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The Enigma of the Everyday

Christina Murdoch Mills

The University of Montana

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The Enigma of the Everyday

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B.A. in Third World Literature, University of California, San Diego, 1991

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
Painting and drawing

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Abstract

The articulation of happenstance and of the enigmatic nature of everyday things is one way concepts in my work have been filtered through and informed by memory, emotion and the experience of life that is both lived as a process and inhabited as a space. My current work attempts to embody as much resolved chaos as possible while emphasizing a quality of paradox.

During my graduate studies in studio art, I have worked in a variety of fine art media including, graphite pencil and ink drawing, collage, watercolor, acrylic, egg tempera, oil paint, digital photographic prints, aluminum and iron casting, ceramics and found object assemblage. Working through these different processes refined my aesthetic sense, reinforcing my affinity for an organic, spontaneous and referential art-making process that allows me to approach painting from a number of conceptual locations simultaneously. The contradictions and accidents that occur in the process of making art echo contradictions and accidents that occur in other areas of life. Such things are both inevitable and unavoidable, unfolding much the same way paintings are ultimately resolved.

My thesis work, entitled Bliss, is a series of paintings derived from photographs that reference the ordered symmetry of Buddhist mandalas. As representations of bliss states these works allude to the tenuous, shifting nature of experience. In this work, pieces of things coalesce to make a whole; entities threaten to fall apart or lose their center, loose associations of thoughts and feelings circulate. Just as mandalas become meditations on truth and transcendance, this work aims to induce bliss states in the viewer.
My thesis exhibition, scheduled for May 4-16, 2009, will be in the UC Gallery at the University of Montana. It will include four 84” x 84” oil paintings on linen, as well as other related works, from the painting series entitled, Bliss.

**Bliss: a series of paintings derived from photographs**

I am interested in abstraction that is rooted in specific aspects of life such as sacrifice and surrender, the relationship between human beings and our mortality and the ordinary yet engrossing work of caring for my children. The repetitive, daily tasks like folding laundry, preparing meals and bathing, building relationships, though ordinary, if consistent, are miraculous over the span of lifetimes. As forms of expression, everyday things expand out and are reflected back by natural forces like the weather, time, the perpetual growth and senescence. These things are commonplace and yet extraordinary; they inform the content, the making and the meaning of my work.

We engage in life with the knowledge that everything we value will inevitably end. It’s so hard to accept! Painting is a sensuous medium for exploring these concepts. Touch, itself, is embedded in the material of paint and relates to bodily experience that can be paradoxically both lovely and devastating. In my work, I’ve relied on the analytic eye of the camera to direct and focus the messy act of applying paint to canvas. This process has allowed me to isolate a tenuous instant of beauty that originates from the unlikely, common source.

The Bliss Series evolved out of my search for a link between the subject of my children, their tremendous presence in my life and the depth of feeling I have for them and the ideas I have been trying to resolve through painting since I began making art.
fifteen years ago. Having children has been both a responsibility and a joy. The ceaseless work of supporting and nurturing them has become, for me, the essence of what is meaningful in my life; of meaning itself. As I worked through the evolution of symbolic abstraction, drawing on ideas of bridges, spheres, points of intersection, penetration, marks, specificity and pieces that contribute to a whole, it was clear that I needed a direct link, a personal link, to the subject of humanity. I believe that my experience is fundamentally similar to that of so many other people.

There is a clear link between my everyday life with my children and what I experience as the heartbreaking tenuousness of how we experience works of art. The events of the recent past, principally the untimely death of my father, the unravelling of my marriage and my subsequent efforts to feel as though I was doing more than merely keeping my head above water, lead me to have my artwork lean more toward a positive outlook rather than a negative one. I had been reading Buddhist philosophy that emphasizes the idea of mindfulness in which individuals adapt to various situations by adjusting how their consciousness responds. Accordingly, deliberate choices can be made that determine the ways we are affected by what we experience.

Joseph Goldstein described the nature of consciousness in The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation. He wrote,

    Consciousness itself is arising and passing away in each instant. There is not one mind that is observing all phenomena; at every instant “mind” is created and destroyed. The consciousness that hears is different from the consciousness hat sees, or tastes, or smells, or touches, or thinks. There are different mind-moments, arising and passing away every instant. When the mind becomes quiet, it is possible to observe this flow of consciousness Insight into the flow and impermanence of the knowing faculty, understanding that there is not one knower, one observer, but rather an ongoing process at every moment, exposes the illusion of a permanent self (p. 34).
Eastern philosophy and regular yoga practice focused my attention on the physical form as the means for experiencing the world. This extended to the physical form of the painting as a vehicle for ideas. Everyday experiences of change, loss, beauty and attachment result in a struggle to create meaning either in spite of, or because of, all these things. Such things might be described through abstract paintings that could be beautiful, sensual, organic and direct, and might approach the sublime. Photographs I made from the inside of a toy kaleidoscope (fig. 1 & 2), reference the ordered symmetry of mandalas while providing a tangible link to these aspects of my everyday life.

1 Tina Mills, *pale yellow*, digital photograph, 4” x 4”, 2008
I’ve found that the daily care of children, as with other common chores, can be experienced as being profound despite its banal nature. A deep sense of satisfaction, of connection, can develop as relationships deepen to congruently expression our inner worlds. In this sense, passing moments have the potential to become sublime through the mysterious transformation from plain to beautiful. The way we can experience the ordinary as being extraordinary is one of life’s great joys. The photos I made of the inside of my children’s toy kaleidoscope are conceptually linked to this paradoxical shift. They are also linked to associations of an interior, private (individual) space, a literal “looking

2 Tina Mills, blue hue, digital photography, 4” x 4”, 2008
within”. The cheap toy itself is a funky, even silly premise for art; small bits of colored plastic with light shining through are lovely, nonetheless. The kaleidoscope photos provide an allegory for the meeting of the resolutely ordinary and the surprisingly extraordinary things I want my work to be about; about my experience as a mother and how that expands out to larger, more universal concepts. The *Bliss* paintings (fig. 3, 4) are an extension of that allegory.

The 84” x 84” oil painting on linen entitled *dark light* was painted in the winter of 2009 (fig. 3). Derived from a photograph, as are all of the paintings in the series, it evokes and abstracts the muted palette of winter; the pale sky, dark silhouettes of bare branches, the purity of fallen snow. In this painting, the lighter forms compete for

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3 Tina Mills, *dark light*, oil on linen, 7’ x 7’, 2009
dominance as the darkness in the middle ground and background threaten to engulf the light. The velvety surface of *dark light* has a tactility that opposes the cool and aloof palette. The hazy swirl of pale color cannot ultimately be resolved between the light and the dark forces at work.

In the previous spring of 2008 I began the *Bliss Series* with the tempera on gessoed panel painting, *untitled* (fig. 4). The tempera medium on board lent itself to a more specific rendering of the image with a similarly reduced palette. In this case, I was interested in projecting a delicate, naturally undulating line while describing colors that

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4 Tina Mills, *untitled*, egg tempera on board, 24” x 24”, 2008
had heft and weight. Again, these opposing qualities had the potential to activate the
work with a liveliness that could go beyond the limitations of the medium. The surface’s
satiny quality is more reminiscent of drawing on paper, rather than painting.

In these ways, the allegory presented in the *Bliss* paintings links the purely visual
experience of looking and the tactile emersion in physicality of the experience of the
everyday. Daily challenges must be continually overcome. They include, for me, the
process of putting paint on canvas in an attempt to render paintings that evoke bliss states
by representing a complex beauty. Infused in this process is the hope that life can be
suffused with enough goodness that it is worth the effort it requires.⁵

When I first began to work with the kaleidoscope photos I made drawings on
tracing paper as a way of exploring variations of the idea of whether a drawing or
painting could look as “good” as a photo (fig. 8 & 9). In this process, I made large prints
on Japanese mulberry paper of the digital photographs in both black and white and color.
I also made photocopy transfers of the images and then painted directly on the
photocopies and prints (fig. 11).

In isolating and defining the distinct characteristics of each medium, I sought to
balance symmetry and movement via the element of touch. I linked the tactility of the
painting process to life’s tactile qualities expressed in daily routines of interaction. The
tactility in this series, specifically, forms the symbolic underpinning of my formally non-
objective work (fig. 10).

The concept of bliss is systematically explored in Buddhist philosophy as being

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*⁵ The evolution of my intention for this work is linked to the study of Tonglen, a
Buddhist meditation practice that utilizes the mantra, *om mane padme hung*. Loosely
translated, this mantra means, May all beings be happy.*
comprised of three jhanas, or levels, of attainment as one develops toward the state of enlightenment. In the first jhana, bliss states are defined in all their subtle manifestations; happiness, pleasure, pleasantness associated with contact between the mind and the tactile sensation sphere, delight, rejoicing, joy, shining mirth, bliss, elation, satisfaction and mental uplift. We touch every day on these mind states knowing full well that there is no fixed point; that everything is constantly in motion or flux. With the Bliss series, my aim is to envelop viewers in the awareness of a shining moment of radiance that exists on the cusp this inevitable shift.

Another source of writing that addresses concepts relevant to the evolution of content in the Bliss Series include Coleman Barks’ writings on the 13th century Sufi poet, Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-73). Rumi wrote about the ecstatic unfolding of everyday life, an idea that is central to my current work. In The Soul of Rumi, A New Collection of Ecstatic Poems, Coleman Barks describes the paired Arabic terms of fana and baqua, concepts present in Rumi’s work, that are described as the play and intersection of the human with the divine. The concepts of fana and baqua also describe what I try to manifest in Bliss. Barks describes fana as the streaming of consciousness that moves from the human out into mystery as,

. . . the annihilation, the orgasmic expansion, the dissolving swoon into the all. The gnat becomes buttermilk; a chickpea disappears into the flavor of the soup; a dead mule decays into salt flat; the infant turns to the breast. (Barks, 8)

Baqua, by contrast, is the “living within.” It is life lived with clarity and reason, courtesy and craftsmanship. Baqua, a return from expansion into each unique individuation, into pain and effort, confusion and dark comedy; it is the end of a frayed

rope and the reality of absence. The beautiful work of art can both celebrate and alleviate this thought.

7 Tina Mills, one blue pencil, no-blot pencil on tracing paper, 2008
Tina Mills, *two blue pencil*, no-blot pencil on tracing paper, 2008
9 Tina Mills, *enigma*, oil on canvas, 48” x 48”, 2008
The thing that most interests me in the kaleidoscope images is the accumulated shapes in relational space and the light shining through ambiguous depths that projects an ecstatic state of sensuality or joy; the expression of the tenuous feeling of wonder and its precariousness.

The content of the work emerges from specific everyday events. One moment of clarity related to this idea comes from the awareness of how sublime beauty coexists with cruelty and grief. There will always be things in life that we must come to terms with despite what we want; things that can’t be made to feel right. While we exist enveloped in the world’s splendor, it is often a cold comfort in the face of such things.

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10 Tina Mills, *one study*, hand-tinted Xerox transfer print, 4” x 4”, 2008
Background

This photo (fig. 11) defines a moment in my life that is a pivot point for thoughts on what lead up to it: my parents’ divorce when I was two-years-old and our subsequent family experience. The events in the lives of my parents and those parallel events that followed in my own life are both predictable and profound. Their unusual custody arrangement lead to my brother and I moving daily between their houses. The result of years of perpetually shifting location lead me to a state of relative calm in states of flux. I came to feel most comfortable when unsure of what to expect. I believe this also lead me to an attraction to unknowable things, to the fringes of things; to mystery.

As an undergraduate at the University of California, San Diego I studied non-western literature. I read works in translation by Chinua Achebe, Carlos Fuentes and Aimée Cesaire. Literature opened up worlds that were otherwise unfamiliar to me.

11 Photograph of Tina and Alex Murdoch, Sacramento, California 1978.
Through my studies, I was exposed to dramatically complex and foreign ways of being in the world, new frameworks to explore and ways to make sense of things. My reading progressed from novels to poetry as I became interested in more abstract, or open, literary forms. I appreciated poetry’s ability to express subtle, complex and wrenching emotion; its ability to enliven simple words with energetic flow. It followed that a few years later, when I became interested in visual art, I was drawn to abstraction.

My early paintings were geometric and simple; color studies in lightly shifting forms that resolved in regular, predictable solidity. Quiet and cheerful, this early work reflects what I can only describe as hope and innocence. I didn’t really know anything about art. I worked for a long time on paintings that circled this basic Taoist theme — in a world of multiplicity there exists still one essential thing of which we all, and everything, are a part. I showed this over and over in work that was built of pieces interlocking form that held together or massed to form a single whole. I used the process of painting as a means to step outside of daily concerns, floating watercolor on paper. The work I made for the first five years sat squarely within the modernist tradition of abstraction. I tried to infuse it with feeling. I tried to give the work so to speak a sense of interiority.

I still use materials in a way that reflects a sense of openness, responsiveness, vulnerability and intimacy. I made work, then, on tissue paper. The watercolor medium would pool and pucker the paper as it dried. The pooled pigment would lead to sedimentary areas of color. This process called to mind more external, rather than personal, psychological phenomena (like coping with conflict and its resolution into some temporary state of peace). What also came to mind then were geologic phenomena such
as erosion of rock via water. The persistent flow of rivers and the rocks that transform incrementally over long expanses of time. Or the insistent yet sometimes advancing, sometimes retreating, movement of oceans, in this work I felt I was evoking, and thus creating, oceans of time.

I entered graduate school with an interest in mark making as a reflection of the concepts of everyday joy and suffering, of gradual change, or the insistence of natural laws, of the onslaught of time, of the accumulation of experiences and subsequent eroding of rough spots and of gradual adaptation akin to erosion of rocks by the river’s relentless flow. My thoughts about things were grounded in concrete visual forms; the emphasis was as much on how the work was made as it was on what was made. A series of drawings on board emphasized the dual effects of accumulation and erosion. This was a parallel to events in my personal life; to the accumulation of memory and the dire need to make sense of personal experiences that, though commonplace, were so difficult to understand. I located points or zones of truth that could be applied to the larger picture, to the natural world as it is beyond human concerns and to the smaller picture, what moves people in our daily lives.

During this time, I came across some old encyclopedias and was interested in them as out-of-date repositories of knowledge. The encyclopedia illustrations provided a means of exploring “objective” material that might highlight humanity as we are in all our various forms, locations, and epochs. The recognizable subject matter of photographs, compared with my earlier interest in abstraction, might provide points of reference for viewers, something that had been absent in my work until this point. The kaleidoscope photos that lead to Bliss evolved from what I uncovered by working with
the photos contained in the encyclopedias. I first made acrylic medium transfers and hand-tinted Xerox copies of the printed originals. I, then, drew the photos and used tracing paper to reproduce the images by hand with graphite pencil. I found that things I had overlooked in the originals would emerge, to my surprise.

One particularly important instance of this was of women sorting coal in Formosa (fig. 12). The elegant composition attracted me to the small black and white image. In it, three small, light figures are centered in a field of darkness. The figures crouch at their work, their heads covered with the pointed disks of their straw hats. In the background, tropical palms and simply constructed wooden buildings provide a degree of context alluding to village life, a temperate zone. What I didn’t see until I drew the image was the small child on the back of one of the figures. I began to wonder if I had unconsciously seen it before or if I had consciously seen it but had suppressed that sight. That small figure shifted the significance of the image.

12 Tina Mills, *sorting coal*, Xerox transfer, 2” x 31/2”, 2007
The Formosan women then brought to mind something that was said to me shortly after the birth of my daughter, Ava. She was a couple of weeks old at the time. I recall speaking to her father about my surprise that caring for her was so constant and such hard work. He commented that I was lucky I didn’t have to work in a rice field with her on my back. Through the image, a link was created between my memory and a more universal experience of life. The encyclopedia image evolved into a relic of specific indifference to my personal struggles as well as evidence of the universal truth of hard work and sacrifice.

I took most of the images from the encyclopedia marked F. This made sense for a couple of reasons. First of all, I was considering a trip to Finland to visit the family of a friend and wanted to read about it. Also, F is just a funny letter. Also in this volume were references to the terms fireweed, fruit fly, Formosa, football, fungus and fairy ring. It is a surprising, incongruous list of terms.

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13 Tina Mills, *fairy ring*, acrylic and photocopy transfer on paper, 2” x 3”, 2007
The images in the encyclopedia, circa 1960, seem oddly out of time even as they are lodged in time. They can neither be free of their time, the time of their making, nor of their time, a time that was long past (figure 13). While some of the information in the old encyclopedias is still relevant, much of it is outdated. This fact highlights how knowledge is mutable, ultimately, relative by nature. It’s somehow affirming to come across such concrete evidence of that fact. In working with randomly acquired source material like appropriated photographs from encyclopedias, I could embrace the idea of synchronicity or what Carl Jung referred to when he spoke of the unconscious mind in *Man and His Symbols*. While symbols have personal significance, just as images in dreams do, they can also relate to a universal instinctive sense of things. I sought to locate images and render forms that might contain that sort of significance.

I looked for an image to work with that would allow me to sift through thoughts I was having on the subject of natural forces, things that appear chaotic but ultimately have an inherent order as living things always do. The image of fireweed became source material for a series of drawings entitled “brambles”. Using tracing paper and graphite pencils I completed a series of 50 plus 4” x 4” drawings. This series reflects the changeable nature of everyday existence. Of course it was impossible to make two identical drawings. What emerged was evidence of sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic variation. Furthermore, the drawings gained the feeling of touch when they were translated from photography to pencil and paper. What they lost in accuracy, in specificity, they more than gained back in individuality or feel.
By working in series, I isolate the drawn elements in order to more clearly discern what seemed successful and what was visually unsatisfying. This helped me more clearly define the aesthetic of my work. What became most important in the drawings was the sense that they were portraying something honest and immediate (fig. 14). An example of this is a group of work, entitled Mandalay after a favorite Rudyard Kipling poem my dad used to read to me when I was a child. The work was based on the idea of building mandalas, abstract designs with clear centers radiating outward, each point of color related to another distant point in opposition and balance. I had made the Mandalay series during the year my father was dying of cancer.

These works were a quiet retreat for me from the jumble of emotion during that time. They also allowed me to explore memory and begin to knit my past together with everyday reality. I often felt overwhelmed. There was a lot of grief in the work as I searched, with dread, to accept the inevitable end to my father’s life. By contrast, the

14 Tina Mills, fireweed, graphite on tracing paper, 4” x 4”, 2007
Bliss Series is larger in scale and more complex. Its large scale intends to envelop the viewer in the process of looking while simultaneously projecting the presence of the work outward.

My work maps ways for contradictions to exist without canceling each other out. The mandala form in the Mandalay painting is a shifting, radiating form. It moves toward equilibrium, toward beauty. The act of painting continues to be both an escape and a reckoning. Toward the end of that year, the bright colors in the paintings were like a beacon. They provided me with a means to return to the personal space of reflection. The calming effect of painting those works also prepared me to be as present as possible with my father as he died.

Influences

Other artists who have worked similarly, invoking an interior space and with a private philosophy in mind, are Agnes Martin (1912-2004) and Martin Ramirez (1895-1963) who approached art making from relatively egoless places. Agnes Marin worked in a small studio in Taos, New Mexico for the last few decades of her life as she attained international acclaim. Her work from the 1960’s is particularly lovely (fig. 15). It embodies the qualities I’ve come to look for in my own work, humility and confidence with an internal sense of order. In a 1996 interview for Art in America Martin said, “I think that our minds respond to things beyond this world. Take beauty: it's a very mysterious thing, isn't it? I think it's a response in our minds to perfection. It's too bad, people not realizing that their minds expand beyond this world.” From Agnes Marin I learned that artwork could provide a portal to ways of thinking for both the artist and the
viewer. After I encountered her ideas and her work, I tried to keep that in mind as my primary purpose in making art. Similarly, I valued working in series, like Martin, in order to develop ideas with depth.

Unlike Martin, Ramirez worked totally apart from the art establishment. Ramirez was institutionalized in California mental hospitals for most of his life. He used a paste of potatoes and saliva to assemble large sheets of paper for drawing. Materials such as brown paper bags, scraps of examining-table paper and book pages were glued together in this manner (fig. 17). The drawings lack guile and provide a glimpse into the mind of

15  Agnes Martin, white flower, acrylic on canvas, 71” x 72”, 1962
Ramirez, the individual. They also provided an outlet for someone who had few options for self-expression, for normalcy.

These works by Martin and Ramirez, particularly their tactility and delicate simplicity, influence my personal aesthetic. The way I’ve come to view it is that they made artwork that came from a need for it. Because it originated mostly outside of the market drives of the art world, works like theirs strikes me as authentic and direct. It seems like an egoless art that originates from and arrives at a deep interior space. In the case of Ramirez, the art object can be seen as imbued with a personal, even fetishistic significance; with the power of ritual objects. In his work, one gets the sense of an exorcism of the idea in the process of making it, and of a truth that simultaneously imbedded in the works resulting depths.

The influence of these two artists is evident in artwork I’ve made over the years from my process of working, to material choices, to my general preference for a limited palette (fig. 17).

Conclusion

The *Bliss Series*, alludes to that Sufi idea of the intersection of the human with the divine. The kaleidoscope imagery typifies the shifting nature of experience and its tenuous beauty. It reflects an effort to resolve experiences through the process of forming allegorical abstraction. In it is a sensitivity to materials, an interest in non-objective subject matter as an expression of intensely subjective experiences and a focus on the process of making art as a means of resolving and reframing those personal experiences; in effect, is a way of transforming my understanding of things. The *Bliss* paintings engage viewers by evoking an aesthetic response that can be mysteriously linked to their unseen source.
Appendix

3.15.08
I did some yard work yesterday evening as the kids were dropped off by their dad. It looked like rain. There’s a lot of work out there for one person. They painted after dinner, putting layers of color onto small plaster figurines—dragon, horse, dog—then baths and backrubs for everyone. I took some vitamins and drank water. The dog wanted a walk. No time for that. E. called in a dark mood. Said, “I don’t like people.” I cracked jokes. She just felt sad. Woke this morning to dim light, everything wet and glistening. Lying in that dim stillness, thinking. Thought about Sacramento. That explains it. I often cry before it rains.

11.13.08
The rain is falling in the hour before dusk. The gray sky meets the wet pavement in mutual humility. The circle of light cast upon this family table provides just enough light for the pen meeting paper. There is a simple satisfaction in forming marks on paper with wet ink. It first hovers on the surface, then sinks in and dries as new words are formed; threads of thought pulled from memory, the effort to create a link between these thoughts and understanding how it all fits together.

11.14.08
Last night I added another layer of paint to the large linen canvas. It’s coming along. I’m starting to put in highlights, finalizing relationships between forms and starting to glaze. It’s satisfying to see even the slightest amount of depth begin in the thing. It’s as if the painting can begin to breath. The toughest thing is working through the early stages when I don’t have much, just the hope that the piece will be resolved eventually. It takes courage to face the unformed, unresolved painting and continue to work with it until it’s where I want it. It’s a process of returning again and again with no guarantee of success.
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