The Discovery of My Self and Art

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Jessica Green

Thesis Advisor

David Hannon

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 2007

Expected to Graduate May 5, 2007
Abstract

An awareness of one’s self is crucial at this point in one’s life with graduation from college fast approaching. In order to be able to act in the world, people must be conscious of who they are and what they want out of life. For me, the process of self-analysis seemed rather compact over the span of only four years, and came to a head in this semester, my final months as a student. Sparked into curiosity by peers and exposure to different belief systems, and heavily influenced by authors such as Hermann Hesse, Jack London, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the results of my searches are explained within this paper. Spirituality receives a lot of attention, since my developed understanding of it ties into art. As a painting major, art is what drives me; it is my purpose and my lifestyle in the future will reflect that through the choices I plan to make. Included in this thesis is my senior painting project which was inspired by this recent development of my self. Images of the resulting artwork, along with explanations of the pieces, and a description of what art means to me are a large part of this retelling of my inner and artistic discoveries.
Acknowledgments

-I would like to thank my project advisor David Hannon for his guidance and support during this project. His dedication to his art, to his students, and to his family have been an inspiration to me.

-I would also like to thank the influential persons mentioned in my writing and illuminated in my paintings: Ross, Megan, Phill, and especially Duncan. Without them, I would not have the future that I look forward to now.
At certain times in life the elements around oneself become ingredients working together to induce a situation ripe for change. A transition of this sort cannot be a subtle, involuntary process of development like those that constantly take place in a person. Instead, one becomes increasingly aware of her thoughts and environment, and every decision to take a step in one direction or another is tried against the past and the desired future. The exit from college into the world has become one of these intense moments of doubt and deliberation for me. An expected shift must take place from being on the receiving end of ideas and standards to the place of being responsible for my own principles, but the naturalness of such a transfer does not insure a smooth ride. The only invariable is the destination of knowledge, put simply in Plato’s *The Symposium*: “[One] has no right to talk as if he knew; but he should be prepared to say what it is that he thinks” (87). Because of the dramatic effects of this adoption of accountability, my senior honors thesis is based on what I learned about myself and the paintings that I produced while these inner processes were in full fury.

When I first started delving into my own psychology, the task had the aim of formulating a defense for those who disagreed with me. In the past I had always been the child who was soft-spoken and meek to a fault, and I avoided all confrontation. Comfort and security came before risk, before strength, before curiosity. Because I was raised in a religious, sheltered environment, I had all the questions and answers about life provided for me, and everyone I knew shared the same knowledge. Only after I came to the more diverse setting of a college campus was I exposed to characters who presented new questions, different knowledge, and the openness to share all this with me. Rather than opening my eyes, however, the situation scared me. My security was shaken, and I
needed to learn proof that these others were wrong. I had no intention of changing; in fact, my purpose was to strengthen my views through a more thorough understanding of them. Therefore, my searches began with an investigation of my religious convictions, led to an appeal for why I should let these standards go, and ended with a struggle to define and defend the new mind I created. All this took place over a four-year time span with both uplifting and discouraging influences working together to help build who I have become.

The initial contacts I made upon arriving at Ball State University in the fall of 2003 were with organizations that felt like home. I found a church and sought out a group for extra-curricular Christian activities. Bible studies and retreats filled my freshman existence with affirmation, and I felt stronger in my faith than ever before. My inner bliss received its first prick of uncertainty that spring at a religious conference. I realized that what the pastor on stage said was exactly true according the religion I aligned myself with, but I could not convince myself to believe in the condemnation of it. At first I put this doubt aside as weakness and focused my efforts on trusting what I did not understand. This façade of contentment did not last long thanks to encounters that forced honesty out of me.

During this first year I also was immersed in a completely separate culture from the afore mentioned one: that of the Arts and Journalism Building. Art majors are notorious for spending arguably unhealthy amounts of time in their campus building, but the resulting atmosphere is one of closeness and inspiration. As friendships developed, insights and ideas were shared. By the beginning of sophomore year, my classmate Ross began to confront me with what he saw as problems with my Christian system. My
sureness in my religious title and the reliable answers that had been passed down to me over thousands of years did not satisfy his questions, and trust in these meatless faces was no longer an option. What Ross forced me to acknowledge were the same issues that troubled me at the earlier conference. A further challenge arose later that year through another classmate, Duncan. The exclusivity of my beliefs did not allow me to pursue the feelings of attraction we had for each other, despite all other factors of the relationship being promising. I resisted his temptation for as long as I viewed it as such, but I came to realize that I was fighting against natural cohesiveness because of a program. I knew the guidelines of the program when I signed up, but I had not known back then if my self fit the definition.

Curious to find answers to this question, I broadened my exposure to philosophical and spiritual thought, with authors such as Hermann Hesse and Joseph Campbell being of profound influence in these initial steps. In *The Power of Myth* Campbell elaborates on the beauty and relevance of the stories and symbols contained in religion, and in Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* a personal journey of spiritual and self discovery was contagiously portrayed. These books and others that coincided with my experiences in reality made me realize that a belief system can create the unity and structure and fellowship that humans need as social creatures (Campbell, 9-11). Also, many people have sincere supernatural experiences that lead them to some form of righteous devotion. Searching my memories of countless Christian endeavors, I found none in which I felt any first-hand connection to God, which was the whole point in my opinion. Lacking the personal experience to convince me of the truth of my religion, and limited in my social and self
interaction by the cultural constructs that came along with it, I decided I would take the chance of letting go of this stake of stability that had guided me for so long.

I began a focused inner search for legitimacy, for “music instead of noise, soul instead of gold, creative work instead of business, passion instead of foolery…” (Hesse, 151). Books continued to impact me through Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s intense curiosity and honesty in *Notes from the Underground* and Albert Camus’s fresh look at judgment in *The Fall*, pulling me forward in my pursuit of truth. The overwhelming intake of these and so many other sincere perspectives and ideas was enlightening and confusing at once; “it stirred, delighted, and tormented me” (Dostoyevsky, 47). To help sort through the disorganized piles of thought I had accumulated, I joined an honors course this semester entitled “Discovering the Self”. The instructor and the students, the readings and the journaling, affirmation and challenges, all were immensely beneficial in pulling the innumerable loose ends in my mind together enough to prepare me for a life outside school. Much of what is contained in this paper stems from what the class helped me decipher. Among the most important revelations I came across was that I still have a desire for a supernatural connection and a hope for something beyond human understanding. Whether this is because of my ingrained background or an innate drive or a recently developed interest, I could not ignore it. It was when I brought art into the equation that the pieces finally started coming together for me, and I stumbled upon the first answer in all of my searching.

Up to this point my self-inquiry had led me to toss out what was unnecessary to my being and enjoy the freedom of thought that this allowed me. With art, I found a solid new base to anchor my self to and to give me a drive and life purpose. Enforced this time
by first-hand experiences of art's mystery and depth and possibilities, I saw the spiritual potential of the medium as well. As a physical object, an artwork is grounded in the landscape that humans dwell in, but to view a true art piece or to create it can be a connection to infinitely more. While this phenomenon may in fact be unexplainable, a reading of Carl Jung’s *The Undiscovered Self* lent itself to at least offer an analogy without cheapening the effect. Jung’s psychology is based on the self being made up of the conscious, the personal subconscious (built from experiences and genetics), and the collective unconscious (innate archetypes) (76-77). A person holds in consciousness at any given moment only a slight fraction of what is contained in the other two departments, while bits of the subconscious rotate through awareness and the unconscious is an unnoticed influence. A painting, for example, is created over a series of moments, a series of changes in the conscious, a series of different influences from the subconscious and unconscious. These layers of awareness and experience are transferred through the creation process into a tangible object. The act of painting then becomes a manifestation of a deeper level or higher state that is unknown even to the artist. This is recognizable upon viewing the work also when an inner recognition occurs in which a person senses familiarity in all three levels of the psyche. The fact that the impact of an artwork is often indescribable attests to it reaching beyond the viewer’s immediate understanding or consciousness, but the fact that the impact took place shows the truth of the connection. With other views, one could apply this marvel to the influence of a muse, the Holy Spirit, or past incarnations. For me, none of these describe the actual situation; it is only Art.
A unification of the tangible and the intangible, therefore, is what I seek with my artwork. Interestingly, this fulfills the same desire that religion attempted to fulfill. Both devotions are a means of arriving at the same goal, or perhaps a way to sublimate the desire so that one can continue with life and learn more about the truth behind it on the way. The principle difference in the path of my religious past self and artistic present self is the lifestyle that applies to either option. My development of what this means for me has occupied much of my latest thought with the approach of graduation. A lot of my ideals relate to my romantic view of a beat-like freedom, one without the traps of dependence on a job or possessions, especially those grounded in one location. Travel, however far or close, will be crucial to keep inspirations fresh, to keep myself “looking for a way of experiencing the world that will open [me] up to the transcendent that informs it, and at the same time forms [myself] within it” (Campbell, 61). Ultimately the people and places I encounter will influence me on a deeper level, in a way that can one day be expressed tangibly through painting or sculpture.

The little I have learned about Marxism and my own discontent with aspects of civilized culture have led me to want to avoid the accumulation of material goods, other than those that I have created myself. The elimination of all unnecessary baggage will allow me to take part more purely in life, and take away distractions from my artwork. The poet Kenneth Rexroth epitomized a lifestyle validated by the production of his art and his own self-teaching while never achieving the usual associations of success such as wealth, recognition, comfort, or status. Again, books played a large role in my belief in the promise of such a life, through beautiful and inspiring stories such as Jack London’s *Martin Eden* and Somerset Maughm’s *The Razor’s Edge*, in which happiness is found in
the simple moments when “I had the clothes I stood up in, some loose cash, my passport... I felt so free, I laughed out loud” (Maughm, 262). Of utmost importance within this freedom, however, is to have a drive to “[paint] prodigiously, and read prodigiously” (London, 304), to have the joint obsession of creating and improving my art and my self.

This ties into the second part of my story, which belongs to the artistic realm and which is becoming less separate from the sphere of the self as time passes. My painting technique began its development as a hobby in middle school when my uncle took the part of my artistic mentor. He emphasized the foundations of strong design, color harmony, accuracy of shape, and wide range of darks and lights (value). I discovered I had a natural ability for copying what I saw to a paper, and my personality to do as I was told lent itself to quick learning of the traditional teachings of my uncle. After some time had passed and I had arrived at college with a progressing painting major, I noticed from my fellow students’ work and art history class that technical prowess was not the epitome of art. My pieces, though aesthetically sound, were lacking the passionate essence of the works that I admired. The success of an artwork, I realized, was not in the replication of life, but in what one can create from the basis of life experiences. Art should not just be a pastime to display what already exists in the physical world; it should be an obsession to show what is not there as well, what is only visible to the specific artist’s mind. I experimented with different painting styles in order to break away from the habit of imitation of sight, switching from completely abstract to the realistic illustration of ideas with a few stops in between. While none of these styles satisfied my personality, each endeavor added to my knowledge of painting, allowing me to develop my artistic voice.
Particularly troubling to me throughout this time of dissatisfaction was my struggle to introduce a conceptual theme to my work. I had never considered the meaning behind any of my paintings before I came to college, and the insertion of ideas was an unnatural and clumsy undertaking. The tendency to overcomplicate or oversimplify discouraged me, and now that I was aware of conceptual content, to not include it left me with failure in my gut. My hopelessness and determination combined to produce the conflict that “I cannot break through this stone wall with my head if I do not have the strength to break through it, but neither will I accept it simply because I face a stone wall and am not strong enough” (Dostoyevsky, 12). There was no particular moment of divine intervention causing a breakthrough, only a slow acceptance that I had to work from my strengths rather than ignore them, taking apart the wall one stone at a time. In all of my toils with ideas, I nearly forgot that simply painting from life came naturally and had endless possibilities as far as meaning goes. Instead of trying to force an elusive element into my work, I came to grips with my traditional, representational style and learned to let it help me find the pieces of content I wished to add.

The series of paintings that make up my senior thesis painting body (Appendix A) are examples of these lessons of technique versus content, and the unity of the two. Over the last year especially my work has had much more focus in that I finally feel comfortable with the rather conventional style of my painting. Because of this peace I have been able to gradually develop aspects of my work more sure-footedly and successfully, carefully varying technique and adding stages of content. From randomly meaningless landscapes I moved on to random figures that were more thoughtfully painted in order to allow post-completion interpretation, all the while concentrating on enhancing my brush strokes,
color, and composition. The paintings included in my senior project go a step further, with half of them being portraits of people I care about and have shared experiences with, which attaches an extra psychological component. The other half actually includes intentional content, describing a specific experience. Still, as a physical object, the aesthetic qualities of the pieces are of just as much importance as any message within the work.

The three paintings entitled “Vessel I”, “Vessel II”, and “Vessel III” are all self-portraits. They are based on the development of self-awareness mentioned earlier, with a focus on the spiritual transition. I painted “Vessel II” first, because it was the first image for the theme that I came up with. At the time I was merely pleased with how easily the composition, tension, and subject matter came together. After completion I realized how accurately it represented the stage of fear and suppression I was held in at the time. This discovery was important because art is both an expression and a conversation. The fact that the painting came forth so naturally was because it was an honest expression of my pent-up turmoil at the time, a representation of the excess of pressure that needed to be released through the conflict of the brush strokes. Being a rather closed person who finds it difficult to express herself through spoken language many times, this was an exciting step. The second point has to do with the reality that humans must socialize to grow, requiring feedback from others to understand what they are and what they want. Creating art can provide this same kind of reflection, however, since more goes into a successful piece than what is intended. This allows me to interact with and learn from the less obvious sides of myself in a new way.
"Vessel I" was painted next. It precedes "Vessel II" in chronology of subject matter in that it portrays the vessel as a whole object, before it has been broken. The vessel is a symbol for Christianity, taken from the Biblical passage of Isaiah 64:8 which says, "But now, O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our Potter; we are the work of Your Hand" (Bible, 623). To use a clay vase allowed me to reference the religion without being heavy-handed, yet the message is still intelligible. The pose of the figure is also symbolic of my former self's position. The vessel is a burden carried with me everywhere, dictating each motion through the occupation of my arms. My eyes are downcast with the intention of reverence and submission, but as a result I do not even see what I am holding, much less if there is anything inside. Having moved on from the emotional state of "Vessel II", perhaps I was more comfortable with the past of my religious upbringing, making it possible to approach this second painting with peace and resolve. I believe this is evident in the significant technical strides I made between the paintings. The palette knife is a utensil I enjoy using to apply paint just as much as the traditional paint brush, and I was able to utilize this tool in a more confident manner. The handling of the figure itself was also improved, with more intelligent layering of colors and build-up of surface texture.

My final self-portrait was "Vessel III". I struggled with this piece, because for the progression of the series it needed to represent the state of mind into which I was moving, which is a difficult perspective to grip. Attempts were made at several compositions, including one with a re-built vessel and one with the broken pieces at my feet, but these conveyed impressions of an apologetic or rebellious nature, neither of which applied. In the end, I had to remove the vessel and focus on the simpler qualities of painting a
straightforward depiction of me. Consequently, the artwork was honest, and it also happened to be the most rewarding painting of the collection. I felt like I finally understood how to paint; the colors were stronger, the paint-handling was more mature, the scale and the pose were bolder, and the overall presence of the piece was satisfying to my psyche. In a way the vessel had been replaced by painting itself, just as art has come to fulfill the place in my life where religion once resided.

This "Vessel" series of paintings represent my growth spiritually over the last few years, as well as technical achievements. The success of the works lies in that I was ready for them; they were an appropriate challenge, neither another example of biting off more than I could chew nor of hiding in my security. I was able to insert content poetically without obscuring it beyond recognition and while keeping a firm sense of the traditional and mechanical aspects of painting. "Art is triumphant when it can use convention as an instrument of its own purpose" (Maughm, 246), and I felt I had earned this sense of accomplishment. It was nerve-wracking to present such personal images to other viewers but exciting to witness their responses to my work. As they brought their own experiences and knowledge to what they saw, I was able to learn from their interpretations and comments. The paintings became instigators of a three-way approach to self-analysis, in which the viewer, the painting, and I all participated in the conversation.

The second half of my senior project makes up a four-part series of portraits, "Procession I", "Procession II", Procession III", and "Procession IV". The subjects chosen for these paintings are a selection of peers who have had an acute influence on me during my transition, both through their own personal growth and through their
interactions with me. The title for the collection was chosen from the Catholic symbol of a procession of people journeying to reach God, again referencing my religious background. While the characters represented in the paintings are not all following a conventional path to god, I consider them all to be seeking the divine in some form. Without knowing exactly what is behind these rather direct portraits, the conceptual element may be difficult to notice. They are mostly exercises of skills, which I believe should be the focus of the school years, despite all of my concern with meanings and ideas. Hence, the colors and compositions of the pieces were made aesthetically, bearing the series as a whole in mind as I worked on each individually. This said, though, my personal connection to the location and the people, as well as their association with the more conceptual Vessel series, add an extra psychological component.

To begin explaining why I chose the particular models I did, I will introduce the subject of “Procession I,” Ross. Ross is a fellow painting major and the first person I met who asked me great, yawning caverns of questions that could not be illuminated by my textbook Christian responses. He presented contradictions in my life and beliefs that made me curious and wary. His intensity scared me into wanting to figure out how to answer him confidently. The personality within the face in “Procession II” is Megan, my roommate for the last four years. Somehow our internal journeys were extremely similar at this point in our lives, despite being very different from one another through high school. No matter whether I was struggling or secure, she was right there with me. We encouraged each other, and she was my comfort zone. Phill, of “Procession III”, is another acquaintance through the art department. His impression was one that showed me the fragility of life, beliefs, and friends, and the power of guilt, dependence, and free
will. Though he made my own life more difficult in many ways, he made me aware of both the blessed and the evil sides of everything. He taught me to worry and the futility of prayer. Duncan is represented in “Procession IV”, and according to this chronology, he is the prize at the end of the race. In effect, though, he is what motivated me from the beginning. I had the courage both to find worthwhile ideas and goals and to learn how to say them because he patiently wanted to listen to me. He had faith in me right away, and waited until I figured out on my own that we could listen to and help each other. The setting for all of these portraits was in the painting studio, the site where most interactions with these friends took place.

I became much more confident with my portrait-painting abilities from these exercises. I am also glad to have memorialized these people in such an intimate way. After the creation process and an adequate response time, however, I feel finished with these works, just as with all of my other paintings. This is how I rationalize any trades or purchases that I agree to. Instinctually I have conflicts about assigning a worth to a painting other than the painting itself, because that turns the piece into something other than what it was made to be. Still, if I have the honor of sharing a connection to others through works in which they show interest, I am thrilled to pass the art along with the prospect of them receiving some benefit from it as I did. I do not feel the need to hold on to any of my pieces after my experience has passed and my opportunity to learn has been taken advantage of. Now I consider them only to be a starting point for my next painting, which I always hope will be my best.

Among all the goals that I allow to drive me, the most crucial to my direction of choice is simply to tirelessly create artwork. Art has long since surpassed the level of
hobby and graduated into a need for immersion. Media may vary according to my situation and with gratitude to the broad education Ball State has provided me with, ranging from painting to printmaking to drawing to sculpture (Appendix B). Beyond survival and creation, I see the necessity to fill the rest of my life with the people and experiences that promote intellectual and artistic discovery (London, 320-330). Graduate school is an approaching speck on the horizon, which will no doubt accelerate my education in these areas. In the mean time I want to aspire to the lifestyles of artists such as Sue Coe and Paul Gauguin, whose “readiness to learn and remember, quickness and keenness of mind and the qualities that go with them, and enterprise and breadth of vision aren’t usually combined with readiness to live an orderly, quiet, and steady life; their keenness makes such temperaments unpredictable and quite devoid of steadiness” (Plato, 82). I will maintain my pursuit of art, enhancing and enhanced by my pursuit of my self and my place. Authors will continue to affect me as I look forward to comparing the wisdom of Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Marx to Dostoyevsky and Jung. I hope to observe different cultures and relate them to mine. I want to choose friends who share my desires. I want to find god, and I want it to be relevant. These are my goals, and to reach them, my relatively young and untested curiosity to learn must prove its potential to flourish. This is what art does to me.

Reflecting on the distance I have covered in the last four years, I notice a change from apathetic contentment to a motivated lust for achievement. The achievement is not of wealth, but of artistic and self improvement, and the way the developments of both have mirrored each other so far enforces me on the path I have chosen. Certain roots remain from before my search began, such as my hope for the supernatural and my
attention to art, but now the former yields to the latter, instead of vice versa. I cannot say that one way is better than the other in general, because the more I learn the more I realize that "there are more answers than questions, and lots of people have found answers that were perfectly satisfactory for them" (Maughm, 69). I have chosen my destiny, which means perhaps I have found some answers for myself. The difference between these answers and the ones I held before is that now I do not presume to know, yet at last I have prepared myself to say what I think. I have handled the jolting beginnings of my transition, and now I am ready to graduate.
Appendix A
"Vessel I", oil on canvas, 2007. 30" x 54".
"Vessel II", oil on canvas, 2007. 36" x 48".
"Vessel III", oil on canvas, 2007. 36” x 54".
"Procession I", oil on canvas, 2007. 30" x 42"
"Procession II", oil on canvas, 2007. 30" x 42".
"Procession III", oil on canvas, 2007. 30" x 42".
"Procession IV", oil on canvas, 2007. 30" x 42".
Appendix B
“Three Linas”, earthenware, 2007. 4” x 6” x 8", 4” x 6” x 9", 4” x 6” x 10”.

“Bookends”, bronze, 2007. 4” x 6” x 8” each.
"Me, Green", woodcut, 2007. 10" x 15".

"Peek", woodcut, 2007. 10" x 30".
Works Cited


