Ancestral Spaces: Time, Memory and the Liminal experience of Painting

by

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# Table of Contents

List of Illustrations ................................................. 4

Summary / Abstract .................................................. 5

**Introduction**

Spatial representation as an expression of cultural identity .................. 7

**Section One**

Historical Representations of Space .................................. 16

Modernity: A New Sight ............................................. 19

Time and the Unconscious as properties of an intangible spatiality .......... 24

Representations of Space in Arab Painting .......................... 28

**Section Two**

Representations of Space in Contemporary Art ........................ 34

Liminal Space, Nonduality and Mamma Andersson ......................... 34

Dream Spaces and Time in the paintings of Amy Cutler ................... 42

Memory and the Construction of Time in the work of Louise Bourgeois .... 50

The Liminal Experience of Painting .................................. 55

**Conclusion** ......................................................... 69

**References** .......................................................... 72

**Bibliography** .......................................................... 74

**Appendix 1** (Original course proposal) ............................. 77
List of Illustrations

Figure 1 Doric Temple, 2006 www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/arch/greek/doric_temple.jpg

Figure 2 Angkor Wat, 2005, http://sambali.blogspot.com/2006_03_14_archive.html

Figure 3. Albrech Dürer (1471-1528) Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Woman, 1525. Etching. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 4. Paul Cézanne. Still Life with Plaster Cupid 1895, Courtauld Institute of Art, London

Figure 5. Georges Braque Houses at L’Estaque 1908, Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm, Kunstmuseum Bern

Figure 6. Rene Magritte. Les Mots et Les Images 1929 (appeared in La Revolution Surrealiste)

Figure 7. 16th-century copy of the Persian historian Mirkhvand’s Rawzat al-Safa (Garden of Purity) shows Timur receiving envoys during his 1370 attack on Balkh, now in northern Afghanistan. It was a far larger embassy that came to him 25 years later, bearing the first of two letters from the Ming court of China that Timur found profoundly insulting. The British Library Collection

Figure 8. Majnum Comes Before Layla Disguised As A Sheep from the Haft Awrang of Jami made for Soltan Ibrahim Mirza, 1556 to 1565. Simpson Haft Awrang Page 204 Folio 264A attributed to Persian Artist Ali Ashgar father of Aqa Reza.

Figure 9. The Sri Yantra. In Tantrism a state of transcendence arises when dualities unite. For example, male-female and Shiva-Shakti

Figure 10. Mamma Andersson, Travelling in the Family, 2003, Acrylic and oil on panel, 122 x 160cm, Larsen Collection, Stockholm

Figure 11. Mamma Andersson, Collect One’s Thoughts, 2005, acrylic/oil on canvas, 110 x 150 cm

Figure 12. Amy Cutler, Campsite, 2002, Gouache on paper, 118.1 x 120.9cm, Private Collection, New York, Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow

Figure 13. Amy Cutler, 2001, Disembark, Gouache on paper, 118.1 x 86.4 cm, Private Collection, New York

Figure 14. Louise Bourgeois, Cell VII., 1998, Photo: Christopher Burke, Courtesy of Friedrich Christian Flick Collection

Figure 15. Louise Bourgeois, I Do I Undo I Redo (May-December 2000), Three steel towers, Photograph: Sean Smith

Figure 16. Marisa Purcell, Clearance, oil on linen, 150 x 120 cm

Figure 17. Marisa Purcell, Cycle, oil on linen, 120 x 90 cm

Figure 18. Marisa Purcell, Arcadia, 2006, oil on linen, 187 x 172 cm

Figure 19. Marisa Purcell, Wish, 2006 oil on linen, 198 x 187 cm

Figure 20. Marisa Purcell, Ascendants, 2007, acrylic on paper, 120 x 100 cm

Figure 21. Marisa Purcell, Installation, Only the Memories are New, Sydney College of the Arts Graduating Exhibition, Sculpture Studio, 2008. Curtains, plaits, 6 paintings, antique frames.

Figure 22. Marisa Purcell, Time to Breathe, acrylic on paper, 130 x 100 cm

Figure 23. Marisa Purcell, Installation (detail) Only the Memories are New, 2008
Abstract of Dissertation

Where a person is situated in space and time determines the way an artwork is perceived. The result of this experience implies a relationship between the viewer and the artwork, thereby creating a liminal space. The terms liminal space and nonduality in this paper refer to the threshold, or in-between space that both separates and unites two opposing forces, creating a unique place that transcends memory and time.

An artwork can serve as a mediatory object between artist and viewer because with each encounter, a unique meeting occurs. Thus, the meeting of audience and art object is transitory, ephemeral and temporal by nature and will be discussed in relation to the artwork as a vehicle to foster a subjective perception. Using my ancestral memories as a starting point, I refer to the art object as a means to explore time as a cross section of experience. Like dreams, where time is non-linear and memories exist side by side, I refer to the nondual space that exists between artist, artwork and audience as an opportunity to access an intuitive reaction to perception.

The yearning to represent subjective space stems from my desire to understand perception and the brain. By presenting an overview of approaches from art history and contemporary art, this paper will discuss the various philosophical approaches that have been employed to represent space and time. I emphasise the ability of visual art to record the multifarious nature of experience, and the ability of the picture plane as a means to employ illusory and abstract space simultaneously.

I have approached the research of time, memory and space through the lens of my own ancestry, which is essentially a combination of eastern and western in origin. Through this model I explore the tendencies throughout art history to
depict space and time and the influences that culture and science have had upon the visual arts.

My own paintings, and the work of Louise Bourgeois, Amy Cutler and Mamma Andersson are discussed with the intention of describing how the subjectivity of space can be expressed through a method that embraces the theories of nonduality and liminal space. Between the junction of east/west and abstract/illusory space, lies a point of union that I will refer to as ‘transcendent space’. By existing in the nondual, access is granted into a field that transcends the ‘either/or’ and allows access into a temporal space that permeates all experience.

**Studio work**

The studio component of the MVA will comprise of a series of paintings and an installation entitled, *Only the memories are new*. The paintings are of small scale and play with depictions of flatness and illusion. I have referenced Arabic miniatures as a means to employ a vertical perspective, whilst the inclusion of windows and doorways imply an opening to the nondual and the liminal.

For the installation, components of the paintings come to life and occupy a space that invites the viewers’ participation. The installation presents an environment that asks the viewer to navigate the space that they occupy by way of memory and time.
Introduction

Spatial representation as an expression of cultural identity

‘There are as many realities as there are points of view’.¹

This research paper originated with an investigation into the spatial properties of painting and how these relate to the ancestries from which I stem. Being the product of Arabic and Irish/Australian parents and as a painter, I have straddled dual cultures, and thus two modes of perception. My motivation for exploring spatiality and temporality in painting is to examine the contrasting perceptual expressions between east and west, and at the junction propel a liminal space.

The displacement from my ancestral culture, mother tongue and cultural identity has appeared as a subtext in my work. There has been a drive towards exploring issues of cultural memory and loss, and painting has been the means by which to access suppressed knowledge. The undercurrent of this research paper is the need to bring into balance the hidden elements of my ancestry with the more conscious awareness of artistic ancestry. My incentive is the exploration of spatial devices used throughout my artistic ancestry, whilst subconsciously it is the comprehension of my genetic inheritance. Somewhere between my exposure to the western art canon and art from the Arabic world, lies an in-between place that allows access to space that transcends time and memory.

The history of the development of spatial properties in visual art is complex and has traditionally required an investigation into disciplines such as optics, perception, and neurology. For the purposes of this research paper however, I will focus on the ways in which spatiality has been both understood and represented throughout art history and contemporary art practices. The varied cultural manifestations of spatiality will be examined as a means to gain insight into the significance of space as a representation of identity.

A discussion of spatiality cannot occur without an exploration of time and memory. Because perception is subjective, the artist’s interpretation of a given time and space is unique. The viewer too forms an essential component when perceiving an artists’ work, for it is here where the artwork has a chance to recreate itself. Spatially, a painting can be seen to exist independently of its maker and the viewer. Whilst a specific intention may have contributed to its existence, it may be received with an entirely different set of preconceptions that relate to time, memory and psychology. When a painting successfully occupies its own spatial territory, then it can be said to exist in a liminal space.

An acknowledgement of ancestral tendencies and patterns has invariably led me to an investigation into my current painting practice. Throughout the research process it has been reinforced that there is no ‘absolute space’[^2], and thus an attempt to arrive at a ‘correct’ representation will never exist. I have therefore researched traditions and individuals who have embraced an Einsteinian manner of perception, that is, that space is reliant on time and that time doesn’t exist, unless observed. The following paper will thus explore the eruption of innovation that surrounded Einstein’s theories in addition to other perceptual expressions from varied cultures, philosophies, and eras.

Space, perception and the physical properties of the universe are said to be universal truths and therefore cannot be reduced to a particular culture or epoch. However the way in which ethnic groups express a sense of space can be a determinant of the ‘prime symbol’ of their culture, evident in their spiritual expression, ethics, politics and art.[^3] Representations of space in painting are reflective of the values and fundamental philosophy of a culture. There are as many interpretations of the cosmos and its structure as there are cultures. The following examples offer a glimpse into the varied and complex nature of how space has been perceived.

Broadly, Greek space can be understood by a sense of ‘near and far’, that is, space was conceivable and consisted of viewable things, covered by the omnipotent heavens above. This viewpoint was clearly recognisable in societal structures and architecture, pointing to an idealised image of heaven and earth. There was a proliferation of closed structures with heavy surfaces, with no suggestion of the infinite.⁴

Figure 1. Doric Temple, Athens, Greece

In Hindu philosophy, space is conceived in the form of an immense ‘square surrounded by mountain ranges. Beyond the belt of mountains is the endless expanse of the mythical ocean. In the very centre of the square rises Mount Meru, the axis mundi. At the macroscopic level, the temple replicates this structure. Its basic form is also square. It is surrounded by a moat- the mythical ocean.⁵ The components of this expression of the cosmos all interrelate and are dependant on each other, forming an infinite web of interconnectedness.

Arabic cosmology suggests that the earth is situated in a vast universe sustained by Allah. The Qur’an⁶ states the universe is expanding, holding a similar viewpoint to the Big Bang theory, instead referring to it as the ‘Big Clap’. The creation of the universe was by Allah’s command, and was as quick as a single clap. Though the earth in Islam is considered to be the spiritual centre of the universe, in some chapters of the Qur’an, a more Copernican viewpoint is evident, where the sun assumes the central role.

In Islamic philosophy, there are different realms that describe various components of the cosmology. In the Realm of Divinity infinite numbers of unseen tiny dots emerge and expand to such large circles they engulf the entire universe. These dots give rise to all existence and within the circle human perception has the opportunity to unite with the attributes of God. The expansive philosophy of Islam is comparable to fractal geometry⁷ where each part contains the whole, that is, the macro is the micro and the micro is the macro. This idea has filtered through to a cultural expression that is symbiotic with the sacred act. For example, in Islamic painting, each brush stroke assumes an integral role in the overall composition, and the picture would be irrevocably altered without its inclusion.

The motivation for knowledge in the western world resulted in scientific innovation that provided both mathematical and philosophical explanations about the nature of the universe.

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⁷ In colloquial usage, a fractal is “a rough or fragmented geometric shape that can be subdivided in parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole”.[1] The term was coined by Benoît Mandelbrot in 1975 and was derived from the Latin fractus meaning "broken" or "fractured". Michael F. Barnsley and Hawley Rising, *Fractals Everywhere* (Boston: Academic Press Professional, 1993).
of space. These scientific explanations have contributed to key turning points in the last thousand years where the perception of space has been refined and expanded. The modern era saw vast changes in perceptual philosophies, mainly due to the exchange of knowledge between east and west, and disciplines such as science and optics. From the vaulted Gothic cathedrals and vanishing points (where all parallel lines converge), to the invention of the automobile there has been a search for liberation and a desire to gain command. Modernity embraced the notion of the limitless and infinity at a period where accepted scientific truths were being rejected.

Since perspective methods were introduced into painting in the fourteenth century, artists have been consciously aware of the difficulties of representation. As is usual with innovation that refutes earlier methods, much debate and philosophical discourse has surrounded theories of representation. Perception and modes of representation have undergone major paradigm shifts throughout the centuries.

In order to illustrate the vast contributions that have been made to perceptions of space and time, in section one of this paper I will discuss the philosophical, psychological and scientific disciplines that have been instrumental in forming current conceptions of space.

The diversity and subjectivity of spatial representation throughout history

Essentially a painting is an object; in some epochs it has been treated as such, and in others it has been used as a suggestion; a window or portal to an alternate reality. Grappling with the myriad ways in which representation unfolds onto a surface is an exercise that has been a source of constant consideration in the minds of artists for thousands of years.
Following the application of Euclidian\textsuperscript{8} derived spatiality, painting up until modernity remained faithful to the Greek tradition of representation as an achievable act. The idea encouraged hierarchy and a means by which to aspire. The picture plane became a window opening out onto ‘reality’, and attempted to describe it as accurately as possible, using a thoroughly laid out system of perspective.

The early years of the twentieth century saw a feverish attempt to redefine attitudes toward perception and the representation of space. It was Cézanne, and later, the Cubists who attempted to address the problem of representing three dimensions on a two dimensional surface. With the introduction of The Theory of Relativity into common vernacular by 1916\textsuperscript{9}, time became an inseparable companion to space and was to influence how perception was both understood and expressed.

Following the determination of the Cubists to fracture the picture plane into multi dimensions, thereby alluding to an object’s place in space and time, further scientific innovation changed the course of perception. The birth of psychoanalysis prompted investigations into the unconscious and dreams where time seems to be of an altogether different nature to conscious experience. Artists were rebelling against the ‘real’ in an attempt to point out that a more faithful rendition of reality was to be found in intangible representations of experience.

In section one of this paper, an introduction into the experiments made by Cubists and Surrealist artists will be discussed to illustrate twentieth century inventiveness.

Throughout the modernist period artists foraged through examples of historic art – both from the European Middle Ages, and the near east. Apart from the Orientalist tendencies of the fin de siecle that emphasised the exotic, there was a

\textsuperscript{8} Euclid is known as ‘The Father of Geometry’. He was a Greek mathematician of the Hellenistic period who flourished in Alexandria, Egypt, (323 BC-283 BC).

\textsuperscript{9} In 1916 The General theory of relativity was published, thereby completing Einstein’s former innovation of The Special Theory of Relativity.
genuine investigation into the treatment of space by artists from Asia and the Middle East. Seeking alternative treatments of space allowed European artists to appreciate the seemingly flattened space of Islamic painting. Because Arabic painters did not try to represent reality, and in fact, saw representation as heresy, they invented ways to depict space that was more reliant on subjectivity and language. In this way, the paintings of the eastern world had many affinities with those of early modernism.

The nature of representation for Islamic painters in the Middle Ages was a precarious subject. Only Allah was deemed a suitable creator, so artists adhered to strict rules of representation. A democratic system of space was employed where all subjects were depicted the same size, no matter where they were situated on the picture plane. Perspective was implied vertically, allowing the viewer to create a unique reality amongst the narrative and formed an interchangeable relationship with the viewer. The integral and complex role of the viewer will be examined throughout the paper with reference to theories of nonduality, time, memory and liminal space.

**Components of Spatiality: Time, Memory and the Liminal**

If time, memory and the liminal are interpreted as spatial issues, then it is vital to examine the philosophical premise of each. Various cultural, scientific and psychological traditions inherent in the concept of subjectivity will be discussed to emphasise the inconclusive nature of perception.

An investigation into the conventions of picture making throughout history offer insight into varied methodologies. Historical approaches to representations of space offer a kind of distillation of perception over the centuries. To offer an authentic individual response to space, contemporary approaches increasingly represent the process of perception itself. This approach is exemplified by the Surrealist method of juxtaposed disparate images, as though in a dream, or the Cubist method of representing multi-dimensional spaces. There has been a
resurgence of a dialogue between the real and the imagined and thus the relationships that form between the two.

Sigmund Freud’s description of the dream as a ‘pictorial’ transference of inner thoughts is akin to the creative process. With logical thinking temporarily suppressed, the dream puts together images in a seemingly distorted way, showing things next to something that may appear arbitrary. Freud suggested that space and time are distorted in dreams because the unconscious mind reorganises psychic material. For artists, the dream has been a vehicle to escape the constraints of societal time and sense non-linearity and a subconscious reading of reality. Because the nature of experience is in constant flux this is perceived by the individual not as a series of moments selected by the conscious mind but as a multiplicity of perceptions and memories. Non-literal representation can incorporate the components of perception that contribute to a nondual meeting with a work of art.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant argued in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that even the simplest act of perception has a temporal structure, which is a synthesis of the immediate presentation and memory.\(^\text{10}\) Because things arise in dependence on one another inherently they cannot exist as permanent phenomena. Thus, subjective relationships are formed with things as dependent on a specific period of time, or whether the subject is moving or stationary. With so many variables, it becomes clear why the subject of perception has been a topic of enquiry amongst artists for so long.

Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed. You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet others go ever flowing on. Cool things become warm, the warm grows cool; the moist dries, the parched becomes moist. It is in changing that things find repose... it is one and the same thing to be living and dead, awake or asleep, young or old. The former aspect in each case becomes the latter, and the latter becomes the former.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880 - 1918*, 11.
Section two of this paper will introduce three contemporary artists, Mamma Andersson, Amy Cutler and Louise Bourgeois as a means to highlight the philosophical premise that time is integral to space, and that memory and psychology contribute to an understanding of spatiality and perception. Because of the artists’ varied experiences and approaches to their work, the examples provided contribute to an understanding of the nondual space that can arise when considering the process of perception in this way.

The artists discussed in this paper occupy different worlds, in terms of their generation and also by their chosen means of expression. The youngest, Amy Cutler, stems from a resurgence of narrative and image-based painting, reflective of Surrealism. Her drawings and paintings occupy a place where neither the real nor the imagined take centre stage, but somewhere in-between.

Mamma Andersson, a mid-career artist working out of Sweden, uses the image itself as a means to deconstruct the very act in which she engages. Andersson falls in to a long line of artists who experiments with the picture plane as a site for allusions - to the real, and to the reality of the language of paint.

Finally Louise Bourgeois, an artist whose life has spanned many of the significant artistic stages of the twentieth century, will be discussed in relation to the emphasis she places on time and memory. Both her sculptural and two dimensional works encompass an awareness of the canons of western art and extend from them by her unique approach of using the self as subject.

I will conclude this paper with a description of my own process of painting as a way to synthesise both the historic and ancestral investigations made in the body of the paper. It is hoped that the paintings offer a visual metaphor for the in between state of painting as a means to draw upon the highly subjective representations of space.
Section One

Historical Representations of Space

Section one of this research paper will take an eclectic trajectory that allows for a discussion of space that refers to diverse disciplines such as science, philosophy and psychology. It is not the intention to provide an intricate survey but rather a broad overview of the history of spatial representation as it applies to this study.

Early writings by Euclid and other Greek philosophers and mathematicians suggest that western perspective theories originally emerged from studies in geometry and optics. Euclid wrote *Optica* in 300 BCE and it was the first text that defined the terms *visual ray* and *visual cone*. Vitruvius, in 25 BCE, wrote “Perspective is the method of sketching a front with the sides withdrawing into the background, the lines all meeting in the centre of a circle.”

The Islamic physicist, Alhazen, was considered the father of optics, but also made significant contributions to geometry, mathematics and astronomy. He wrote an influential book *Perspectiva* (c.1000 CE) that was translated into Latin in the twelfth or thirteenth century. His theories had a strong reputation in the middle ages and contributed to the development of optical aids used in the Renaissance. His scientific method was considered to be so important that scientists considered earlier inquiries into nature to be pre-scientific. He pioneered the psychology of

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13 Robert Briffaut, *The Making of Humanity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1928). 122 “What we call science arose as a result of new methods of experiment, observation, and measurement, which were introduced into Europe by the Arabs. [...] Science is the most momentous contribution of Arab civilization to the modern world, but its fruits were slow in ripening. Not until long after Moorish culture had sunk back into darkness did the giant to which it had given birth, rise in his might. It was not science only which brought Europe back to life. Other and manifold influences from the civilization of Islam communicated its first glow to European life. [...] The debt of our science to that of the Arabs does not consist in startling discoveries or revolutionary theories; science owes a great deal more to Arab culture, it owes its existence....The ancient world was, as we saw, pre-scientific. The astronomy and mathematics of Greeks were a foreign importation never thoroughly acclimatized in Greek culture. The Greeks systematized, generalized and theorized, but the patient ways of investigations, the accumulation of positive knowledge, the minute methods of science, detailed and prolonged observation and experimental inquiry were altogether alien to the Greek
visual perception, arguing that vision occurs in the brain, rather than in the eyes. Personal experience was understood to affect what people see and how they see, and that vision and perception are subjective.

In the Middle Ages the importance of things in heaven and earth determined their size and position in space. With the introduction of perspective, by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), Donatello (1386-1466), and Masaccio (1401-c.1428) objects were rendered according to the space they occupied in the visual world. Brunelleschi is considered to have ‘discovered’ perspective by applying his theories to the infamous Duomo (Santa Maria della Fiore in Florence). His theories were based on the idea that the apparent size of an object decreases with increasing distance from the eye.

It wasn’t until Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1474) wrote his treatise Di Pittura (On Painting) in 1435, that Brunelleschi’s methods were recorded. Alberti described how an artist could get a correct view of a scene by observing through a thin veil, or velo. It was to become one of the most influential art treatises in the western tradition. The idea was based on seeing things as if through a window, and by tracing an outline on the window glass, the artist could gain a better sense of scale and perspective. The system was a brilliant and hyper-efficient means by which to logically and consistently record the illusion of space and depth. The method stuck, because it ordered the chaotic nature of perception and contributed to a sense of control over what is seen.

Piero della Francesca (1420-1492), whom Kenneth Clark has called the Philosopher’s stone of aesthetics14, wrote his treatise on perspective thirty-nine years after Alberti. His deep interest in the theoretical study of perspective contributed to a large body of work indebted to the laws of Euclid. Albrecht Durer

(1471-1528), recorded space by making perspective ‘machines’ that became an influential and innovative way in which artists could employ tools to record space.

Figure 3. Albrech Dürer (1471-1528) Draughman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Woman, 1525. Etching. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The quattrocento painters transformed the picture plane into a window through which the viewer looked into another space. The theory of linear perspective focused on the world ‘out there’ giving rules for how to measure it precisely using Euclidian geometry. This formulation of space can be seen as a visual metaphor for the world at this time. The growing rationality and orderliness of society was reflected in the commerce industries, politics, the understanding of nature, and religion, and consequently in representations of space.

Following Newton’s concepts of time and gravity in the seventeenth century, eighteenth century enlightenment thinkers contributed to a loosened grip on accepted scientific truths. The French Revolution was the political starting point for the rise of modern science and secularism. It inspired passionate belief in individualism and freedom, contributing to new sciences of the mind and psychology.

Hermann von Helmholtz, a German nineteenth century scientist, demonstrated how the eye and ear respond to light and sound and how the brain organises optical and auditory neurological impulses. These theories contributed to an understanding that perceiving form is learned from experience, and geometry is not innate. His theory of vision triggered the rapid erosion of Renaissance

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perspective in western art. Impressionism became a prime example of this. The art historian Erwin Panofsky later went on to say that perspective is not the imitation of the spatial structure of one's visual experience but a 'symbolic form' expressing one's concept of the world.  

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Modernity: A New Sight

By the twentieth century, more fluid, relative concepts were evident in the sciences and arts. Twentieth century culture, both art and science, began with new ways of conceiving time and space. ‘In science, mathematics and philosophy, the laws of a clockwork universe established by Sir Isaac Newton in the baroque age were giving way before the first world war to extraordinary notions – that time and space are one, that light waves curve, that no two observers ever see exactly the same thing’.  

17

Innovations in science helped to reinforce the notion that perception is inherently individual, that is, depending on a person’s experience, and where they physically stand (or move) will determine the way they perceive. Since time was first proposed to be an integral component of space, initially by Henri Poincaré, and later, by Einstein, the shift in our comprehension of spatial properties has significantly developed. It is from this development of the early twentieth century that representations of space irrevocably altered in the visual arts. Einstein summed this up by stating ‘there is an infinite number of spaces, which are in motion with respect to each other’.  

18

From approximately 1908, painters responded to the climate of change and became dissatisfied with purely pictorial solutions to space. Comparable to the time of Giotto, where theories of single point perspective were employed in painting, new ideas enthusiastically emerged, leading to a deeper understanding of space and the expansion of visual consciousness.

16 Ibid.
18 Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 1880 - 1918.141
A steadfast attempt to break through accepted modes of perception was made. Monet speculated what it would have been like to be born blind in order to have sight miraculously restored, so he could see things as they are, without reliance on the rules that were imposed on his generation. By liberating the canvas from the confines of the studio, the Impressionists rejected the fixed point of view that perspective theories relied upon. It was becoming clearer that perception was not just reliant on the apparatus of the eye, but on the interplay between illusion and reality, fantasy and truth.

Leading up to Cubism’s experiments with volume and planes, many in the avant-garde were already moving toward a theory of abstraction. Attempts were made to abandon mimesis in favour of an art that allowed an individual’s mind to perceive not only from his/her own sensations, but also from his/her intuition, unconscious and memories. For artists in the early twentieth century, obeying the accepted conventions of Euclidian geometry was simply not viable in a climate of febrile scientific discovery.

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) was the first artist to introduce multifarious spaces on a single surface with multiple perspectives of the same subject. His *Still Life with Plaster Cupid, 1895* situates the cupid in an unstable ground of tilted forms and abstracted space. There are ambiguities between objects, such as the back edge of the table which seems to disappear into the floor. Cézanne dispensed with the rules of perspective in order to record how his eyes looked down at different parts of the scene from different angles. He accentuated the flatness of the picture’s surface whilst being preoccupied with the properties of volumes in three dimensions. Cézanne fused perceptions and conceptions – the way we see, and the way we know what we see. ‘He ‘realised’ objects in space as they take form, as the eye darts about the visual field and hovers around things until they are identified in space and integrated into our world of experience. For Cézanne an object in space was a multitude of creations of the seeing eye that varied dramatically with the most minute shifts in points of view.’

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19 Ibid.:142
Cézanne made important innovations in the way space could be represented in painting. His reduction of pictorial depth and illusion and the use of multiple perspectives allowed the Cubists to create even more radical interpretations of space. Kant’s idea that, ‘The senses give us only the material of knowledge, while understanding gives us the form’\textsuperscript{20} was embodied in the work of Cézanne, and later Braque, Picasso and Juan Gris.

Georges Braque (1882-1963) extended the theories of Cézanne, by examining underlying form and structure, rather than representational detail. His painting, *Houses at L’Estaque*, prompted the term *Cubism* because it broke down form into a series of planes and tilted forms. ‘The whole renaissance tradition is antipathetic to me, the hard and fast rules of perspective, which it succeeded in imposing on art, were a ghastly mistake’\textsuperscript{21} The Cubists thus situated themselves amongst the *modern*, thereby experimenting with the picture plane as a site for allusions of spatial realities and time.


\textsuperscript{21} Pepperell, “Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time and the Beauty That Causes Havoc.”
The vast changes introduced by Cubist theories inevitably led to drastic reinterpretations of space. It was not merely the principle of convergent lines leading to a vanishing point that was being abandoned, but also certain canons that had prevailed for centuries, such as that of the opacity of solid bodies and the concordance of form and colour. The perception of space as a contained knowable entity was giving way to multi-dimensional and infinite possibilities.

Cubism liberated artists from the conventional mode of representing reality; single point perspective. It no longer viewed painting as a window to reality, and instead saw the two-dimensional surface of the picture plane as its own entity. The Cubists applied the theories of multiple perspectives continually, almost to the point where their paintings became entirely non-objective. It was around this time that new scientific theories about the nature of time and space were being filtered into the mainstream, verifying artists’ excursions into a more fluid representation of space. It was as if a whole generation had been granted new sight, for the theories confirmed the shaky truth of representation via the methods of Euclid.

Although Braque and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) did not record statements about their idea of Cubism in the early days, other artists in their circle (Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger) described the Cubist approach as trying to capture the artist’s subjective experience of space by ‘moving around an object so as to record successive views of it which, when combined in a single image,
reconstitute it in time’. The multiple perspectives portrayed by the Cubists, according to Metzinger added a temporal dimension to an otherwise static space. He suggested that Braque’s paintings ‘radiate in time’. ‘Formerly a picture took possession of space, now it reigns also in time.’

Braque and Picasso situated themselves in an atmosphere where new spatial theories were informally yet passionately discussed with mathematicians and actuaries, like Maurice Princet. Princet was chiefly responsible for relaying theories by Henri Poincaré, the French mathematician who first expressed that Euclidian geometry is not necessarily accurate, but that it provided useful axioms because it corresponded to sensory experience. Princet discussed Poincaré’s theories about the relativity of space and time with the Paris artists, which were precursors to Einstein’s theory of relativity.

Einstein postulated several new theories in one year – 1905; the special theory of relativity, the quantum theory of radiation, and his law of the conservation of mass-energy. Each was important, but the theory of relativity (further refined in the general theory of relativity in 1916) was revolutionary. Einstein shattered the notion of absolute space – the great, still ether in which the Newtonian universe resided- and replaced it with a radically altered vision of cosmic unity that links space and time.

There has not yet been a consensus as to how much artists were aware of current scientific theories. The modern climate was as such that ideas came at a time when change was immanent. Once artists became aware of and explored four-dimensional theory, notions of space changed forever. Time was now an integral component in perceiving space and from it flowed a culture that developed a philosophical and mystical approach to the fourth dimension. It became an accepted belief that an object in space is the result of tangled perceptions and experiences, and, according to the cubists, ultimately a myth.

Once the conventional motif was eliminated, painting began to engage with the viewer. In an entirely new way, western art started to let go of its authority and

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23 Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 1880 - 1918, 22.
24 ibid 195
25 In his article (Leonardo, vol 37. No1, p. 73) Robert Pepperell notes the rejection of prominent art historians Lynda Dalrymple Henderson and John Richardson of the idea that there was any specific cross pollination between the theories of Einstein and Cubism.
acknowledged the participation of the viewer in creating a work of art. The motif was no longer an objective thing separate from the spectator; rather, ‘the thing seen participates in his activity as he configures it according to the sequence of his subjective optical perceptions.’ Modern artists began to perpetuate the notion that art did not have to represent anything – even a faithful depiction of multifarious viewpoints.

Time and the unconscious as properties of an intangible spatiality

The breakthrough of early modernism was reliant on the intangibility of depicting time, or more specifically, a four-dimensional universe. Non-Euclidean geometry, n-dimensional theories and research into parallel dimensions prompted a resurgence of mystical practices. It was under this system that intangible and unexplained phenomena could now be introduced into the dialogue of contemporary science and the arts.

Early in the twentieth century there was an impulse to understand the unconscious mind. Although Freud published On Dreams in 1901 and The Interpretation of Dreams in 1900, it wasn’t translated into French until the late 1920’s. However, during this time, a fascination with the occult, the fourth dimension and things ordinarily inaccessible, or ‘invisible’, the metaphysical preoccupied the minds of artists and there was much written about this topic that artists could access. The origins of Surrealism were in neurology, psychoanalysis, and physics. Some artists of this time compared Einstein’s space-time with the surreal intangibility of dreams. ‘The dream…a huge, heavy

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27 n dimensions - mathematicians have devised numerous definitions of dimension for different types of spaces. All, however, are ultimately based on the concept of the dimension of Euclidean n-space E n. The point E 0 is 0-dimensional. The line E 1 is 1-dimensional. The plane E 2 is 2-dimensional. In general E n is n-dimensional.
28 Abbott Abbott, Edwin, Flatland, a Romance in Many Dimensions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). For example, In 1884, when this book was originally published, it was essentially a satire on social hierarchy, but it used geometric figures as the protagonists to illustrate what it would be like to live in 2 dimensional world. Flatland contributed to an understanding of the imperceptibility of perceiving further dimensions, but also prompted an enthusiastic speculation of how the world could look from an altered viewpoint.
head on a threadlike body supported by the prongs of reality…falling into space just as the dream is about to come into being.\textsuperscript{29}

Cross-sections of experience and glimpses of non-linear time are common attributes of dreams. The subconscious goings-on give us access to a perception of time that is not always related to the ordered experience our conscious mind projects. As Freud suggested, in dreams, there is an absence of time and space. Experience, therefore, transcends all time and thus we are the sum total of all our experiences. In this way, memories and the experiences of history can remain in the present, and are somehow accessible in the present moment.

The first characteristic of dreams is, the absence of time and place, that, the emancipation of the imagination from arranging things spatially or temporally. Linked to this is the second fundamental character of the dream – the interchange between hallucinations, imaginary things and fantastic concoctions with external perceptions.\textsuperscript{30}

It was thinkers like Carl Gustav Carus, who published books like \textit{Psyche, on the History of the Development of the Soul} in 1846 which begins with ‘The key to the knowledge of the nature of the soul’s conscious life lies in the unconscious’, that contributed to the proliferation of all things subterranean. Another popular book written in 1869, \textit{Philosophy of the Unconscious} by Eduard von Hartmann was to further scholarship and propel thinkers like Freud to continue their research.\textsuperscript{31}

Dada, and then later Surrealism attempted to bring to the fore, the idea of disparity, the absurd, and an art that could unify the unconscious, with all its rich and diverse material. It was believed that accessing disconnected and seemingly absurd images may contribute to a more realistic depiction of realism itself. By working with the mystery of the dream, the surrealist artists wanted to express the tendency of the unconscious to unify time and place. These analogies between the irrational and the surreal lent themselves to the idea of Einstein’s warped space-time universe and non-Euclidian space. It also opened up the way for


more open-ended perceptions of space that looked to eastern philosophies, myth and the occult for explanations.

Carl Jung’s work, on the unconscious mind and its archetypes were to contribute to the theory of creating a balance between reason and intuition, the unconscious and the conscious and were also applied to the creative act itself. Beginning from the premise that perception itself is creative act, surrealist paintings can be seen to be representative of the rubble of thoughts that are glimpsed and held for just a second. Dreams allow the artist to wrench up images from the subconscious and put them next to something literal. Theories of the unconscious and the importance of myth as outlined by Freud, and later Jung were to have an enormous impact on Surrealism.

Both cubist and surrealist paintings embrace the temporal and the spatial to situate representations of perception. Layers of experience entwine, in much the same way as a Cubist layers facets of space onto a two dimensional surface. Surrealism’s investigation into the subconscious and the analytical straddles the duality of consciousness.

Rene Magritte (1898-1967) was intent on pointing out that disparate images brought together do not necessarily make logical sense, but rather point to an alternate experience of reality: the one that lies parallel, underneath, or in tandem with our conscious experience. In his Les mots et les images, he used words and images in a unique context, enabling him to question ‘reality through the confrontation with the real’. Commenting on Les mots et les images, Magritte said, ‘An object never has the same function as the image or the word that represents it’.32 By bringing unrelated words and pictures together, Magritte emphasised the absurdity of certainty, because he believed it was entirely subjective.

32 Das ABC der Bilders, 2007, Wall Text, Pergamon Museum, Berlin
Whilst innovation in twentieth century thinking is vast, a significant feature was the notion that there is no single reality, or an absolute space, and this was so aptly reflected in the artistic climate. The Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset challenged the sanctity of a single space or point of view and the arrogance of this particular belief he observed in western culture. ‘The truth, the real, the universe, life... breaks up into innumerable facets and vertices, each of which presents a face to an individual.’ In addition, he used innovation in scientific theories to support a divergent view of reality. ‘The theory of Einstein is a marvellous proof of the harmonious multiplicity of all possible points of view. If the idea is extended to morals and aesthetics, we shall come to experience history in a new way.’

The opposition to the idea of a single reality helped to reject restrictive class systems, monisms, monarchies and authority. The nonpartisan attitude of modernity helped to pave the way for a wider appreciation of knowledge that lay outside of conventional western thinking.

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33 Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 1880 - 1918. 131
34 Ibid
Representations of Space in Arab Painting

The modernist preoccupation with space, partly as a reaction to the very firm treatises set by renaissance painters, has had an influential legacy. The fascination with space by western art cannot be separated from the influence of the east.\textsuperscript{35} The East and West have a long history of influencing each other. The influence of Venetian style on Arabic painting occurred through trade routes, and through Jesuit priests bringing pictures to China and the east. Conversely, the infamous trading point of Venice was the literal junction point of east and west. The city thrived in the healthy relationship they had developed which became so integrated that Arabic culture can be seen throughout the city’s architecture and its cultural production.

Eastern views of reality relate to the perception of time and space – views that differ greatly from the Newtonian rational model where empty space is filled with objects and spaces that are clearly measurable. The eastern concept of Being Time\textsuperscript{36} is a spatiotemporal idea that suggests that the subject cannot be separated from the observer thus emphasising the nonduality of experience. When applied to painting, the construction of space was left to the observer because the depiction of a fixed point was beyond the scope of a mortal.

Arabic painting has its roots in representing the invisible, by way of symbol and inference. The sacred act of painting moved artists to find ways to project intuition and the numinous into their works, without attempting to portray reality as they think they saw it. Representation was seen to be an aspiration to see from the eyes of Allah. The way in which humans perceived, for example - a vanishing point- was not deemed godly, and therefore, not worthy of representation. The aim was for the artist to commune with Allah during the creative process, and thus allow the doorway to be open for the viewer to meet the same space.

\textsuperscript{35} What is loosely referred to as \textit{eastern art} shall here mean Arabic painting from the Ottoman empire in Turkey, unless specifically referred to.

\textsuperscript{36} Dogen
Painting in the manner of the Renaissance, or by using perspective techniques was seen by Arabic miniaturists to distance the viewer, thereby severing the potential connection with intuition and sense perceptions. Too much ‘worldly’ accuracy created an independent object and disallowed the nondual function that a painting can create with a viewer.

The significant ‘style’ or ‘signature’ of renaissance paintings reinforced the need to aspire towards ‘perfection’. As soon as a painter indulges their own style, or nuance, (as evidenced by a signature, or something unique to the artist), they are removing the sacred act and allowing the picture to become a reality of earthliness, as opposed to godliness. Aspiration to perfection is a way to pay homage to, or work toward a pure representation of the power of God, for only God has the power to perceive all viewpoints simultaneously.

In the Qur’an the word for to fashion, or form - ‘sawwara’ is synonymous with to create ‘Bara’a). God himself is not only called ‘creator’ (al-bari), but also ‘musawwir, which is a common word for ‘painter’. Creativity or creation was seen to be the domain of Allah and was thus deemed inappropriate to try to replicate his work by bringing into being an individual’s creative interpretation.

On judgement day, the idol makers will be asked to bring the images they’ve created to life. Since they’ll be unable to do so their lot will be to suffer the torments of hell. Let it not be forgotten that the glorious Koran, ‘creator’ is one of the attributes of Allah. It is Allah who is creative, who brings that which is not into existence, who gives life to the lifeless. No one ought to compete with him. The greatest of sins is committed by painters who presume to do what He does, who claim to be as creative as He.

Illusory representations of space pointed to the absurdities inherit in an absolutist idea of perception. Prior to the pervading influence that western concepts of spatiality had on Arabic painting, the creative act was not seen as making ‘art’. Because there was only one way to depict space, Arabic painters strictly adhered to the principles as laid out by their forebears. Miniatures were produced in

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37 Perfection in this case, means to replicate and honour the old master painters who were closer to Allah.
workshops with a head illuminator dictating practices, usually commissioned by the Sultan, and seen only by a privileged few. Thus the apprentice, and consequently, the master, were conveyers of the word, and as much as possible, were encouraged to stay out of the way of conscious interaction with the work. This aspiration to absolutism is reflected in the way space is expressed in the pictures. Similar to Medieval art in the west, Persian miniatures emphasised the importance of objects by size, not perspective.

In Islamic miniatures, flattened planes and volumes sit on top of each other, creating space through the movement of the viewers’ gaze. Within this world, the viewer is not placed in front of the image but within it, among the images. The total participation of the viewer is called upon to create an individual and sacred response to the painting. The ‘far, near, earlier and later’ move toward each other and the two dimensionality of the whole is suspended in time. The creation of an immanent, more subjective view of reality is thus inevitable. All time, objects and symbols merge to create a depiction of reality that transcends the scene itself. The viewer participates in creating a collapsed time-space-memory of the picture itself. The intended simultaneity is meant to encourage the moral purpose of the viewer’s total participation in making the picture come alive.

Figure 7. 16th-century copy of the Persian historian Mirkhvand's Rawzat al-Safa (Garden of Purity) shows Timur receiving envoys during his 1370 attack on Balkh, now in northern Afghanistan. It was a far larger embassy that came to him 25 years later, bearing the first of two letters from the Ming court of China that Timur found profoundly insulting. The British Library Collection

For the miniaturists and illuminators of the 14th Century in Turkey, paintings were deemed acceptable only when accompanied by the word. Painting was seen as a subservient accompaniment of calligraphy and was rarely seen in isolation, because of its ability to depict – an idea considered profane.

A picture leads to the form it represents and this leads to the meaning just as the shape of a line leads one to letters and from words the sense can be found out. Although in general they make pictures of material appearances, the European masters express with rare forms many meaning of the creation and thus they lead those who only seek the outside of things to place the real truth. However lines, (calligraphy) provide us with the experiences of the ancients and thus become a means to intellectual progress.

Arabic miniaturists, who after a lifetime’s work went blind, saw this as the ultimate gain. For, to be blinded, meant that you may have access to Allah’s omnipotence, and sense for yourself what true creation is. These artists knew that the attempt to represent reality is futile, because it is far too complex to perceive. Their works were stylisations of reality, a ‘picture’ carved out for their forebears, and thus deemed worthy of replication.

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41 the Word of God, Allah, is the Qur’an
43 Pamuk, My Name Is Red, 73.
In Islamic painting, space is an abstract concept and something that is best described through the use of metaphor and symbol. An acknowledgement of the complexity of spatial perception, and indeed, the impossibility of such an aim is a common attribute found in non-western art. Various devices were employed to infer that true perception is unreachable, except by God.

The way in which space is perceived by a culture can contribute to the subtle complexities inherent in societal structure, architecture and spiritual expression. Pictures are usually the first to be accused of being idolatrous, so expressions of spatiality can often be found in music, architecture or other non-representational art forms.

Sound and vibration are descriptors of space, especially in Hindu cosmology where the universe was said to have been born from the primordial vibration om. Sound structures the nature of all form, moving from the materialisation of existence from an abstraction, to an image residing in all dimensions.

Yantras are examples of the aural dimension represented in visual form. These images, usually geometric in nature are descriptors of space. Used as an instrument to guide meditation in Hindu and Buddhist tradition, they are sacred
representations of a deity or the manifestations of universal properties. The Yantra contains the essence or vibration of the sacred, devoid of human representational devices that are seen to occupy a lower spiritual status than the abstract form.

Figure 9. The Sri Yantra.

In Tantrism a state of transcendence arises when dualities unite. For example, male-female and Shiva-Shakti.

The move towards abstraction in the twentieth century by western artists is akin to the employment of the non-representational in non-western art. Where the west has arrived at modes of representation through theories of non-representation, the east through its own processes had arrived at similar conclusions. The centuries preceding modernism, where trade routes opened up a gateway to the arts, commerce and culture contributed to an awareness and widening understanding of alternative modes of reality. The inclination of early modernists to look toward the east (usually from a pejorative ‘orientalist’ viewpoint) was the starting point for the canons of eastern modes of representation becoming assimilated by western art.

The renaissance of metaphorical representations of space by modernist artists was an attempt to grapple with scientific innovation and the shift from a eurocentric worldview to one that opened itself beyond the contained borders of the west. The resulting synthesis of ideas contributed to a visual art form that incorporated eastern and western interpretations of space.
Section Two

Representations of Space in Contemporary Art

Liminal Space, Nonduality and Mamma Anderson

Throughout section two of this paper, three specific concepts (time, memory and liminal space) will be applied to the work of three contemporary artists; Mamma Andersson, Amy Cutler and Louise Bourgeois, to elucidate the subjectivity of perception and the means by which access is granted into the liminal. Suggestive of the multifarious ways available to represent experience, these three artists all embrace a nondual approach to their processes, contributing to a spatiality that is both ambiguous and subconscious.

An artwork that exists independently in time and space, can be said to be existing nondually. That is, if an artwork can recreate itself upon each viewing, the artist has been successful in bringing to the work something of an essential truth. Each encounter that an artwork has with a viewer blurs distinctions between matter and energy because the dimension of time cannot be separated from perception.

Both eastern and western philosophies have a name to describe the ‘threshold’ when dual functions converge. It is this ‘in between’ state that some artists have referred to as the mystical, or mysterious aspect of creativity. Rosemary Gordon, a Jungian psychotherapist, references Paul Klee’s description of the creative process.

from the root the sap rises up into the artist, flows through him, flows to his eyes. He is the trunk of the tree. Overwhelmed and activated by the force of the current, he conveys his vision into his work. He does nothing other than gather and pass on what rises from the depths. He neither serves nor transmits. His position is humble. And the beauty at the crown is not his own; it has merely passed through him.44

David Loy analyses such occurrences, like this experience of Klee’s, as instances of nondual thinking in which the distinction between subject and object, creator and created disappears. The conjuring of a ‘divine force’ suggests an external force, and, as Loy suggests, an attempt by western culture to describe non-dual processes. Western philosophies refer to the liminal (from the Latin word limen meaning ‘threshold’), as a period of transition, during which normal thought and understanding are relaxed, opening the way to the experience of a new state.

Liminal space and nondual states both allude to the ambiguous nature of the in-between. Both concepts require a grasp of the binary forces, in order to bring about an awareness, of a third space, one that transcends the reality of the ‘either-or’. Mircea Eliade, a philosopher and religious historian, describes the potentiality of liminal space;

between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds, and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.⁴⁵

According to Carl Jung, the creative act is best approached from the threshold, or, the in-between space. From this liminal space, a third space arises, which was referred to as ‘the transcendent function’. This duality refers to the union of normal perceptions, and one that unites the….

Subconscious/conscious
Sacred/profane
Separation/union
Past/present
Inner/outer
Temporal/spatial
Subject/object
Reason/intuition
Memory/present
Individual/universal
Structure/anti-structure……

Nondual thinking is not exclusively eastern in origin. In a western Christian context, as evidenced in the work of Meister Eckhart, descriptions of unity can be seen, for example;

For as long as I’m this and that who has this and that, I am not all things. Let go, so that you are or have neither this nor that, then you are everywhere. And once you are neither this nor that, you are all things’.

Modernity, and post-modernity have contributed to this idea of subject/object redefining the meaning of an artwork. The once held power of the artist gave way to the only accepted truth being recreated each time a work of art is encountered. ‘Imagination creates images, but above all it creates a world which opens anew with each image’. Thus the viewer’s autonomy in creating meaning has contributed to the creation of works that intentionally play with ambiguity and the indefinable. Theories of relativity and perceptions of perception itself have contributed to a century or more of intangible and cryptic works of art, allowing both the artist and the viewer to access the less rational, and intuitive aspects of their psyche.

Paintings that elude, contradict, spur arguments and dwell comfortably in paradox, demonstrate an allegiance to divergent views of perception. The paintings of Mamma Anderson draw from a rich library of imagery; those of art history and other varied sources such as the ‘throw away’ reproduction that saturates the modern condition. Whilst her work will not benefit from explanation or analysis, in this paper a discussion of ambiguous spaces, liminality and time will be applied to her painting as a means to elucidate inherent metaphors and to render palpable the impalpable.

The spaces available to the viewer in Andersson’s paintings blur the line between the interior and the exterior, the flat and illusionistic. The ambiguity of the imagery contributes to a sense of unease about what is being represented, and can bring to mind dream states. At first glance the images promise a sense of normality, with their backdrop of birch trees, landscape and the artist’s obvious affinity with

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48 Swedish artist, born 1962
49 Andersson’s paintings reference the systems of modern representation and the multiplicity of images that are available every moment. Because of the proliferation of images, there is a sense that images have become ‘throw away’, or unprecious.
the workings of paint of paint. After a brief engagement, however, this trust is broken and becomes subverted by a creeping feeling of uncertainty.

In some pictures, for example, *Travelling in the Family, 2003*, a group of people are sitting around a table that is situated in a non-descript place. The setting seems to be either a stage, or a blackened room that sits amidst a vast landscape. Spatially, this painting makes no sense, but Andersson further contributes to the poetry of this scene by introducing amorphic abstracted shadowy shapes that hover around the figures. Blackened, hazy forms appear in many of Andersson’s pictures, often creeping into the foreground or the periphery. It is as if the forms pull the drama away from an implied narrative and invite the viewer into a parallel dimension, one where there are no rules of perception.

![Image of Mamma Andersson's Travelling in the Family, 2003](image)

Figure 10. Mamma Andersson, *Travelling in the Family, 2003*, Acrylic and oil on panel 122 x 160cm, Larsen Collection, Stockholm

The whole encounter is thus propelled into another space, one where past, present and future converge, emphasising the elasticity of perception. An interior scene is placed in a forest, a vast landscape sits within reach of an intimate, domestic space, and a sense of suspension arises. Andersson draws from her experience as much as the images that surround her, whether it is the Nordic landscape where she resides or from memory. All images converge and the act of painting allows them to be liberated from their dormant state.
Andersson is acutely aware of images: the reproduced, the inherited, the remembered, the sacred and the iconic. Systems of reality and representations of reality are referred to by the inclusion of pictures, often stacked up, in the studio, gallery, or outside. The various references to pictures in her work seem to imply that the artist has digested them all at various stages in her life, leading to paintings that re-assemble, reinterpret and collage the results into vast, inexplicable scenes. In this way the paintings emerge as a kind of snapshot of experience, or a synthesis of many moments.

In Collect One’s Thoughts, 2005 paintings are stacked like in a shop, rather than a studio. They seem to be finished works, or perhaps, a ‘bank’ of images. The title suggests that the multitude of images are from the artist’s own experience, and that she must sift through them all in the construction of a picture. The shadowy figure appears again, casting a shadow on the pictures themselves, overriding, or tainting the images with something intangible from the artist’s unconscious. This picture is an example of the artist grappling with the overwhelming task of image making. Because conscious experience incorporates a vast array of material, the job of discerning content is akin to random selection, or the surrealist technique of automatic drawing, for in the end, choices are not always conscious or rational.

Andersson’s painting functions on a nondual level. Her paintings exist independently of the artist, and seem to converge and form a new reality with
each viewing. The work sits comfortably in the liminal because it evokes a sense of space that is ambiguous, and a place between realism and abstraction, interior and exterior. The pictorial space acts like a stage where the dimensions of space and time concur and provides room for the interjection of the onlooker.

The type of painting that Andersson makes conjures memories; both personal and those of a collective nature. Painting can unite memories from past, present and future and contribute to a feeling that all moments exist in one moment. Andersson says she draws from a ‘well of the unknown where not even she has access to. It’s the hidden part of herself that needs to remain inaccessible, for this is the source of energy.’ She goes on to say that ‘I’m not that interested in the future either, because I’m in the future. The future that was before and which was coming – it’s here and now.’ Her paintings therefore are reminiscent of simultaneous memories that exist as cross sections of time.

Like any non-literal painting, when it is approached with a view to understanding it on a wholly rational level, then the work can appear cryptic and frustrating. However, when time is perceived as unified, ever-present and that all moments are one moment, then the ineffable makes more sense. Like Andersson, Marcel Proust understood that his epiphanies were glimpses into the lost paradise from which past, present, and future are seen simultaneously in a profound and exalted moment.

The ambiguous image is a vehicle for altering perception and can assert a collective aura. There is a breakdown of systems of reality and representation and thus the paintings ‘hint at the destructions and omissions of time and the anarchy of space.’ Residing in an in-between space, Andersson’s pictures are a playful foray into the unconscious and back again, and an excursion into a filmic world of scattered attention.

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D. W. Winnicott, a psychoanalyst and paediatrician, wrote extensively about the creative process and the importance of play. He said, ‘it is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between – the transitional space – that creativity can occur.’ In this way, a union of the subconscious and the conscious states can contribute to a conversation between the dual aspects of being and wrench up images that may or may not make rational sense.

Dwelling on the threshold of duality contributes to nondual experiences and can be sensed through Andersson’s paintings. Creating art in this way can suggest that our real existence eludes the images and stories we constantly make of it, and can surprise both artist and audience. Reality itself transforms into a theatre, where memory, time and space become the actors on the stage.

‘In the nondual experience’ Loy states, ‘consciousness does not disappear but becomes one with its object: I am the thought processes, and it is this negation of the usual duality of ‘thinker – thinking – thought’ that brings about a union of subject and object. It is in fact impossible to establish an opposition between duality and nonduality because the nondual cannot be opposed to anything; what is nondual is all things and in all things.

The state of nonduality allows two opposing forces to come into union. Pure nonduality, however, is rarely possible, unless, according to David Loy it is in the state of enlightenment, which is experiencing nonduality. Perhaps it is the aspiration, or the will to unite contradiction, that brings about the tension that contributes to the energy inherit in Andersson’s painting. It is this energy that gives the work its frissant, and the ambiguity to compel audiences to create unique nondual experiences with it.

The visual exchange that occurs between artist and viewer allows Andersson’s paintings to have many lives. Each viewing offers a different reading for they depend on audiences to fill in the gaps, thus recreating themselves according to a

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54 Wynards, "Zurich Dada and Mysticism."
55 Ibid.
viewers’ preconceptions. Andersson is well aware that the open-endedness of her work is reliant on an authentic voice, one which is a conglomerate of her experience into the ever-present moment. ‘It’s about trusting the viewer, which often means trusting yourself.’
Dream Spaces and Time in the paintings of Amy Cutler

‘In each moment of time there is the entire being, the entire world.’

In much the same way as Arabic cosmology suggests that we partake in a fractal universe, Amy Cutler draws upon imagery that transcends the rational present and connects the fragment to the whole. In the following section, a discussion of the unconscious, dreams and time will be applied to Cutler’s paintings to highlight the role they play in uniting influences from both Arabic and western art.

The unconscious, dreams, free association and chance are terms most commonly associated with Dada and Surrealism. The unifying feature of these two influential periods in art is the exploration of time as a concept that surpassed basic interpretations. Dream examination allowed artists to view and perceive time in an unrestricted manner and contributed to a widening of perception regarding the philosophy of time.

From the point of view of the conscious mind, time has been viewed as the order of succession, and space as the order of juxtaposition. Thus, the two orders both unite and oppose each other, because space is thought of from within time. The action of our consciousness is a temporal one, where all things are considered from a framework that unites all experience.

The notion of ‘being – time’, a single reality that is stretched out in space and time is directly accessible to the enlightened mind in its entirety. The reality of ‘being – time’ surpasses the world as we perceive it from our limited perspectives.

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57 Ibid. This does not mean, as it is sometimes assumed, that ‘being – time’ exists only for the ‘enlightened’ mind, because that would imply that reality is different depending on how it is perceived. The difference between the ‘enlightened’ and ‘unenlightened’ perspective means only that reality is accessible to the ‘enlightened’ perspective as it is, but for the ‘unenlightened’ it remains clouded by the common views about it.
The Koan\textsuperscript{58} of the Zen Garden has its roots in the intangible world of perceiving space. It is an illustration of the multiplicity of the present stemming from any point in our nature, memories or existence. By situating a veranda to overlook a Zen garden whereby the viewer can only see a section of it, highlights the fact that we are unable to witness everything in any given moment. The adage is that only an enlightened person can see the entire garden. This metaphor for perception, consciousness and the connectedness of experience, allows an awareness of time, memory and union to come into being. Any given moment is every given moment, and can be seen objectively only from a point of nonduality.

From William Blake’s ‘To see the world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And eternity in an hour‘ to the mystical writings of Jallaludin Rumi (1207-1273), and to the verse of thirteenth century Sufi, Mahmud Shabistari:\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{verbatim}
  Know the world is a mirror from head to food,
  In every atom are a hundred blazing suns.
  If you cleave the heart of one drop of water,
  A hundred pure oceans emerge from it.
  If you examine closely each grain of sand, A thousand atoms may be seen in it.
  In its members a gnat is like an elephant.
  In its qualities a drop of rain is like the Nile.
  The heart of a barley-corn equals a hundred harvests,
  A world dwells in the heart of a millet seed.
  In the wing of a gnat is the ocean of life.
  In the pupil of the eye a heaven:
  What though the grain of the heart be small
  It is a station of the Lord of both worlds to dwell therein.
\end{verbatim}

As Poincaré observed, the fact that it takes time to transmit information about events happening remotely means that our knowledge of these events is always indirect. What we consider to be happening ‘now’, is, in fact, an illusion. Crucially, two observers in relative motion will measure different durations between the same two events and will disagree about which events are happening at different places in space are simultaneous.

\textsuperscript{58} Koans are Zen ‘riddles’ intended to exhaust the mind in order to make it let go of the conventional (binary thought structures that have shaped it. Emptying the mind out makes it receptive to a non-dualist way of thinking.

Artists have long been aware of the problem of representation and space and whether time would exist at all without an observer. Depending on the perspective one wishes to take, the attempt to represent something ‘objectively in space’ as opposed to ‘subjectively in time’ will vastly differ from each other.

There has been a recent resurgence into an exploration of the difficult areas once so thoroughly explored by artists of the first half of the twentieth century. The intangible has become a means to express a multi-layered understanding of time and an individual’s experience of any given moment. In recent painting and drawing, surrealist devices and narratives based on the internal logic of dreams have occupied a prevalent role.

Following the influential periods of Cubism and Surrealism, the image itself became absorbed by non-objectivity and abstraction. A reaction to theories of relativity, where time is relative and perception itself is intangible, artists moved away from representation, allowing for a foray into a numinous, non-objective void. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence into narrative and ephemeral painting.

Amy Cutler\(^6\) works primarily with gouache on paper on an intimate scale. Her pictures seem to spring from memories, from associations with Indian miniature painting or the fantastic scenarios of fables. The paintings evoke a fairy tale land but are removed from the evocative setting that is usually so palpable in children’s stories. Cutler’s compositions are most commonly situated in an empty white space, as though the images have been lifted from somewhere else, collaged into her imagination. The non-descript spaces allude to an intangible world of open-endedness, allowing the viewer to fill in the gaps, creating a time and space independent of the artist’s intentions.

Most of the narrative of Cutler’s drawings takes place in the immediate foreground of the page. Because her implied space is compact, the context is undefined and it feels as if time has frozen. When she wishes to apply a sense of spatial depth, a

\(^6\) Born 1974, New York
vertical perspective is employed, in a similar manner to Arabic miniature painting. Figures are stacked up, but are treated non-discriminately, for they occupy the same dimensions as those in the supposed foreground. Cutler employs a similar approach to pre-Renaissance, or Arabic miniatures in the way in which her subjects (exclusively female, or animals) are rendered with strength of purpose and poise. When a figure is pictured wandering into a distant forest, (as in *Campsite*, 2002) she is represented with the same proportion to her companions in the foreground.

Figure 12. Amy Cutler, *Campsite*, 2002, Gouache on Paper, 118.1 x 120.9cm, Private Collection, New York, Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow

Cutler’s interest in folk art, fairy tales and Persian miniatures all help to support her metaphoric associations with the unconscious. The tradition of representation in a non-hierarchical way is usually associated with religious tradition, but can also be seen in storytelling and works for children, where characters are encouraged to reside in children’s imagination, rather than being set out on the page. Like a child reading a storybook, the viewer is encouraged to make endless associations with the visual metaphors, deciphering their actions until some sort of decoding has taken place. Yet, the viewer will return to the work time after time, and will undoubtedly offer an alternate reading.

Cutler’s collage of different spatial, temporal and cultural contexts are reminiscent of dreams, where the unconscious mines the past, present and future and
presents inexplicable scenarios. The artist has kept diaries of her dreams and has translated the images into some of her work. ‘Daydreams and things that I so often do not hear correctly constantly enter my work’. In much the same way, the Surrealist’s dismissal of the rational world allowed for a layered and multifarious reading of any given moment.

Like the Dada artists of the early twentieth century, Cutler randomises narratives by playing with chance and the absurd. Dadaists intentionally freed words from their contexts and juxtaposed apparent arbitrariness to enforce new readings, albeit intangible. Chance, for Dada, was not arbitrary randomness, but was a universal orderliness that revealed itself as a sign of the artists merging with his/her object. Cutler’s process involves drawing to ‘get ideas out’ and then she departs from this by a process of erasing and re-drawing. Her technique resembles the psychoanalytic technique of free association rather than a pre-conceived narrative.

Max Ernst once defined the technique of collage as a systematic exploitation of completely alien realities or ‘what for all appearances seemed like an unsuitable level for it.’ Ernst emphasised that a new form of ‘poetry’ can be realised through the apparently chance encounter of unrelated fragments.

Jung was later to experiment with chance by using the I Ching. The traditional Chinese explanation for Jung’s synchronicity is a universal orderliness to which the practitioner attunes herself through concentration and meditation, so that a merging takes place.

Allowing chance to contribute to the creative process helps to reveal narrative. The unconscious is activated, allowing images and associations to arise. Cutler says of her process, There is definitely some sort of conversation that goes on between the work and my subconscious. That’s what keeps it interesting to me.

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61 Wynards, “Zurich Dada and Mysticism.”
63 Wall text on Albert Oehlen in Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2007
64 Wynards, “Zurich Dada and Mysticism.”
I don’t know which direction it will go in and I am never faithful to the original sketch. Things happen that I can’t control. And these twists dictate where the paintings need to go. A few times I’ve even cut the painting in half and have gone in very different directions with each half.65

Cutler’s affinity to surrealism lies in the desire to resolve the two states of dream and reality. In this way, the artist can be free to navigate a course without the restrictions of depicting realism, and instead explore her own perception of the present moment, in all its layers.

Andre Breton, in his First Manifesto of Surrealism66 encouraged artists to ‘reveal what has been hidden’ and to use dreams as a source of unconscious activity. According to Breton, an unrestricted imagination gave rise to freedom and a kind of evolution of the mind and spirit. In dreams, a suspension of time occurs, and gives way to reality that is a kind of cross section of experience.

Like Louise Bourgeois, Cutler’s interest in fabrics, costume and traditionally ‘feminine’ crafts, reference a temporal field that goes beyond the present. Cutler’s figures are lovingly clothed in fabrics and ornament taken from many sources, but in all there is a particular attention to pattern and repetition. The fabric is simultaneously beautiful and restrictive, utilitarian beyond the presumed function of dress. In Disembark, the women seem to be escaping from their dresses-turned-tents and are dismembered from the trees by falling gently downward. There is a sense of liberation amongst these hardy women as they float away from their homes perched amongst branches. They are simultaneously at one with their clothing and reduced by it.

65 Freiman, Amy Cutler, 14.
E. H. Gombrich argued that there are threads that connect space and time through cultures and experience. ‘Obviously there is something in the Hegelian intuition that nothing in life is ever isolated, that any event and any creation of a period is connected by a thousand threads with the culture in which it is embedded.’ Cutler’s painting evoke past and present through the attentive details of past eras through dress and fabric juxtaposed with the contemporary women who wear them.

Cutler’s figures occupy a place that transcends time and culture. The delicately rendered fabrics evoke a metaphorical thread; one that connects experiences through ancestral and creative lines. Her use of nineteenth century dress, plaited hair, and other-worldy settings emphasise a feminine reality that transcend linear time.

Cutler’s paintings imply that experiences, memories from our ancestors, culture and our own lives are all present during the creative act. The threads that connect

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our experiences to our ancestors, both familial and artistic, allow us to form nondual relationships. This wrenching up of experience merges space and time, memory and the present, pointing to a relativity of awareness. Whilst Einstein postulated that space and time are symbiotic, he was also suggesting that subject and object are also in union.
Memory and the construction of time in the work of Louise Bourgeois

The pure present is an ungraspable advance of the past devouring the future. In truth, all sensation is already memory.68

For the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves – only then can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them.69

In 1870, the psychologist Ewald Hering remarked that every living cell contains the memory of the experience of the entire series of its parent cells and even those of former generations.70 Memory, a key component of perception is an unreliable, unquantifiable and intangible source of knowledge. Memory easily distorts once the content has digested and chronology is one of the first things to go awry. However, as unreliable as it is, it is always present, even when we are not thinking of something specific. Our memories inform the way we perceive the present and are thus fused with the present.

For Henri Bergson every movement or action that is made leaves traces in the body and mind. ‘The past collects in the fibres of the body as it does in the mind and determines the way we walk and dance as well as the way we think.’71

Regardless of whether an experience is minor or significant, both our unconscious and conscious mind absorbs the associated emotion and contribute to the way the present is perceived.

In the work of Louise Bourgeois72, disparate and sometimes random objects come together, resulting in works of art that transcend the conditions of their

69 Rilke, R. M, p. 257
70 Kern, The Culture of Time and Space, 1880 - 1918:40
71 Ibid.
72 Bourgeois worked alongside many of the most noted twentieth century artists, but was not recognised as one of the defining artists of our time until the last 20-30 years. Her stance as a female in a male dominated modernist arena contributed to a gradual erosion of the prevailing
creation and/or the psyche of their creator. Although the work is intensely personal, it manages to embrace the mysterious nature of existence that is relevant to a varied audience.

The dual aspects of experience are readily apparent in Bourgeois’s work. The psychological associations of childhood, and the personal experiences of separation and union, reveal layers of trauma. Whilst her work is emotionally charged, it unites the opposing forces, for the work never quite commits itself to one or the other. By existing in the dual concurrently, the sculptures transcend the rational and exist of their own accord.

Bourgeois’s sculptures explore a kind of alternate cubism in the way they fracture metaphoric space. Like the painters who attempted to disrupt the picture plane in the early twentieth century, Bourgeois pierces the surface of the present to render past and future as residing in the present moment. Her use of moveable mirrors in the Cells help to create infinite reflections and a fracturing of the space. The mirrors emphasise the sense of isolation by making the condition a timeless, never ending process. As a starting point, Bourgeois uses the theories of Cubism to fracture the subject itself. This fracturing is yet another way to break down the phallocentric worldview, and, more specifically, the ‘father’.

critical divide. Born in 1911, she has witnessed, participated and furthered the theories of art movements as central as Cubism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.

73 Are series of works that separate the work and the viewer and trap figures and objects within a large space, usually a cage, or other solid structure. For Bourgeois, the cells represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and the psychological, and the mental and the intellectual.
The *Cells* are mental spaces, where childhood traumas are stored, isolated and contained. The cages themselves act as a kind of frame to contain and conceal the ever-present past. As Bourgeois describes, ‘Space does not exist, it is just a metaphor for the structure of our existence’.  

Memory is the central part of the brain’s attempt to make sense of experience, and to tell coherent stories about it. These tales are all we have of our past, and so they are potent determinants of how we view ourselves and what we do... Our memories are the fragile but powerful products of what we recall from the past, believe about the present, and imagine about our future.

In *I do, I undo, I redo*, installed at the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern (2000), Bourgeois constructed 3 towers, each 9 metres high, enclosed by spiral staircases. In each tower, the artist placed a bell jar containing sculptures of figures representing mother and child in various states of physical attachment. The three steel towers are vertically stacked and can be viewed in order by climbing the steps to the viewing platform of each section.

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A linear temporality is suggested by the title of Bourgeois’s work, *I do, I undo, I redo*, implying a logical progressive movement whilst alluding to the traditional female craft of embroidery, sewing and handiwork. Linear time is also implied by the verticality of the central columns that can only be accessed by ascending, one after the other. This linearity, according to Julie Kristeva, in her essay, “Women’s Time”76 is a construct within which we operate in the western world today. This time is masculine, sequential and phallocentric, and is evident in language and the depiction of history. According to Kristeva, linear time is an illusion, for we cling onto it always in the hope that it won’t ‘slip’ away.

The phallic representation of the column in this major work by Bourgeois, can be seen to be both a reference to patriarchy and to women’s subjectivity. The column is enclosed by a spiralling staircase contrasting with the vertical rigidity of the column. The enclosure contributes to a metaphorical reading of entry and escape, passageways and myth. The spiral evokes non-linear space, and according to Kristeva, cyclical time, which is ‘women’s time’.

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Kristeva’s essay assists in the reading of Bourgeois’s work because it differentiates between linear and cyclical time as being male and female respectively. Kristeva describes cyclical time as ‘cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality’ and monumental time as ‘a massive presence of monumental temporality, which is all encompassing and infinite – like imaginary space’.77

The imaginary spaces that Bourgeois constructs promote an engagement with the symbolic and tangible experience of time and space. Space itself is manipulated to reference psychological states – what is shut out, concealed and what can be peered into is often from the viewpoint of a child, or the child within the ninety-six year old artist.

Bourgeois’s constructions employ the liminal as a means to entice the viewer to peer, to get down on all fours and investigate, staircases and cages invite participation, but may be blocked. Similar to the way memories function, the interior spaces are visible, yet inaccessible to the observer. Bourgeois’s thresholds are narrow spaces that only reveal fragments and moments, never the whole installation. Like the Zen garden the whole work cannot be viewed at once, for experience evokes relativity theory in the way that it needs to be read in contrast to something else.

77 de Rosa, S. quoting Kristeva (2004) p. 84
The liminal experience of painting

To conclude this research paper, I will use my own work as a way to synthesise the concepts of space, time and memory to reflect on the opportunity that painting affords to unite dualisms. To be painting now is to have inherited the styles, philosophies and culture of what has come before. By tracing familial lines, access is granted into an arena that resides simultaneously in the foreign and familiar. The method feeds the process of painting because it serves as a device to draw associations, evoke metaphor and place the self within a wider community of collective memories.

Whilst I acknowledge my artistic forebears as inevitable influences in my work, it is the recent pull toward an understanding of my familial line that have started to dominate. The intangible urge to discover the stories and my own hidden histories has drawn me to research spatial and temporal devices in both Arabic and western painting. This has allowed me to consider the varying approaches to painting in a way that I previously would not have considered in such a subjective way. It is as though a doorway has opened, both personally and thematically, that has allowed me to walk a path that feels authentic and entirely my own.

My mother’s side of the family are of Lebanese origin. My grandfather was born in Ehden, in the north of what was then referred to by the Australian immigration authorities as Mt. Lebanon. He emigrated to Australia when he was twelve, in the mid 1920’s. My grandmother’s parents were part of the first wave of Lebanese immigration, forced to leave their homes due to poverty and the conflicts between their Christian faith and the ever-growing population of Muslims. The stories my grandmother tells me of her childhood emphasises the importance of assimilation. Living in a small town of northwest New South Wales was not exactly conducive to language or customs other than English. The racism that she and her seven siblings were subject to, the rigidity of the nuns that taught them, and the need to fit in, were all contributing factors to the silencing of our ancestral identity. My
grandmother, being one of the youngest of the eight, recalls learning Arabic as a girl, but now all she can remember is the names of certain food, and how to count to ten, which she is inclined to do now that she is well into her 90s.

The stories I have of Lebanon come solely from my grandmother. They are a little girls stories, shrouded in myth, nostalgia and without grounding in any reality. Thus, my perception of this land never visited is mystical, fantastic and almost representative of a utopia that holds the key to my own identity. I plan to travel there in early 2009, with my newborn child and my partner, to finally experience this land with my own eyes.

The paintings that have emerged since the beginning of the Masters of Visual Arts, have attempted to pull me closer to an understanding of the perceptions I have of the mother country, my hidden inheritance, and to my relationship with my grandmother – who has continually been a loving and profound influence on me, and my strongest link to being Lebanese.

In early 2006, the painting Clearance, came to me as an invitation to consider my dreams, and the long suppressed urge I had to delve into my heritage. I began the painting with a familiar technique of glazing several colours together to form an undercoat. The usual approach of allowing this coat to dry did not happen, and instead, I reached for a small brush and started to sketch in the forms of trees. Images of trees began to appear frequently at this time, and seem to refer to the snowy mountainous region from which I stem in Lebanon. In the weeks leading up to Clearance I had a series of dreams that related to childhood stories of the land left behind, and my grandmother. One dream in particular was centred in a snowy landscape where enormous trees surrounded my grandmother and I. We climbed a fallen tree until we came to the end – there was nowhere to go but to jump. My grandmother pointed to the nets that lay below in an intricate web that would cushion our landing. This dream has been a constant reassuring memory for me – it points to the connection I have with my grandmother and how important it is for me to discover our ancestral stories.
The resulting painting seemed to be an attempt to bridge the opposing cultural realities and to combine the moments across time. I found it interesting to hear other people comment on this painting, because although there is nothing to indicate my personal story, the responses implied that a nondual connection occurred. My own nondual connection with these symbols from my childhood is a synthesis of the dual cultures I have inherited. This painting seems to be a bridge between my two experiences and I feel like it was important step in the evolution of my work because it allowed a lot of subconscious ideas to surface.

Since the time Clearance was painted, I have learned that images will present themselves under the right conditions. If I allow myself to observe and be present whilst at work in the studio, things arise that resonate either with my grandmother’s stories, or my own memories that perhaps stem from something more ancient than my life. The more I have opened myself to it, the more I have sensed my connection to the hidden reality of my ancestry. Through painting I have allowed myself to acknowledge this connection that lies deeper than storytelling. It now feels like an intrinsic part of myself.
This painting began a series of works called *Places to Remember*, images of snowy landscapes, trees and lace. My great grandparents were hawkers of finery’s and haberdashery and a strong connection to sewing and fabrics has been passed down to my sisters and I. This series of works attempted to locate the image I had of Lebanon, with the dreamed perceptions I was having of it at the time. They refer to storybooks, legends and myth, and entwined the awareness received from my meditation practice with my childhood stories.

Following *Places to Remember*, I embarked on the series *Time Being*, a collection of large paintings that allowed me to immerse my whole body into the process of painting. The painting *Arcadia* is about a journey. The process of painting this picture happened in one intense sitting, and was returned to a few days later to complete it. I felt enveloped by this picture, and somehow compelled to ‘paint it out’ in one go. What emerged was a fairy tale landscape that seemed to stand for my own idea of the quest involved to understand my lineage. Everything is clouded in mystery, there is no right journey to take to the land that doesn’t exist anymore, but I must attempt it anyway. Everything about this picture feels like the
stories I was told by my grandmother as a child. ‘In Lebanon the mountains are so beautiful, the water is the purest in the world, the cedars surround the village’. My image of this land has always been shrouded in mystique and fantasy, hence the title, ‘Arcadia’.

In *Arcadia*, I loosely constructed a space that revealed a ‘scene’ by using the device of theatre curtains being drawn back. The curtains pointedly refer to the painting as a stage in which the artist acts. Spatially the elements sit on one surface indiscriminately and there is an indication of a journey through time. Time like space unfolds and the pathway is only revealed once the viewer takes the first steps in its creation. Heidegger’s series of essays entitled *Holzwege* - (woodpaths) describes the sensibility of creating something with each step. Whilst Heidegger has taken the term from a colloquial German expression ‘to be on a woodpath’ (to be on the wrong track), the meaning he assigns is one of discovery. To be on a woodpath one does not necessarily know at the outset where one is going. The ‘way’ (or, path) is of such a nature that it originates with the movement of walking on it. ‘Only when we walk on it, and in no other fashion, only, that is, by thoughtful questioning, are we on the move on the way.’  

This movement is what allows the way to come forward, and allows a painting to be unique upon each new encounter.

In the painting space, time is irrelevant. Everything exists here – an infinite survey of experiences in all their depth and colour sitting amongst those of both artistic and familial forebears. ‘Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.’  

The nondual space that is evoked by Jorge Luis Borges refers to a new dimension, one where a dialogue that has been gathered through space and time is manifest in the present.

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As our present experience permeates and pervades time, any given representation is, by its very nature, abstract, and incomplete. The infinite concept of now can never be fathomed, nor properly attempted. Now is a culmination of all my experiences and that of my forebears. I see myself as a descendant of both eastern and western traditions of culture and painting. Thus, symbols tend to arise to indicate certain states of being regarding this identity. Whether symbols are intentional or unconscious at the time of making is not really relevant. The imagery comes from the infinite array of individual and collective memories that permeate my experience. Carl Jung suggested the need to unite the unconscious and unconscious to bring about a healthy mind, as he describes; ‘The great artistic work is done by the artist who moves into the visionary realm for inspiration, then back to the psychological realm for the rational organising ability that is necessary to give the vision coherence.’

Some of the elements that have been used in my work cross boundaries of east/west ancient and modern symbols. (For example, in Wish, the gold throne is appropriated from an Arabic miniature, but is similar to the iconography of

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80 Mayo, Jung and Aesthetic Experience: The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration.,93
Buddhist painting.) I see the symbols that have arisen in my work as an attempt to describe an indescribable presence, and perhaps a reference to a historic device to picture the ‘pulse’ of a tradition. In addition, a concern with pattern and design imply rhythm and time and an attempt to translate experience without representation.

Figure 19. Wish, 2006 oil on linen, 198 x 187 cm

The parallel traditions have been passed down to me, both through my background and through my painting practice. In *Ascendants* reference is made to dual traditions – western art nouveau, and the shallow spaces of Persian miniatures. I constructed a vertical space that is grounded in the ambiguity of east and west, similar to the way that the city of Venice acted as the threshold between both worlds.\(^8^1\) From this turbulent space rises up a multitude of oval frames, each containing a reflective surface that shines back at the viewer, inviting them in. The frames are linked by an intricate web that reflects itself back onto

itself. This can be compared to Arabic cosmology suggests that the universe is made up of infinite unseen tiny dots. These dots contract and expand to such large circles that they engulf the entire universe and they are known to be the basis of all life of the universe. By investigating Arabic painting more extensively I have discovered a subtle memory or inheritance from this tradition. This has contributed to a nondual approach to painting, and one that seems to embrace the opposing, yet co-dependant traditions of east/west, flatness/illusion and my Australian/Arabic heritage.

In *Ascendants*, the many ornate frames imply a family tree swaying in a breeze, making them vulnerable. I cannot trace my ancestral line prior to our Australian immigration – and the loss of this knowledge feels like a nostalgic mystery. I am compelled by representations of space in Arabic miniatures, as somehow their ambiguity tells me more than their accuracy. I relate to the idea of ‘compressed time’ where time is non linear and the memories of my ancestors feel like my own. I see my pictures as embodiments of the mystery of perception and memory.

Figure 20. Ascendants, 2007, acrylic on paper, 120 x 100 cm

The cultural memory that I have inherited infers a dislocation that has resulted in displacement from the culture of origin and the culture of the present. In Michael
Fischer’s terms, ‘Ethnicity is something re-invented and reinterpreted with each generation by each individual. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided.’ It is through painting that I am reinventing my ethnicity to a space that bridges dualisms.

The silenced cultural heritage in my family has contributed to an ever-present subconscious awareness of it. Through an exploration of space and time, a tangible representation of the issues has surfaced. Spatially, my paintings sit amidst the tension between flat and illusory spaces, contributing to nonsensical perspectives that allude to the unconscious. Having no fixed point of perception, the paintings attempt to unite both aspects of my experience whilst acknowledging the dualistic influences. In Wish, the vertical composition supports objects floating on top of a surface that implies a vanishing point. The perspective makes no logical sense – and objects are treated for their significance rather than where they reside in space.

The way in which I sense space is a reflection of the way I perceive—multifarious, non linear and layered. Different aspects of space in a picture refer to the varied dualities that are trying to come into balance and are a representation of the struggle to unite. I see the representation of space as necessarily abstract – in this way I acknowledge the Arabic painters of old that recognised the impossibility of depicting reality.

When I rid myself of the extraneous details that pervade conscious experience, everything seems to co-exist – yesterday, tomorrow and now. The point of my painting is to prise open this space and allow the contents to spill out like a cross section across the layers, incorporating everything. This process is usually undiscernible until after the fact. Things become clearer once the febrile imagination is allowed to have its debris settle, giving it a border or a perimeter to make sense of itself. True to whatever moment it was made. The aftermath of

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such a process usually brings clarity and some sort of conscious understanding of what is going on in this seething ocean of everything. As Jung says,

‘that is the secret of great art, and of its effect upon us. The creative process, so far as we are able to follow at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life.’

Fragments of experiences seem like fragments because their nature is made up by so many indescribable conditions. Bits here and there, from then and now, all merge to create a singular moment. Wholeness, therefore, is an integration of the parts and become clear when viewed from a liminal space. To gain mastery of the parts is to understand the whole, and as that is intangible, then the way to access it is through painting the process of perception. The clarity that comes is in direct proportion to the degree of access I have to the unfettered unconscious. In the words of Philip Guston, I take solace ‘..Here, there are no truths, only blind stabs.’

The parallel traditions of east and west have been passed down to me, both through my background and through my painting practice. I have been prompted to further investigate spatial devices used in different painting traditions. By investigating Arabic painting more extensively it allows me to discover an intrinsic memory or inheritance from this tradition, contributing to a merging of the opposing forces of east/west, flatness/illusion and my Australian/Arabic heritage.

This nondual experience to which my painting aspires invariably led me to seek a wider arena to experiment with. Although I believe painting is a next to perfect medium for me to play with spatial and temporal ideas, toward the end of the Masters of Visual Arts, I felt a need to push the boundaries beyond a two dimensional surface. Whilst I’m not exactly sure why this was a necessary departure, it helped me to expand some of the spatial ideas I was applying in my

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83 Jung, quoted in Mayo, *Jung and Aesthetic Experience: The Unconscious as a Source of Artistic Inspiration.* 67
painting. Perhaps also, playing with objects rather than forms, is an alternative way to grapple with a tangible sense of artefact and relics.

One of the pivotal images that inspired the painting series *Only the Memories are New* are plaited strands of grey hair. In the series, architectural structures sit amidst an uncertain background of flattened landscape, emphasising the verticality of its perspective. The plait formed a device that helped me initiate the paintings, rather than actually appearing in them. Because I viewed the plait as a three-dimensional object, it became a separate entity to the pictures themselves.

*Only the Memories are New* was an installation that was made up of a suite of six paintings, a work on paper, and an installation that included 18 strands of 3 metre plaits, a wall of antique frames, and a transparent curtain placed in front of an open window.

The plait has a strong, personal association with my grandmother. As a young child I used to plait my grandmother’s long, grey hair down her back. Now that she is much older, I still plait it, but I also let it hang because it is so beautiful. This ritual I have had with almost every meeting with my grandmother has become an
embedded association with her. When the nursing home cut off her hair unannounced one day, the grief I felt was tantamount to losing touch with her and my entire ancestry. I reacted very strongly to this act that I saw as violent, revealing to me the importance of this symbol and the necessity to allow the ancestral knowledge to come closer to my conscious mind. The plaits became a symbol – an entwined rope of sturdy hair, forming a ladder, and connections to both my grandmother and my own relationship with Lebanon. The plaits in the installation are hung from a beam over 4 metres from the ground. The repetition of the plaits implies my ritual and the size of which its importance has taken on for me.

The frame, which repeatedly appeared in the series *Time to Breathe*, also entered into *Only the Memories are New* in a three dimensional form. The frame as an object, and as a symbol has many layers of significance for me. Not only does it refer to my family tree, and to the walls of my Grandmothers' house where photos of her forty-five grandchildren and great grandchildren appear, it also acts spatially. The frame separates and highlights space and draws attention to the boundary – and, in this case the liminal. There is no art hanging in my family home because the walls are covered with too many pictures of the family. The oldest photo is of my grandmother’s parents, and then it stops. Most of the photos are of this generation, and it is hard to compete with wall space amongst such a crowd. My early visual memories are of photos, not artwork, and the appearance of the antique frames in this installation acknowledges this and also the empty family trees that we have no knowledge of.

The objects in the installation were independent of each other, yet they related, both through the paintings, and through their positioning. For example, the work on paper, *Time to Breathe*, an image made up of hanging frames that are flying through the air, was hung directly opposite the installed frames, forming a direct relationship between their empty reflectivity. My purpose was to install a work where the elements spoke to each other, away from the symbols in the actual paintings.
Making the installation was a very personal and intimate journey. I was very protective of the content of the work and felt a need to not discuss the personal significance for me. Whilst I still feel like this about the work, I now know that making it, and reflecting on it in retrospect was an important thing to do – both for my painting practice, and for my individual growth. It has made me realise that my stories are disparate, my access to any concrete knowledge about my ancestry is very limited and my denial of reaching an intimate depth, or ‘owning’ this knowledge feels like sabotage. Identifying with my heritage is a very new reality.
for me and it has only come about through the process of making work. As it is still fresh, and I am not versed in the mechanics of such a subtle, subconscious awareness, the process of revealing this state to anyone else has been very difficult. Writing this paper has been a series of attempts to over analyse my ideas through theory and ideas rather than personal stories. Having had some time, I see the paintings and the installation in retrospect and it is clear that the denial is just as strong an element as the attempt to understand. I now see the process as ongoing and this paper has been the beginning of continued investigations into the liminal experience of making art. The liminal embraces both my unconscious and conscious understanding of time and memory and ancestral stories. Painting is the vehicle that I use to access this liminal space.
Conclusion

Throughout the paper I have researched traditions and cultures with varying philosophies and cosmologies with the intention of highlighting the universality of issues of space and representation. Because of the assertion that the present moment is a culmination of all moments, the present allows for an expansive awareness of the varying factors that have contributed to its formulation. In section two I suggested that when time is viewed as a cross-section, a nondual interpretation of experience is possible, allowing for the seemingly opposing influences to exist concurrently.

Painting is like a theatre of time and space, both in the making and the viewing, because the surface is activated in time. Paint, narrative, abstraction and memories, all sit on an illusory surface collapsing all moments into the present. Like in theatre, literal time has nothing to do with actual time, thus in painting contrasting temporalities sit next to each other demonstrating a kind of cross section of experience. Upon completion, the artist’s role gives over to the audience where they become actors and audience interpreting text.

Connections, relationships and associated thoughts all converge, like the automatic drawing of the Surrealists. The painting becomes an environment in which action is immanent. They are a tableau of experience. A painting is therefore an occasion, a kind of theatre where elements are held together in a frame. Sometimes they read as a set, as though people are going to enter them. The audience becomes the actor, entering the drama, even if for a moment.

In this way, I relate to the sensibility that took hold of New York in the 50’s. The flattened surface of a canvas is an illusion, in which to create further illusion. The process of painting is a kind of ‘act’, as in Harold Rosenberg’s observation, ‘At a certain moment, the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act, rather than as a space in which to reproduce,
re-design, analyse, or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event'.

Philosophers, scientists, and theologians have all speculated about the nature of being and space. It is a description of experience that transcends culture and philosophy. Physicists and neuroscientists have investigated the impulses to understand consciousness to such an extent that it is becoming the most popular field of science today. It is not a new impulse, however – varied cultures across history have attempted to explain the inherent complexities of space and time. The premise of a culture can be found in the way the cosmological story is told, and it frequently relies on a model of spatiality as a visual metaphor to describe the nature of existence.

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to bring into union my own understanding of time and space, through both painting theory and my experience of growing up with dual cultural influences. In the last chapter, The liminal experience of painting I introduced my motivation for exploring how painting can assist in the bridging of dualisms. On a theoretical and personal basis, my paintings grapple with perceptions of time and the unfolding of a space that is neither linear or uniform.

The duality of experience can be united when a distillation of time occurs. When the threshold is reached between the unconscious and conscious mind, the viewer and the maker, the past and the present, a third space arises that transcends dualism. From this in between place, access is permitted to pervading time, where things arise in dependence on one another. Subject and object are no longer separate and instead converge into a space that is nondual. When painting aspires to dwell on the threshold, then access is granted into the space that unites experience, cultures and philosophy.

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86 For example, Heidegger, Bergson, Dogen, Poincaré, amongst others, from east and west, throughout epochs


Bibliography

Andersson, Mamma. "Collect One's Thoughts."
APPENDIX

Course Proposal

In Between

This enquiry began with a desire to understand my own process of painting which I combine with a disciplined meditative practice. I have learnt that conscious planning or decisive action usually results in contrived or dishonest results. I believe that artmaking that is spontaneous has many parallels with meditative practice. Observation of the moment, the free association of ideas and an opportunity of allowing oneself to access realities beyond habitual patterns, in a way that promotes stronger connections with the inner being, are commonalities that I have observed between the act of painting and the process of meditation.

I wish to examine this enquiry further and more thoroughly within the framework of theoretical and academic study as well as through the daily ritual of creating paintings and other works of art.

In the theoretical component of the MVA I aim to explore the parallels and distinctions between the perceiving, creative and the meditative mind. What are the similarities between an artist's focussed concentration, open non-discriminating awareness, and a meditator's state of mind? To recognise the nature of things, without reaction, could be seen as one of the shared qualities of meditators and artists. The buddhist concept of tathata ('suchness', truth, as it is, ultimate unchanging reality of all things) exposes the essence of something by perceiving directly through the senses. This method of perception bypasses the intellect or usual processes of conscious reasoning, and serves to illustrate how buddhist thought has a long tradition of inquiry into the nature of creative perception. Therefore, I will closely examine relevant buddhist texts that directly relate to the themes of perception, creativity and meditation. I intend to pose the same questions relating to creative activity to both ancient and modern buddhist texts.

Poetry, music and dance are all representatives of intangible artforms. For example, to dissect, and describe a haiku defeats the purpose entirely. Rather, questions that investigate the ways our brains transmits the imagination at play and in dreaming can all contribute to a deeper understanding of the self.

How is the production of art relevant today and how is science coping with ideas and insights long held and revered by artists and meditators? To explore these questions, I will also be examining psychological texts and pursuing enquiries in this realm within the psychology and philosophy departments of the Sydney University in order to gain a greater and more complex understanding of current thinking in these areas.

I am interested in the psychological space that artists inhabit when we create and will examine if it is comparable to the meditative space. Is perception an
imaginative activity? I wish to investigate the artist's intangible urge to create and to examine how meditation can enhance the artist's ability to access and rediscover those elements of her innate nature, and by this means summon a similar response within the viewer who looks upon her work.

By investigating the common ground between perception, creativity and meditation, I aim to demonstrate how a cultivation of awareness is central to creative perception; both in the making and the experiencing of works of art. Such deepening of awareness seems to vitalise and infuse the creative encounter with consciousness and can allow an uninhibited pathway to perceiving the world with accuracy, equanimity, and appreciation.

I propose to investigate these questions posed above as they relate to my own creative process by drawing on three broad areas of research; namely, cognitive neuroscience, buddhist scholarship, and the psychology of creativity. In my own practice I look for inspiration and analogy from these diverse traditions of scholarship whilst grounding the research in my own experience of creative practice.

when you try to understand everything, you will understand nothing. It is best to understand yourself and then you will understand everything 87

What is perceptive empathy? What happens in the brain when someone responds to art? Recent neuroscientific research suggest that our brains mimic observed action. For example, when a dancer moves in front of a viewer, the brain fires off the same neurons involved in that action as though the viewer herself was carrying out the movement of the dancer. Similar effects have been proposed in the perception of the emotional states of others. I am interested in examining this theory of 'mirror neurons' and other advances in neuroscience as a way of understanding how audiences react to art of a seemingly abstract nature. For example if our brains somehow mimic a reaction to a person screaming; is a similar reaction taking place when somebody cries in front of a Rothko painting? Is it possible that the work itself communicates something of the brain activity of the artist Rothko at the moment the painting was created?

Research relating to brain functioning (mirror neuron studies), the study of consciousness by Fransisco Varela and studies of the psychology of creativity undertaken by Jung and Winnicott have thus far assisted me in arriving at a deeper understanding of my own patterns of mind when generating creative work. I will explore and extend this research within the theoretical component of the MVA.

The sanskrit word ‘Rasa’ (emotive aesthetics) would also seem to support this idea of a mimic reaction in the beholder of a work of art: the term contains the sense that an artwork itself contains the essence – not the artist. The artist imparts her experiences through the act, say of painting, and there they are left. This concept also parallels that of Francisco Varela’s emphasis on the necessity of imagination in perception. Our experiences and therefore our particular view of the world shapes our perception.

87 Suzuki, Shunryu
Psychology has long supported the idea of encouraging bridges to be kept open between the imagination and everyday existence. In Jungian psychology, dream therapy is an important aspect of understanding the subconscious mind, in addition to creative play. Winnicott examines the human state of being when engaged in a creative act through his research into children at play. He is interested in spontaneity, creativity, and subdued moments that are neither inner or outer to explain the space in which the human being resides when we are engaged in play or creativity.

It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also space between – the transitional space – that creativity can occur. 88

There is a long history of artists who feel they are indebted to a higher source for their creative output. The liminal state an artist may access may be more fully understood through an in depth study of the areas discussed above. E.H Gombrich, Maurice Tuchman, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Roger Lipsey, Rudolph Arnheim and the current editions by Jacqueline Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, and James Elkins have all written extensively on art, perception, the creative imagination and the spiritual in art. Along with these influential writers, there are many artists whose work I will draw upon in this research who support this view of being a ‘vessel’– from contemporary artists such as Antony Gormley, Bill Viola, Magdalena Abakamovicz, James Turrell and Kimsooja to artists from last century including Agnes Martin, John Cage, Eva Hesse, Len Lye and Paul Klee, who writes,

from the root the sap rises up into the artist, flows through him, flows to his eyes. He is the trunk of the tree. Overwhelmed and activated by the force of the current, he conveys his vision into his work.. He does nothing other than gather and pass on what rises from the depths. He neither serves nor transmits. His position is humble. And the beauty at the crown is not his own; it has merely passed through him. 89

My research will engage contemporary research and examine it within the perimeters of the meditator and the artist at work.

The goal of creating meditative contexts for experiencing the arts may challenge art-world conventions and clichés, but such challenges are necessary to keep pace with current artistic explorations of the realms of consciousness.  90

Throughout the two year duration of the MVA, I aim to access a wide variety of literature as outlined above and in the attached bibliography. I will also survey current periodicals and books. I intend to write the bulk of my dissertation within the first year. The second year will involve undertaking follow-up research to consolidate the introduction and conclusion of my thesis. I also intend to attend and possibly present a paper at a Mind/Life conference, (www.mindandlife.org) either in late 2005, or in 2006 in the U.S.A in order to further my investigations and delineate my ideas on the influence of meditation and brain function upon the

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88 Winnicott, D
89 Gordon, R
90 ‘Awake’ forum
work of the artist, including the potential role of contemplative methods for characterizing human experience and consciousness.