

Creative and Meditative Processes:
Reflections on Leaving Things Untitled and Unsigned

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This article features two of my art pieces. One piece depicts a meditator sitting on top of a hill (or a heart), with images of other people scattered in the background (or foreground?). The other piece is a self-portrait, of a 20-something-year-old Erin, casually sitting, while journaling behind white bars (or perhaps they are not bars?).

Personally, I am not a fan of naming my art pieces for several reasons. Firstly, I have found that my pieces come to mean different things to me at different times. The meaning behind an art piece may mean one thing to me when I first create it, and then evolve to mean something different years later as my perspective changes. My process of artistic creation is similar to my process of meditation in this respect; I may start an art piece with one intention, and through the experience of creating, my intentions and views shift, and the art piece ends up being quite different than I initially envisioned. Much like a meditation sitting, when I follow my interest in the creative process, I am often surprised by what I find, and the “finished product” is rarely—if ever—what I have imagined at the outset. So, I find that the experience of naming an art piece is somewhat limiting and often inaccurate—it binds the “official meaning” of my art to a certain time, place, perspective, or self, and I would rather have my art remain more fluid and adaptable.



Secondly, I dislike naming my pieces because I don't like telling the viewer of my art what I think is most important about the art piece. I would much rather the viewer see my art piece, perhaps connect with it in some way, and then decide for themselves what it means, how it might be important, or how it may resonate with their experience. People often see things in my art that I didn't anticipate; hearing their interpretations broadens my own understanding of the piece, giving me a new appreciation for it. Through conversations with others about my art, I often feel as if I find some deeper insight into the themes of the art piece, or discover a new theme altogether. In this way, I think of the artistic process as one of co-creation. The viewer of the art co-creates meaning by viewing and interpreting the work of the artist, and thus, the viewer shares a part in the creative process. Similarly, when I create an art piece, I view this, too, as a co-creation—because others have shaped the views, ideas, concepts, feelings, and metaphors that I build into my art and try to visually convey. In this way, my art does not feel strictly “mine;” it is born of my experience, of which many people (friends, teachers, lovers, mentors) have been a part. I don't want to truncate these processes of co-creation and multiple views by assigning a static title. It is also because of this issue of co-creation, and interconnectedness that I rarely sign my art with a signature.

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Lastly (and relatedly), I don't like to name art pieces, because I intentionally build ambiguity into my pieces, and I don't like to artificially resolve that ambiguity with a definitive title. Most of my art is an attempt to convey a complex set of emotions, wonderings, and ideas. I use art primarily as a way of engaging with and exploring ideas or feelings with which I am struggling. My art is a deliberate "working out." As such, my art often revolves around issues of grief, illness, love, abuse, beauty, hopelessness, illusion, self, and "reality." I use art as a way to explore (and cope) with the tensions and questions in these experiences (How do I recognize

the illusions of my own mind? How and why do I understand beauty the way that I do? Why do feelings of love, betrayal, and disgust coexist in the context of abuse? What does it mean for a loved one to be physically dead? Do I truly view illness as "limiting?").

Not surprisingly, I don't find a lot of answers through my artistic process. I may discover more (or at least different) questions, I may gain a particular insight, or (more predictively), my view around the question might shift a bit, and I might start to relate to it in a different way. Because I never really feel a definite "end" to a piece, and I never really "answer" my questions, it is hard to know where and when to stop creating. When I reach a sense of peace or hesitant, conditional acceptance (rarely a sense of satisfaction or finality), I stop, and the piece is "done." To honor the unfinished, still-confusing, likely unknowable aspects of my wonderings, I build in some ambiguity into the artistic piece itself.

For instance, in the art piece with the image of myself journaling, I am sitting behind blank, white bar-like objects. As I created the piece, I loved the imagery of me writing and creating something (e.g. journaling—an act which I consider to be demonstrative of and requiring a certain amount of freedom) in the context of something which limits freedom. As I created this piece, I was wrestling with what it means to be truly free (while feeling trapped), or what it means to feel as if you are free (while failing to see the bars which entrap you). For years, this piece remained unfinished because I could not decide what should be drawn on the bars. I thought of writing words of self-doubt, thought of drawing various entrapments that I have experienced in my life, considered collaging them with magazine images of societal ideals, or of beautifying the bars to make them something ironically attractive. I considered turning them into prison bars, playground equipment, or a crib—something confining that I would soon outgrow. Each way of drawing the bars conveyed a different meaning or experience—but I didn't end up drawing any of them, because I didn't know which experience was most true. I saw a bit of truth in all of them. And so, ultimately, I left the bars blank, and called the piece "finished." If I had to choose a name for this piece today (knowing that the name might change tomorrow), I might call it "Sitting with the Aggregates."

If I had to choose a name for the second piece (the one featuring the meditator on a hill with many colorful figures behind them), I might call it, "The stillness of meditation." I would call it this humorously, ironically, because I have never experienced meditation to be truly still or unmoving. My most calm sittings usually have something else go on within them at some point. Within this piece, I was toying with the humorous juxtaposition of how still my body can be when

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I sit to meditate (and how calm and serene I may look to an observer), while inside my mind, there is no telling what I am experiencing. I could be experiencing a calm, samadhi state. I could be following my breath or very focused on the sensation of my glutes touching my cushion. I could be vigorously engaged in organizing the background section of my literature review for my dissertation. I could be reliving an old, painful memory, imagining a future self, or experiencing something that seems more like a vision or a dream. I could be rehearsing a difficult conversation or problem-solving something repeatedly, because each iteration seems to be forgotten as soon as it occurs. I could have lost sight and sense of my “self” all together and be experiencing some kind of expansive, connected sensation, wherein I am tumbling or twirling ever so slightly in a spacious place. Or, I could be practicing metta, wrestling with some concept of the dharma, or stumbling upon dharma without even knowing it. I frequently have this momentary wondering when I am on retreat, and I very slightly open my eyes a tiny slit to see some of my fellow meditators sitting serenely around me, still, quiet, and unmoving. I see their eyes closed, their breathing even, their bodies very, very still—and I wonder to myself what they are experiencing, because the possibilities are endless, and I also suspect that there is far less “stillness” occurring on retreat at that moment, than there might appear to be.

As I have engaged in writing this reflection, I am struck by the many similarities that exist between the creative processes I engage in while drawing, and the creative processes I engage in while meditating. It is no coincidence that you could re-read this reflection and interchange the words “art” and “meditation” frequently throughout it. The values that I have cultivated in my meditation practice are reflected in my art (e.g. following my interest and curiosity, appreciation for complexity, gentle engagement, the value in the unknown), though they did not originate in my meditation practice. Similarly, the values I express in my art are also evident in my meditation and in my teaching of meditation. Just as I do not like to name pieces and give them an “official title,” I hesitate to delve too much into interpretation of another person’s meditation experience. Rather, I seek to probe and understand what meaning they have made of it. Similarly, just as I view my art and the viewer’s interpretation of my art as an act of artistic co-creation, so too, have I come to understand my own taking up of the dharma through meditative processes. For instance, I may hear a dharma talk from a teacher, sit with those concepts, reflect on them during meditation, and then report my meditation to a teacher, who then inquires about my meditative experiences, and potentially alludes back to the same (or different) dharmic concepts. When (and if) I then come to a new understanding or insight of the dharma as a result of those experiences, this view has in effect, been co-created, or perhaps more accurately, dependently arisen from those experiences, through the careful cultivation of a teacher’s care and wisdom, the complex conditions of my inner world, and my own taking up of the concepts.

As I reflect back on both my artistic and meditative processes, it is this view of dependent arising that is perhaps most precious to me in my current understanding of life and the dharma. For in this concept of dependent arising, I view myself as inextricably, irreducibly, and compassionately connected to others—neither my art nor my insights arise in isolation. Others give me a generous gift by viewing my art, relating to it, interpreting it in some way, and sharing it back with me. Similarly, my Kalyanamitra (my dharma friends) give me a great gift when they share their own experiences in meditation, inquire about my meditative experiences, or share their views of the dharma with me. Through this mutual exchange of ideas, insights, interpretations, feelings, and experiences, we each build each other up and help one another along our spiritual paths. It is an honor to share this path with so many generous dharma friends.