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BEYOND THE SURFACE: THE VOID WITHIN
REFLECTIONS ON AWARENESS, SELF, AND NOTHINGNESS

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Thesis Abstract – Idaho State University (2016)

The motivation for my art is the awe and fascination I feel when I explore the mystery which surrounds the subject of consciousness and the undeniable fact of the ever present awareness which we know as our self. The nature of self is an ancient and controversial subject, eluding consensus. Many past and current philosophical and intellectual sources see the awareness as supremely important and a topic that defies definition or explanation. Many of these perspectives offer a paradoxical picture of awareness: first, as a kind of unknowable emptiness or void, an undefinable and ungraspable background of consciousness through and upon which the life experience unfolds, and second and simultaneously, as an infinite capacity or potential, a fullness of unformed possibility from which life emerges in the present moment. The creative work of my thesis project has grown from an artistic exploration of these conceptual underpinnings.

Chapter 1

Project Subject and Personal Context

The final answer is this: nothing is.

-- Nisargadatta

My art is the expression of my curiosity about the ungraspable “self” that lies at the center of each of our complex and chaotic worlds. It grows from impressions and reflections on interrelated ideas that compel me to create forms and images and a fascination for questions that the rational mind cannot completely and finally answer. Concepts such as the void, the self, the sublime, and the unconscious find expression in my abstract and representational two and three dimensional work. My artwork attempts to explore these topics, to the extent that I can grasp them – always without arriving at final conclusions, knowing that in the end I must settle for uncertainty and more questions.

Curiosity about the unknown began during my infancy. Among my oldest recollections are specific memories of repeatedly experiencing the same strange and intense feeling. The unique quality of these episodes has never faded and has remained vivid ever since. I have struggled to categorize, explain or identify it in words: deep silence – a strange and absolute emptiness permeated with utter stillness, and the obliteration of my normal identity; a unity of complete acceptance through an odd detachment. As I grew out of early childhood this unusual experience occurred less often, and my connection with it seemed to become more obscure. I have never really understood it, but I have always been drawn back to that enigmatic state.

The subject of my thesis project is the inscrutable awareness that constitutes our “self.” I am interested particularly in the relationship between what I see as our surface identity, created by and imbedded within the symbolic and artificial constructs of personality, language and culture, and something which I believe lies deeper within the human being, outside the realm of the senses and rational mind, obscure but hidden in plain sight: the primal and innate awareness – vacuous, silent, intangible and invisible – the noumenon, the void.

We know the *out there* – the objective “real world”, first and only through the subjective *in here* – the awareness. If I look back, towards my beginning, to the edge of my memories, before the first stimuli or impression came, there was only my being, and what it was cannot really be known or described through words. In my awareness there was only myself and nothing else. There was only my empty self as nothing. There was *void*. Before the intricate web of language and reason was built within and created “me”, before the complex story of who, what, when, where and why, before there were words to explain or a mind to know, there was only my undivided self – beingness. An undifferentiated unity; words and concepts cannot reach that state because it preceded them.

Chapter 2

Theoretical and Historical Background

According to Kant the “thing-in-itself” cannot be known.¹ We can only know our perception – perception conditioned by the mind – a lens constructed by language and culture. Inferred is a category of reality that we cannot access through language, beyond the mind and its perception.

In aesthetic terms, the concept of the void usually connotes emptiness or nothingness. However, in other times and places it has been seen in a different way. In the roughly modern/postmodern era in the West, in such thinkers as Nietzsche or Sartre, philosophical thought on the void has tended towards an intellectually derived nihilistic vision, fatalistic and hopeless, where all life is seen as ultimate futility against the inevitability of death, extinguished finally into nothingness. Other views of the void, voiced particularly, but not exclusively, from Eastern sources like Zen Buddhism, Advaita, and Taoism, imply together and consistent with utter vacuity, an inherent awareness and a paradoxical fullness arising from a latent potentiality: the void as simultaneously the abyss of destruction and the womb of creation.

In these traditions the self, the impersonal awareness, *is* the void; it is a strange and unique kind of nothingness. Nisargadatta, the advaita master, likened it to a blank cinema screen, independent of and unaffected by, the flickering images of the stories told

1. Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2003), accessed August 5, 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4280/4280-h/4280-h.htm>.

upon its empty surface.² Here, as in other sources, this core self is recognized as being totally different than everything else. To Nisargadatta, the background awareness was the real and the flickering images upon it an illusion of a nonexistent individual self. According to this perspective the awareness is not a “thing” that can be known like the rest of the vast universe, but a strange absence of all things, including the very presence of a personal self. It is in a strange category of its own, the territory of the absolute, referenceable only through negative descriptors.

In this context the awareness is seen as the understander of understanding, the seer of seeing, and the agent of any knowing, which cannot itself be known; a negative concept, it refers to what is hidden, deep and dark, unknown and unknowable – indefinable and beyond rational understanding. In a bizarre way it refers to an empty nothingness that somehow is. It is like a black hole at the center of our being, a silent eye of the hurricane that devours all experience, itself unchanged. It is the irrational, the unconstructed, and the sub-conscious. It is at once mesmerizing and terrifying, the essence of the sublime. It is this more complex and enigmatic view of the void that interests me and harkens back to my own distant experience.

Heidegger saw that, “human being is not a thing but a peculiar kind of nothingness: the temporal-linguistic clearing, the opening, the absencing in which things can present themselves.”³ In this sense this strange invisible “no-thing” (for lack of a better term) called “self” sits at the center of our world, existing from the beginning

2. Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That*, ed. Maurice Frydman (Bombay: Chetana Pvt. Ltd., 1973), 267.

3. Michael Zimmerman, “Heidegger, Buddhism and Deep Ecology,” In *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 242-243.

within us: mute, vacant and undivided consciousness – an incomprehensibility – a kind of intrinsic natural state that never changes and never leaves. It remains, unheard and unseen during every second of our lives, in the background, and somehow, at the center of our very self – a blankness before language, culture and self-definition arrived.

In this context, the infant becomes a “person,” through the process that occurs as this direct awareness is covered and hidden, crowded out of the attention by a learned and accumulated knowledge based on symbols and language, that is gradually internalized as the foundation of the individual identity. In very young children we see the concurrent appearance of language and the self-concept, both introduced from the outside. These develop into an internal dialog, a kind of repeating mental loop of conversation with ourselves, that constantly reinforces the abstractions and definitions given to us through language, from our parents, and our cultures – about who, what and where we are.

Chapter 3

Conceptual, Formal and Methodological Realization

In my thesis project I explore two very different aspects of consciousness and what I see as the interface between them: awareness-void – the impersonal but intimate nothingness of awareness on the one hand, and the distanced mental world of the conceptual and abstracted on the other – of ideas, of things and their representation – isolated, separated, symbolized – the limited and defined which are knowable to the rational mind. Seeing the nature of consciousness in this dual way, I sense between the two a boundary zone where many consequential dualities merge, transition and help define each other, like Hegelian synthesis: emptiness and fullness, the seen and the invisible, the actual and the abstracted, silence and language, meaning and the incomprehensible, individuality and the whole, the body and consciousness, life and death.

My perception of these seminal dualities is consequential to my artwork because I perceive in this liminal zone of transition a critical symbol of both separation and interconnectedness within the self, which serves as an anchor and focal point in my artwork, providing a conceptual threshold, or departure point from the world of the known into the impossible realm of nothingness – intellectually and visually locating the void.

Two visual elements in particular define this threshold in my artwork: the first is the concrete and plastic material manifestation of three dimensional *surface form* in my

sculptural work. This essential aspect of my three dimensional compositions refers to actual material boundaries themselves. The second, less easily referenced, yet key visual element points to the unseen or absent within and beyond that surface – actual three dimensional *space* in my sculptures.

Within this conceptual/ compositional frame, surface form acts as a border between mass and space. This border corresponds more closely to that aspect of consciousness that relates to the defined, and expressed – the conceptual, mental, and physical world of “things” – the concepts and objects of the mind – and the epistemological means by which we “know” or intellectually process the physical and mental world: signs and symbols, language and meaning.

Surface form is tangible; it has a perceivable presence, dimensions and qualities – displaying simultaneous visual, tactile, psychological or emotional characteristics, like symbolic marks, or images, texture, color, value, luminosity, etc. It can be touched, seen, experienced – *known*. In many of my sculptures the surface represents a salient quality of the perceivable: a form-defining membrane, wall, or shell – a necessity of all “things” – to be known.

In my work I contemplate the conceptual connection between surface form and surface identity, as personal identity or the individual self. In this context, I experiment with the idea of individual personality as a mental amalgamation created, defined, and maintained through the inherent duality of language and acculturation; a self of words, definitions, and narrative built on symbolic representation: the sign and signified.

Space, in contrast, represents a more nebulous quality: unconfined, undefined, limitless, and borderless. It infers what is empty and infinite. It is more ethereal, ubiquitous and intangible, and yet directly experienced and not abstractly known. In my work I examine the idea of awareness as void through space within and beyond the form.

The artworks I have created through this project function to reference, signify, and investigate the self. Here the conceptual thesis dialectic I am proposing concerning separation and interconnectivity between two different aspects of consciousness occurs principally at the defining walls or membrane, that is, the interplay of the surface form and space. Here, form and space express a mutually defining but autonomous relationship based on dialectic synthesis.

Again, I allude to the powerful yet allusive concept of the void – the noumenon (in Kantian philosophy a thing as it is in itself, as distinct from a thing as it is knowable by the senses through phenomenal attributes), by accentuating space directly through the depiction of hollow emptiness in concrete forms. Additionally, I have begun to explore the value and effectiveness of bringing into my sculptural lexicon the long held and valuable tool of classic chiaroscuro through the use of real light sources upon or emanating from within the form, and contrasting shadows created from various degrees of receding darkness inside or exterior to the surface of the form. Within the empty, glowing or darkened spaces of my sculptures I attempt to infer a subtle reference to what is within and beyond the form, the intimation of the nothingness that somehow is, the void perceptually activated.

Two interrelated motifs utilized to explore the self are apparent within the project. The first consists of a continuation of experimentation in expressions of the self through the cube form. The second involves a new visual theme which references the Earth through depictions of cracked or penetrated rock surfaces.

In the cube forms the hollow shells give expression to both aspects of the self. The perforated surface forms carry and transmit the abstractions of the known upon their surfaces as a boundary between actuality and nothingness. The surfaces, like the human mind, hold and transmit symbolic information, meaning and presence. The empty interiors on the other hand, are more important than the visible surfaces. They signal what is uncommunicable, profound and mysterious: the unseen and inexpressible within us.

Several of my project pieces evolved spontaneously and unexpectedly from depictions of the irregular surface forms of rock. Like the cubes these also involve a contrast between a visible surface layer and the unseen below or within. There is also a symbolic connection between the invisible subterranean bedrock of mother earth and the unseen awareness of conscious being.

Often, both the cube walls or earth themed sculptures have holes, fractures or burns, or are exploded, or broken in some way, with channels through the surface communicating a unity of space within and without. Sometimes the space these defects reveal is an empty darkness; in others there is light.

I see in these torn surfaces a reflection of the ephemeral fragility and transience of bodily existence, and in the continuity of space the idea that the awareness is not bound to the perceptions of the body, but somehow supersedes them and extends beyond their

limited reach. Of central importance visually and conceptually, is the manner in which the walls or surfaces act as boundary; a zone of transition and transformation between activated form and content.

I have contemplated how these surfaces could conceptually explore boundaries within the self on several levels; as the skin of the body which divides the “me” from the “outside” and the world beyond; as the facade of individuality, a linguistic and cultural product – an imperfect wall of images, words and memories from which is manufactured the mirage-like shell of personal identity – the specific narrative and theme of a personal life that is maintained as ego: an ongoing story of accomplishments, virtues and fears, of shortcomings and regret.

They could also be a statement about the tragedy of the human condition: the impermanence, weakness and decay of the individual body and identity which is temporal and ultimately destined for dissolution, loss and death.

The empty space within my sculptures refer the mind, as far as it can go, towards the realm of the void, of the undefined and unknown. For me this does not point to a dark and negative view of finality in nothingness, but rather to the possibility of a new freedom: that the mysterious awareness, may define a new and larger identity beyond the petty and limited self of ego. If nothingness is the end of everything it is also the beginning – a limitless potential. It is exciting for me to venture there and to ponder, through my art, this realm of the absolute.

In this intentional process of discovery, I would like those viewing this series of new work to consider an opening... between the limited personal world of the known

and defined and the possibility of another unknown and borderless realm within us,
awaiting exploration: the awareness- void.

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