates a tangible description of the word's feeling.

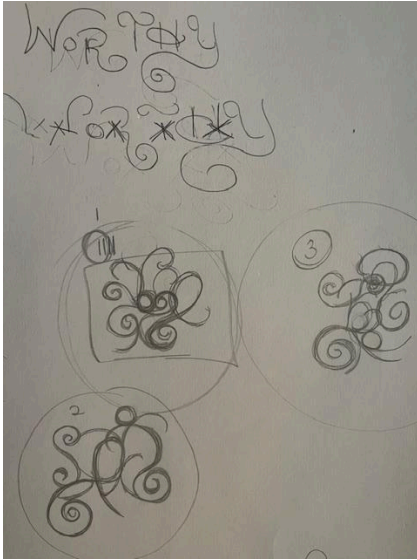


Figure 6, Alicia Weber Cully, *Worthy*, 2022



Figure 7, Alicia Weber Cully, *Joy*, 2023



Figure 8, Alicia Weber Cully, *Intention Bowl of Peace*, 2024

It is in this way that I connect my art and work with an individual's emotions and their reality, bridging the intangible (feelings and thought) into tangible experiences affecting daily life. In saying this, the purpose of my work comes to focus on the development of emotional resonance with the viewer, through a connection with the displayed emotions of the symbol.

This puts me in a position as an artist to provide the tools for the viewer to reach positive feelings. If a person is not in the mindset to feel or participate in feeling a word's intention, then my art is just a bunch of pretty swirls stained and infused into wood grain—similar to how a viewer can experience as Willem de Kooning painting as either an intense burst of existentialist expression, or just as a series of dense brush strokes. While each different reading might be interesting in itself, it is up to the viewer to take the initiative and make the effort to create this bond, whether in the case of the expressive de Kooning or one of my spiritually intensive works. I want the viewer to have conscious freedom with their connection to a symbolic word. In Umberto Eco's description of a work of art is experienced, an "open" work tends to encourage "acts of conscious freedom ... [regarding] the work so as to expose it to the maximum possible opening" (Eco, 4). Just as with Eco, my audience should be presented with a piece for the viewer to connect with their own cognitive understanding of the word. With the viewer making connections with ingrained memories of a feeling, I am able to meet an individual at their own level of interest.

CHAPTER 3

STRUGGLES, GROWTH, AND LESSONS

With a solidified process for my concept, I danced through a variety of mediums. My experimentation with newer mediums in this program came with both positive experiences and many hard lessons on what did not work. In one successful piece, I created the word “Find”, through suspending sparkling ornaments strung on a fishing line for the audience to discover. I lay various pillows and blankets on the floor underneath the glittering orbs in the Three Dimensional Art Building Foyer. The installation allowed the viewer to “Find” the symbol, and view the image from below. The effect gave the piece a performance quality, in which the audience performs the art, since the word was “Find” (Figure 9), the audience had to find the viewpoint of the art piece by laying down on the provided pillows and blankets in order to look up and into the symbol. Similarly I created an environment with the symbolic representation of “Movement”. I constructed this installation with stringing individual pinecones encircled with black twine. The pinecone garland was then strung throughout different angles around trees in wooded areas on campus (Figure 10). The garland was positioned so that the audience could walk through and around the piece. The sculptured installation invited the audience to traverse through and around the installation. As the viewer moved in, out, and around the piece, the symbol changed and morphed into a different positioning of the symbol, invoking another performance-oriented installation. The next two installations fell flat, the materials were starting to become cliché to the word, and as I commute an hour and a half each way to attend school, the opportunity to install artwork on campus difficult to execute properly. At this part of the process

I definitely wanted to continue to explore this form of art, but at a later date when I had more time and resources available.



Figure 9, Alicia Weber Cully, *Find*, 2022



Figure 10, Alicia Weber Cully, *Movement*, 2022

For my next experiment I tried cutting wood sculptures in my symbolic language. During our program's critiques, the basis of my concept kept getting lost in the formality of the work instead of symbols I developed. My amateur skill in cutting wood frustrated me and put me into

a spiral of despair (Figure 11). From this experiment my focus and work suffered, my self-esteem suffered as well. Instead of nervous excitement, my nerves started to take over my decisions, and at this point, my focus and joy were at their nadir, until I started my connection in working with Copper and stone.



Figure 11, Alicia Weber Cully, *Peace*, 2022

For an elective class I took Small Metals, and was drawn to the natural element of copper. I fell in love with the hue of fresh copper, and I loved even more how the metal's beauty intensified with age. With this new attraction to copper, while I had some success in making this small sculpture, with beginner's skill I encountered a similar response in my critiques as my wood carvings. That said, a difference between working with wood sculptures and copper sculptures is that I knew for sure that, while I had little interest in working further with 3D wood, I did still want to incorporate copper in some way with my work in the future.

CHAPTER 4

JOY IN STAINING WOOD

At this point I returned to staining wood to help direct critiques and discussions of my work towards my concept instead of my amateur forms. When I returned to staining, I realized that this medium truly brings me joy, and was reminded of how much I missed creating in this particular medium. The whole experience of staining wood, as opposed to paint or another medium, is to not only showcase the stained symbol, but to enhance and celebrate the beauty in the natural patterns of the wood grains. In my experience, the rougher the surface and older the wood, the more vibrant the pigment will absorb into its pores, causing variations of pigment depth depending on the angles and dips of the wood's terrain. The addition of metallic pigments incorporates a shimmering aura to the grains of wood, rendering an ethereal quality to the pattern of the wood while also adding an organically complex diversity to the completed piece.

By returning to wood staining, my joy and focus returned to my creation process, and this became evident with my finished works. My handwriting and reconstructed symbols came to be reminiscent of art nouveau architecture, similar to that of Victor Horta and Hector Guimard, (Figures 12 and 13)—an interesting relation in that both art nouveau and my own work are directly inspired by natural forms, but do not necessarily represent them. With this new work, instead of begrudgingly making work for class critiques, I started to excitedly anticipate the making of my next art piece. I returned to a point of enthusiasm where every time I would see any sized piece of wood, I would wonder *what image would look best on this? How will the movement of the grains embellish and add depth to the image? Where will the stains absorb more than another section of grains on another part of the piece? How can I embellish a piece*

of wood's natural beauty and bring new life into it? After the 3D forms this was where I needed to be.

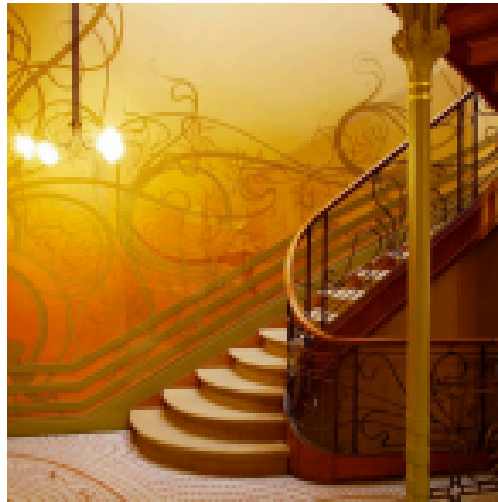


Figure 12, Victor Horta, *Tassel Mansion (Hotel Tassel)*, 1893



Figure 13, Hector, Guimard, *Le Castel Béranger* 1898

When starting on a new piece of artwork, I enjoy how pieces of wood find their way across my path, altering the direction of what the next image will become. The happenstance of finding or receiving a gifted piece brings on new and deeper meaning to me as an artist and tickles the mystic in me. The substrate of the wood guides me to the symbol that should be used to incorporate an intended purpose to spread positive feelings. Since working with various types of wood, I get to give each piece another purpose for its journey. Just as every life experience and outlook alters and adjusts all of us on our own life's path, each piece of wood helps my symbols gain more fluidity to the finished product.

I started creating images using various stains of whites, blacks, and grays. I added a light blue background to help make the image pop and look more dramatic (Figure 14). I chose this color palette to showcase the lines and to focus on creating and developing how I wanted my symbols and lines to interact with each other, and with my other works.



Figure 14, Alicia Weber Cully, *Worthy*, 2022

As the symbols started to take on their own personality through their line of interaction, I started delving deeper into exploring the authenticity of my materials. The stains I had used were mixed at the counter of Lowe's and Home Depot, and the issue came down to the colored pigments that would thicken and cover up the wood grains, hiding the substrate's beauty. I then began to create my own colored stains, by combining powder pigment with a translucent natural finish oil stain. The effects of this experiment gave my work a stronger depth intensifying the grain's beauty.

CHAPTER 5
REQUESTS FOR THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

While exploring symbols for my language. I started to receive requests for specific symbolic words for commissions. I obliged with one caveat, that I keep the symbol as a basic design for the word's vessel to connect others.(Figure 15). In this mode I created the symbol for "Compersion" (Figure 16), *compersion* meaning to feel joy when seeing someone else feel joy. For this piece, I chose a larger round piece of wood for my substrate, and incorporated the color the patron chose. The positive effect was truly exhilarating. Not only did the chosen word take on aspects of the individual's personality, the image expressed a stronger complexity in its meaning because I took on another individual's essence to create the word. To show the differences and similarities across versions, see Figure 15 and figure 16.



Figure 15, Alicia Weber Cully, *Compersion*, 2023



Figure 16, Alicia Weber Cully, *Compersion*, 2023

For my next piece I chose an individual living through similar experiences as mine. We are both middle-aged, single mothers taking graduate classes. We are sisters traveling a similar road on different paths of life. I see her struggles as she sees mine, and we bonded through this. I wanted her to have a word so I could give it to her for graduation. We are both graduating in our programs at different schools in the same week. Of course this savvy friend of mine put another twist on this journey. Since we share and continue to face similar paths, her request was to make the word to symbolize us and this time in our lives, so I chose the word “Moxie” (Figure 17). The word now takes on so much more meaning. In this monumental time in our lives, I am creating a symbol to represent our alignment.



Figure 17, Alicia Weber Cully, *Moxie* 2023

These projects also inspired me to take color into a whole new layer. I decided to find color association through psychology. As described through WebMd’s Stephanie Nicola in *What Is Color Psychology? How Color Affects Emotions, Behaviors, and Mental Health*, “color psychology connects colors with emotions and behavior. It reveals how color plays a role in your moods and can even be incorporated into your wellness routines. For businesses, color psychology informs decisions like product packaging and brand logos” (Nicola). This concept is used to embellish the symbol and amplify the effect of the word’s feeling. To add another layer of meaning, I moved into the exploration of creating stainings on three-dimensional objects such as old wooden bowls. These bowls will be transformed into intention bowls. The finished piece will be interactive. The audience can then place a stone provided, and choose a bowl and place one in the chosen bowl to infuse the object with the bowl’s symbol’s intended feeling seen in Figure 22. With this interactive piece, the audience is welcome to take their object to remind them of the feeling the symbol provides.

CHAPTER 6

THESIS EXHIBITION

My Thesis Exhibition was a sampling of multiple environments for individuals to experience a variety of ways in connecting with each symbolic word. As discussed earlier in my thesis, I create to create a sense of connection and to help others feel better. From this vantage, the work is not for me. It is from me, inspired by me, and designed by my inspiration, but my intent with the exhibition was to promote a positive experience for the viewer, for the audience willing to accept my artwork. That includes the personal mindset of the intended audience. If an individual is trying to look for the negativity and “reason” to discredit what I provide, then that is their internal struggle against the opportunity of a positive experience—again, you can see the de Kooning painting as just a bunch of paint strokes, or a Mark Rothko as just some rectangles, or you can invest into their intensity. Like any artist, I can only provide a key from my unspoken language of optimism and affable reactions, and do my best to channel that intention in a way that connects with the viewer. It is not a demand, and not a language through right or wrong interpretations of these key symbols. The only responsibility I possess is to help provide tools to facilitate an understanding to the beholder of my work at any given moment. Which brings me to my exhibition layout and choices for connecting my works with my thesis.

There are multiple factors in my choices for the exhibition. I followed a criteria I acquired through three years of critiques and questions from my professors, and broke them down to achieve my goal for an effectively welcoming environment for the symbols to portray their purpose. The main variables focused on organization, and providing enough information without forcing the narrative of the audience to make their own emotional connections. Most

importantly, the aim was to create an environment of a professional gallery as well as create a comfortable environment for the audience to absorb the pieces. To help with the mental process of each developmental step in my program, I utilized years of exhibition and curatorial experiences to make these options into a cohesive solo exhibition. The choice of how to fill such a large gallery space was my first initiative. I needed to create flow as well as interest without making the exhibition seem too busy or crowded.

The most prudent option for achieving this was to break my works down into clusters for each wall in the main gallery of Georgia Southern. My first cluster of work was decidedly the layout of my creative process and evolution of the concepts depiction. While ideally I would not display a series of pieces to exemplify the growth and development of my concept in a regular exhibition, my classmates and studio professors stressed the need for viewers new to my concept to understand the process and development of my conceptual design for the symbolic language. With this knowledge in mind, I chose to create a piece exemplifying the process in the development of each symbol, “The Revelation of the Process” (Figure 18). This piece demonstrated the structured breakdown of a new symbol’s creation, as I have described previously. This allowed viewers to experience the creative process each word undergoes before becoming a symbolic representation of the feeling. It was also important to incorporate the growth I experienced moving from three-dimensional creations back into two-dimensional expression. I clustered two sculptures fabricated during the early stage of my concept development, and bridged the gap by incorporating my first three symbols of two-dimensional stainings designed at the end of my second year of the graduate program, which were nestled next to “The Revelation of the Process”.



Figure 18, Alicia Weber Cully, *The Revelation of the Process*, 2024

Varying the clusters to balance the show was in order to create balance and patterns throughout the body of work into a cohesive exhibition. The pattern from the back right side of the room towards the front right is square, square, square, circle, square square circle, and so on. The light blue images were broken up by the dense larger images that helped the other side of the room to not break up eight works stained in one specific color palette, that broke up the monotony an eye can experience when pursuing the two dimensional piece on the left side. While I would not expect those levels of organization to be apparent to a gallery visitor, it was my hope that the underlying connections would subliminally resonate.

Each cluster beyond the creation corner had a purpose and stage of expression. I selected the multiple tiles with a sundry of symbols constructed to express my language through forms devoid of color and wood size variations. Another cluster displayed my change in color choices. I had the cluster of words in a different orientation to show a play on how it does alter and enhance a symbol's feeling. I added the three largest pieces to show the play of darker backgrounds and larger substrates to five other expressions of feelings with interesting

backgrounds different from the blue tiles used in Figures 14 and 15. The interactive pieces helped break up the heaviness of the two dimensional pieces on the longest wall on to the right of the gallery entrance. The two largest pieces are a step further in creating personality with my symbols. For the word Joy, I chose to stain a Phoenix in a position of the word Joy to emulate the power and pure euphoria that connects with the feeling of Joy. For the word Focus, I chose a serpent to represent the intensity and strength of what focus can bring to the mind, body, and soul (Figures 19 and 20). Which leads to the last image displayed in the far wall in the center of the gallery for the viewer to directly see when walking in. The symbol for “create”, the state of being one must feel when creating, the whole basis of making art and for artists. We as artists are driven and get our joy and focus by creating. By refinishing three dimensional objects, and altering them into interactive installations took this step further. Both my “Intention bowls” (Figure 21) and my “Trunk of Release” clusters were inspired to take my work into another level of connecting an individual with my symbols and their effect on feelings. By providing pieces to aid the participants to connect with a specified symbol’s intended feeling of the word’s meaning, the audience had the ability to act on their interest in creating a longer lasting connection to a specific feeling (Figure 22).



Figure 19, Alicia Weber Cully, *Phoenix of Joy*, 2021



Figure 20, Alicia Weber Cully, *Serpentine Focus*, 2024



Figure 21, Alicia Weber Cully, *Trunk of Release*, 2024



Figure 22, Alicia Weber Cully, *Intention Bowls*, 2024

With the clusters resolved, the arrangement of the symbols in each cluster needed attending in order to include different renditions of a symbol placed throughout the exhibition.

These strategic placements created a hidden gem for interested audiences who could discover the repetitive symbols when exploring my works. These idealistic placements added another layer through which the audience can connect and familiarize themselves with the symbolic representations of feelings, thus creating interactive involvement as well as showing any given symbol's versatility and interplay with the other symbols surrounding it. The spacing out of the symbol repetition led to a crossroads in my labeling debate.

To label or not to label was the question, an ongoing debated topic in multiple critiques. If I did not label the symbols, the concept fell short or lost the intended full effect of my works. When making this decision, I also understood that everyone thinks and feels differently, and desired the audience to interpret their own positive experience with a symbol, with or without reading the piece's title. I decided to provide labels in order to aid the audience in focusing on an intended feeling. This way, if guidance and a helpful key was needed, it was then provided through the label. To add more to the audience, the label provided tools to make a richer depth for the participant if that individual so wanted to experience. I accomplished this by placing directions to my interactive pieces, and added an invitation to touch and interact with my artwork through haptic means.

With directions, clustering, and labeling resolved, the environment needed addressing. In my mind's eye there is a fine line between exhibiting work professionally in a gallery and creating an inviting and emotionally inspirational array of work. I tried to balance on this tightrope of ideals as much as possible, given my budget and time constraints in installation. The question that needed the biggest answer was, how do I create a welcoming environment, while continuing to include the idealistic version of a sleek professional gallery? For my solution, I created pedestals from refinished furniture made from wooden end tables and a unique coffee

table. By omitting the bulky pedestals normally used for exhibitions, the lighter and more delicate looking structures heartened an open and welcoming display for my works. I incorporated the main gallery's large bench towards the center of the gallery to provide a place for those enticed to contemplate and cogitate on a chosen symbol more comfortably and still allowed enough walking space for traffic to move around the room if that is what the audience desired. Eye comfort entered into my consideration next, it being my experience that beaming overhead lighting can become a distraction and feel very uncomfortable for those with sensitive eyesight. I decided to align direct lighting to artworks alone, leaving the seating area and center of the gallery to experience a more ambient effect, providing another level of comfort for the viewer to concentrate on connecting with the symbol's intended key to positive feelings.

Earlier in my thesis, I explained the color choices and addition of translucent pigments to my independent artworks. When creating this exhibition, I also kept in mind the size difference and orientational organization of my substrate with each cluster, to make a unique and interesting display for the viewer. At first my two-dimensional works were only rectangular forms. I played with orientation, which is why two of my pieces were exhibited in a diamond square shape, and I added circular substrates to break up the possible monotony of directly positioned rectangles. When applied, the orientation in each cluster added another layer of interest to the symbols. For example when I moved the two square pieces into a diamond, the word focus took one interesting effect. These choices also helped to show the similarities and differences my work can embody even if two representations of the symbol sit next to one another. For example, my large image of Serpentine of Focus sits in a corner next to my diamond shaped "Focus" in the far corner of the right side of the gallery. This gave the option for the viewer to either enjoy the images separately, or welcome the audience to make the

connection of similar words displayed and configured in different areas and clusters in the gallery.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: GRADUATION AND THE FUTURE

After graduation, I plan to continue exploring animal-like representation of a symbol's personality. I also plan on looking for a way to create the "Shadow Side" of feelings. Instead of invoking a negative energy into a person, the symbols will represent the feeling of a word the person would want to expel or release. My intent is to create this shadow side for individuals stuck in a negative mindset or feeling to let go of the emotions. This style of word symbolism will become more sleek with harsh or sharp lines.

My translucently pigmented works, imprinted into wood with my fingers, creates visually-concentrated words reminiscent of Kanji and Sigil, rendering an unspoken language of emotions in order to create joy for the viewer, and resonating with their connection to a specified word associated with positivity. The affable effect within, creates infectious emotional connection, carrying out amiably engaging actions, spreading similarly pleasing feelings to others. The focused reaction from the audience derives from the time visually absorbing the intended feeling by following the swooping spirals and flourished linework of the symbols enhanced by specified colors that are psychologically associated with the symbols' meaning.

Each factor provided in my graduate program at Georgia Southern University, contributed and encouraged the development of my nonverbal symbolic language expressed through wood staining. I will always keep my professors' ever pressing drive to move me beyond my comfort zone in order to create deeper and more meaningful experiences. The memory of my time in this program provides me the strength to continue to follow my spirituality in order

to create and advance my life's intended path to spread positivity. I will always stay thankful for the inspiration and help from my peers and small metals instructor to confidently explore natural materials, enhancing my stainings. These experiences have changed my perspective on creating and how to create, and will forever advance my inspired passion to spread and encourage positivity through my artwork.

My work will continue to transform and morph, and continue to adapt with emotional healing with my sacred purpose of creating. I plan to continue creating work to promote positivity. As my symbols become more complex, and my spectrum of healing through emotion develops, I will continue to stay joyfully focused on my work, and focus on the joy of helping others to experience the same.

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